

Education for indigenous children: The BRAC Model¹

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Abstract

Bangladesh is a country where approximately forty-five ethnic minority groups live alongside their mainstream Bengali counterparts. BRAC, the country's largest NGO, has recently started targeting these ultra poor indigenous people by providing non-formal primary education to children between the ages of seven to thirteen. This is a new challenge for BRAC whose highly successful Non-Formal Primary Education model must now be adapted to work with ethnic minority groups who have different linguistic, cultural and learning needs than mainstream Bengali BRAC students.

The paper outlines the development of this new model. Particular points for discussion include the challenges of working with minority languages, promoting self-esteem among minority community members, training minority teachers and all the while maintaining a cost-effective program (approximately US\$ 20 per student per year).

Introduction

Given that we are currently in the midst of the International Decade for the World's Indigenous People, I am very proud to be here today to discuss BRAC's Education for Indigenous Children (EIC) Programme. BRAC initiated the EIC programme in October 2001 specifically to address the needs of indigenous children in Bangladesh as well as to increase awareness of ethnic minority issues within mainstream Bengali society.

Background

Bangladesh is a diverse and culturally rich country in which different ethnic groups co-exist with the mainstream Bengali population. According to the 1991 census, there are approximately 1.2 million indigenous people in Bangladesh (1.13% of the total population), divided among 45 distinct ethnic groups. Currently no government statistics regarding indigenous children in the formal education system exist and no national strategy dealing specifically with minority language children's education has been identified. However, indigenous students have been enrolled in BRAC's non-formal primary education schools since 1998. In that time, it has become apparent that changes must be made in order to provide these children with the best quality education possible and to help the Government of Bangladesh meet its goal of education for all by 2015.

BRAC is the world's largest southern NGO. Its primary aim is poverty alleviation in Bangladesh. BRAC conducts a vast array of projects in education, micro-finance, health and research. Many of these initiatives have been models for other programmes around the world, specifically in South East Asia, Africa, and most recently, Afghanistan. BRAC has been working in the non-formal primary education (NFPE) sector in Bangladesh for the past 17 years and in the area of indigenous education since the EIC program was initiated in 2001.

Currently, approximately 14,289 indigenous students are enrolled in 928 BRAC NFPE schools with either a mixed populace or entirely ethnic student body in 14 of 40 regions. Education Watch 2002² found a low enrollment and high drop-out rate among indigenous students. Among ethnic minority students in BRAC's NFPE programmes, low self-esteem, poor relations with Bengali teachers and

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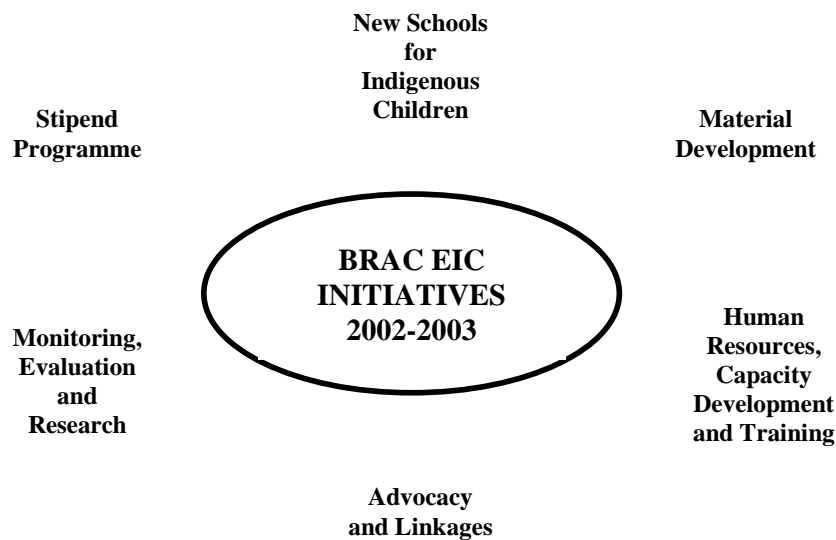
² Ahmed, Manzoor et al., *Education Watch 2002 - Literacy in Bangladesh: Need for a New Vision*. Campaign for Popular Education, 2002.

classmates, problems with Bangla as the language of instruction were all identified as problem areas for indigenous students. Additionally, negative misconceptions towards ethnic minorities were identified both among Bengali children the classrooms and within mainstream Bengali communities.³

Through a combination of observations by field and supervisory staff, research, and consultation with the parents, indigenous communities, and other NGOs working with indigenous groups, BRAC identified the need for a targeted education strategy for ethnic minority students. The result has been a CIDA-funded six-pronged education programme⁴ with the following main objectives:

- Increase the enrollment of ethnic minority children in mainstream education
- Boost the self-esteem of indigenous people
- Create a positive attitude among the mainstream Bengali population towards indigenous peoples

Let us now turn to an examination of how these objectives are being met through the six programme areas.



