

Thematic Briefing Paper-1

COVID-19 and Online Education of Indigenous Students in Bangladesh

July 2020



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1. Introduction:

There are around 50 different indigenous peoples in Bangladesh with a total estimated population of nearly 4 million. Indigenous peoples in Bangladesh are represented disproportionately among both the poor and extreme poor. They are one of the most backward groups of the society. They have continuously been targeted to aggression, attack and eviction from their ancestral lands. These problems are slowly but steadily resulting in their marginalization and corroding their social fabric. Indigenous peoples mainly live in remote areas, outside the mainstream of national economies and development support. The areas they inhabit are even more likely to lack basic infrastructure such as roads, markets, schools and health facilities than the other areas of population.

Comparatively, indigenous communities are left behind from basic services of the government,

including no access to health services, medical support and reliable information, education facilities for indigenous students in remote areas. The indigenous peoples lag far behind in respects of education and consciousness. However, government led effective measures to address the problem is not visible. The ongoing pandemic creating even more problems for indigenous students to avail their education.

2. State of education of Indigenous students during the Corona period

The COVID 19 pandemic has made a huge change in people's lives around the world. The pandemic caused by the virus has changed all the normal conditions in the world. As a result, educational institutions have been closed for a long time. Students have been spending time at home for a long time due to the closure of educational institutions

and are staying away from studies. Generally, students stay away from studies only when the educational institution is closed. The impact of corona virus has had a huge impact on the education system in Bangladesh and all over the world.

Indigenous students in Bangladesh are no exception. The gap between their relationship with textbooks has widened since the closure of educational institutions due to the corona virus. At present it has been noticed that they have nothing to do with the books. They have lost interest in studying. It goes without saying that the guardians are not giving much importance. They are also not pressuring their children to study. As a result, the education of the indigenous students is getting distracted. They are moving away from studies as educational institutions are closed. As there is no pressure in the class, many indigenous students are getting involved in field work and other occupations with their parents. By doing so, they are running towards earning money and their interest in studies is declining. Even many students are addicted to drugs. Hence, the government has already introduced television and online based education so that students stay focused on their studies.

3. Challenges in Online Education of Indigenous Students:

On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared the coronavirus outbreak as a global pandemic. Given the potential spread of coronavirus, the Government of Bangladesh declared the closure of all educational institutions with effect from 17 March 2020. The government has extended the shutdown several times. Later, the government initiated distant learning through Sangsad TV (Parliamentary Television) to continue the teaching and learning during the lockdown. It was for the students of class 6-10 from 29 March 2020 and gradually for the students of primary schools and madrasas.¹

The class contents were also uploaded on YouTube to help continue the curriculum amid the closure. However, due to the existing digital divide, many children and youth living in remote areas of the CHT are deprived of accessing remote learning initiatives of the government. This is also the same for poor indigenous children in the plain land. Many families in the remote areas, both in in the hills and the plains, are struggling to manage food and therefore, TV,

¹ A rapid assessment Impact of COVID-19 on Education in Bangladesh, Advocacy for Social Change (ASC), BRAC, May 2020

smartphone and internet facilities are considered luxury items. In fact, most of the children or guardians are unaware of online classes in the CHT region.²

In Bandarban, only 35 per cent of the 35,000 students attending some 64 secondary and higher secondary schools have access to online classes. In Khagrachari, 37 per cent of the 1,27,000 students in 594 primary schools in Khagrachari are participating in online classes. In Rangamati, most of the 90,000 students studying in 707 primary schools do not participate in online classes for various reasons including poverty and remoteness with no internet facility available.³

Most indigenous children in Bangladesh do not have the opportunity to take classes online. In remote areas where internet services have not reached, most children are at risk of taking classes. Indigenous school students in particular do not have the infrastructure to take classes online. A recent study by BRAC showed that 75 percent of Indigenous students were not participating in classes broadcast on Parliament television.⁴

3.1. Remote areas

In most cases, the indigenous peoples live in remote areas where there are no modern civic amenities such as accessible roads, electricity, healthcare, mobile networks. As a result, it is not possible for indigenous students in these areas to take advantage of online education. Such a picture of the CHT and the plains has already emerged in various surveys and in the media reports.

There are many areas in the hills where there is no easy way to go. It takes a day or two to get there on foot. Students in that area may not yet know that online classes are taking place. So, the government must take action on how they can be integrated into this new system. The also said that all students have the right to education which is the responsibility of the state.

- *Nirupa Dewan*

Former member of the National Human Rights Commission

² A Rapid Assessment Report: The impact of COVID-19 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in Bangladesh, Author: Trimita Chakma and Editor: Pallab Chakma, Kapeeng Foundation, June 2020.

³ Ibid

⁴ A rapid assessment Impact of COVID-19 on Education in Bangladesh, Advocacy for Social Change (ASC), BRAC, May 2020



3.2. Poverty

Indigenous children living in rural areas did not participate much in online education when schools are closed. Most of the families of indigenous school students are poor and cannot be directly involved in online education as their parents can not afford television, smart phone, internet and electricity. Hence, indigenous students are not able to avail these benefits and to participate in these activities, due to the socio-economic status of their families.

Pushar Ratan Tripura, an indigenous student of Dhaka University, said, his home is in Sindukchari under Guimara upazila of Khagrachhari hill district. He is taking part in an online class with a new Android set in the midst of financial difficulties to participate in the class.

There is no opportunity to simplify the online class system for everyone. Most of the indigenous students who study in different universities and colleges now live in villages. These students struggle financially to continue their study. It is much more difficult to attend this online class using Android phones or laptops to keep up with other students and overcoming the constraints of expensive data services.

3.3. Lack of Online Class Equipment

Despite online classes becoming the "new normal" in the education sector, a significant number of students are unable to take advantage of this

initiative due to a lack of digital devices and affordable internet access. Especially, indigenous students are not able to participate in online classes because they do not have a television at home, do not have an Android mobile, cannot afford to buy an internet package even if they have a mobile, etc. The more non-participation in distant learning is evident among the students from indigenous peoples (75%).

Indigenous school children in Bangladesh are not getting pre-primary education. One of the main reasons for this is the challenges and limitations of online learning. Because they do not get the materials to study at home during corona pandemic. In fact, they do not have the equipment (television, radio and Android phone).

Again, some people do not have cable lines in their homes. Because of this problem they are out of TV class. Of the 25.3 percent of indigenous students who take part in television classes, 74.7 percent who remained out of online classes say these