Schools

The largest initiative of the EIC programme has been the opening of 700 new schools for indigenous children between August and September in 14 BRAC regions in 55 upazilas⁵ (sub-district). These schools serve approximately 22 indigenous groups in three clusters: North Bengal, Mymensingh (or plains), and the tea gardens of Sylhet. Another 218 schools will be opened for indigenous children in the Chittagong Hill Tracts under funding from BRAC Education Programme (BEP) donor consortium funds.

The new schools are based on BRAC's existing NFPE model which is designed for children aged 8-10 who have never attended school or who have dropped-out of the mainstream government education system. One-room schools with tin roofs are built by the community with support from BRAC. Students, teachers, and the school management committee are chosen by the community. Students study social studies, mathematics, science, Bangla, and English as core subject areas

³ Department of Monitoring, *A Comparative Study on the Performance of the Bengali and Ethnic Minority Students*. BRAC, 2002 and Hannan, Rowshan and Sanjida Parvin, *BRAC's Ethnic Minority Schools: A Study of Perceptions and Classroom Behaviour, Draft Copy*. BRAC, 2002.

⁴ BRAC Education Programme, *Education for Indigenous Children*. BRAC, 2003.

⁵ Bangladesh is administratively divided into 5 divisions (counting Sylhet), 64 zilas (districts) and 460 upazilas (sub-districts).

following government competencies and supplemented by co-curricular activities. BRAC uses its own materials, textbooks and teacher's guides for the preparatory phase through grade 3 and government texts accompanied by BRAC supplementary materials and teacher's guide for grades 4 and 5. Classes are held six days a week, with an average of 875 contact hours annually⁶, allowing students to finish the five year government curriculum competencies in four years. The EIC teachers and schools will receive the same supervision and monitoring as BRAC's mainstream NFPE schools.

Changes in policy have been made to reflect the differing socio-economic, cultural and geographic situations in these areas. Through work with a consultant, Dr. Susan Malone, of SIL International, the EIC staff are reviewing and revising the existing BRAC NFPE curriculum for the preparatory phase and grades one to three. Additionally, supplementary materials are being created to better reflect indigenous cultures and create a supportive learning environment for ethnic minority children. These curricular and material changes are particularly important because they build on the educational principle that education is most successful when children can use their prior knowledge as the foundation for building new knowledge. Additionally, the preparatory phase has been extended from two to four months in recognition of the greater need for indigenous children to become comfortable in the learning environment. Class size has been dropped to a minimum of 22 students in recognition of the smaller population density of indigenous communities, and the standard BRAC maximum of 33 has been maintained. The gender target has also been dropped to 50% female—as opposed to 70% in BRAC NFPE schools—given the desperate need for primary education among ethnic minority children across the board. Other policies unique to the EIC model include the elimination of the 5tk per month student fee, provision of an additional 1000tk in building money to provide latrines for the schools and a provision that the schoolhouse owner must be indigenous.

The single largest change in education policy has been the incorporation of indigenous languages as medium of instruction in EIC schools in which the community still uses their mother tongue in day-to-day interactions. BRAC supports the right of ethnic minority children to receive early education in their mother tongue and in an environment that supports and celebrates their cultural heritage, as espoused in numerous international agreements and in recognition of the need to preserve endangered indigenous cultures and languages. This initiative has been undertaken in light of numerous studies that show a strong correlation between student achievement and language of instruction.⁷ Furthermore, a recent UNESCO⁸ study shows that students learn to read more quickly when taught in their mother tongue. Second, students who have learned to read in their mother tongue learn to read in a second language more quickly than do those who are first taught to read in the second language. Third, in terms of academic learning skills as well, students taught to read in their mother tongue acquire skills more easily. Indigenous children in EIC schools will therefore be educated in their mother tongue during the preparatory phase and Grade 1, with Bangla gradually phased-in as the language of instruction using a modified form of the regular NFPE education model in grades 2-5. In regions where the mother tongue of the students has no written script, BRAC will experiment with developing an appropriate orthography for use in its schools and in the wider indigenous community.

Materials development

Another component of the EIC initiative has been the creation of new materials in Bangla and the students' mother tongue for use in indigenous classrooms. A team of six indigenous resource personnel has been recruited to collect stories and materials from indigenous communities. Creative writing workshops were held to analyze the ideas, feelings, interests, cultures, and lives of indigenous students. Grades one to three will have a collection of stories published in a book by April 2004. Furthermore, 2 books about legal rights and indigenous folklore have been published for distribution in BRAC adolescent reading centres, with a plan of 14-18 more by April 2004. The reading centres are also being given a magazine called *Manush* which discusses indigenous cultures and issues and is

⁶ Government primary schools have an average of 618 contact hours annually.

⁷ Cf. Thomas, Wayne P. & Virginia Collier (1997). *School Effectiveness for Language Minority Students*. NCBE Resource Collection Series. (Internet)

⁸ UNESCO, *Education in a Multilingual World: UNESCO Position Paper*. UNESCO, 2002.

produced in conjunction with FIVDB, a Bangladeshi NGO working with indigenous communities. Finally, indigenous issues have been added to the grade two social studies curriculum for all BRAC EIC and mainstream NFPE schools, and curricular additions will also be made for grades one and three in the future.

Human resources, Capacity development and training

The face of BRAC has been changing due to the new EIC initiatives. In an effort to support indigenous employment and to draw on the knowledge and experience of the indigenous communities, many new staff have been recruited. Four indigenous staff were hired for the core group at Head Office, and six indigenous resource staff hired to gather information and create supplementary materials. Nine existing staff, four from indigenous backgrounds, have been promoted to Regional Sector Specialist. They will act as cultural experts and build networks to mobilize the participation of the indigenous population in the education process. Additionally, 200 ethnic minority staff have been recruited as school supervisors, with additional ethnic minority staff and teachers recruited for the Chittagong Hill Tracts (funded by BEP). Finally, 1400 indigenous teachers have been recruited for the new schools. Each school will have a main teacher and an assistant language teacher who will help instruct the students in their mother tongue.

Policy in regards to teacher hiring has been revised for EIC schools. The teachers must be of indigenous background and must have attained a minimum of 9 years education (as opposed to the grade 10 minimum for mainstream BRAC schools). The preference is still for teachers to be married women but exceptions are being made in areas where the educational level of women is too low to meet requirements and no potential women teachers can be identified. In terms of capacity development, indigenous teachers will undergo the same 12-day basic training and 3-4 day school opening orientation as other BRAC teachers, with additional support in minority issues and second language acquisition. They will also receive monthly training refreshers where they will explore specific teaching methodologies and plan for the next month's lessons. The grade 1 teachers will receive 2-day refreshers (instead of the normal one-day session) in order to acquire appropriate Second Language (L2) teaching skills.

BRAC has undertaken a considerable amount of capacity development and training with its indigenous and Bengali staff. Consultation with SIL International and workshops with indigenous teachers and batch trainers were held to review and revise the Basic Teacher's Training Module and Foundation Training Module for programme staff to include information on indigenous issues and improve the quality of teaching methods. Teacher trainers and other staff have received training in ethnic minority issues. Foundation training was held for the 253 new ethnic minority programme staff. The revised 12-day Basic Teacher Training has been held for new teachers, including sections on issues in minority education, and the 4-day Orientation for teachers has been held before the new school openings. New issues in the Basic Teacher Training module include an introduction to indigenous language and culture, preparing and presenting profiles of indigenous groups, the background and present situation of indigenous education, and the incorporation of indigenous co-curricular activities and calendars into the curriculum. Teachers will also receive training at a 6-day grade promotion orientation after each grade is completed.

Advocacy and linkages

A focus of the EIC program has been on advocacy for indigenous groups and on creating linkages among communities, government and other NGOs. BRAC has networked with other NGOs working with indigenous groups in Bangladesh, including CARITAS, Koinonia, Proshika, Oxfam, Greenhill, CARE, and the Integrated Development Foundation. As mentioned earlier, the magazine *Manush* is being published in conjunction with FIVDB. This magazine is being distributed not only to the BRAC adolescent reading centres but also to BRAC regional offices, all BRAC teachers, BRAC PACE union libraries, upazila Executive Officers, upazila Educational Officers and the District Commissioners in hopes of fostering greater understanding and sensitivity to minority issues amongst these groups. Furthermore, indigenous songs and stories have been integrated into the mainstream

NFPE co-curricular activities and all materials developed for and about indigenous groups will be integrated into the NFPE curriculum by 2005.

The EIC department is creating linkages with the Government of Bangladesh through three approaches. Between July and September 2003, BRAC staff conducted workshops in 38 upazilas out of the 46 where BRAC teams have opened new schools for indigenous children. The workshops brought together various government officials, including upazila Executive Officers, upazila Education Officers, District Primary Education Officers, District Commissioners, BRAC indigenous teachers, and indigenous community leaders. BRAC organized these workshops with three broad goals in mind. The primary goal was to facilitate a discussion that would lead to mutual learning and sensitization to the issues faced by ethnic minority communities. Secondly, and more specifically, the participants explored the barriers to education that indigenous children face. This part of the workshop was conducted with hopes that government officials would take this information into consideration and take action to increase enrollment of ethnic minority students in the formal education system. Finally, the objectives of BRAC's education for indigenous children programme were discussed. BRAC described its long-term goal of mainstreaming indigenous BRAC graduates into the formal secondary school system. Through a discussion of the EIC goals BRAC sought the support and cooperation of the government in the smooth implementation of this new initiative.

The second phase of government linkage will begin in November, 2003. District Primary Education Officers will be invited to participate as resource people in various BRAC training programmes conducted with ethnic minority teachers and staff. The aim of this cooperation is two-fold. It is hoped that through this participation the DPEOs will become sensitized to the occupational problems of the ethnic minority teachers and field staff, and to the issues faced by ethnic minorities in general. It is also recognized that the DPEOs are a valuable resource from whom the BRAC teachers and staff can learn much about education and education policy.

The third means of EIC-government linkage will begin in January 2004. BEP plans to extend its pre-primary programme schools to new schools for ethnic minority children. These children will be mainstreamed into the government primary schools after one year of BRAC pre-primary education. BRAC will be working with the Government of Bangladesh to ensure the smooth transition of BRAC students into the formal system.

Monitoring, evaluation and research

Monitoring and evaluation of the EIC programme will be undertaken in the same way as mainstream NFPE schools. In brief, each school has a Programme Organizer (PO) who supervises up to 16 schools in one area. The PO visits each school twice a week to check lesson plans, student evaluations, attendance, and to monitor teacher performance. The PO reports to the Team in Charge of the Team Office (local office), who in turn reports to the Regional Manager. Additionally, each region has a Regional Sector Specialist and Quality Assurance Specialist to provide methodological support and increase teacher and staff capacity.

Research initiatives undertaken by BRAC have included a comparative study on the quality of indigenous vs. mainstream education and the performance of indigenous children in BRAC schools. Further study has been done on the perceptions of mainstream Bengalis towards ethnic minorities. Many areas of further study have been identified, including literacy rates, first and second language usage, first and second language posture, and socio-economic status of indigenous communities. These issues are currently being explored in a comprehensive research project being undertaken by BRAC in cooperation with the Research Development Collective, headed by Dr. Mesbah Kamal, a professor from Dhaka University.

Stipend programme

A stipend programme has been set up for indigenous people who would like to continue their education but who are restricted in doing so due to economic constraints. Since 2001, 5150 indigenous students have been awarded a stipend to continue their post-primary education. In 2003,

500 ethnic minority students will be given stipends for post-secondary studies. Additionally, stipends are available for indigenous teachers who wish to complete their secondary school certification or post-secondary education.

Conclusion

By expanding its current programme BRAC hopes to provide equal opportunities for education to the children of ethnic minority populations in Bangladesh. It is also hoped that BRAC may create an innovative model for non-formal primary ethnic minority education which may be adopted by the government of Bangladesh, other NGOs, or perhaps even other governments around the world in an effort to provide a supportive learning environment for ethnic minority children and to attain education for all by 2015.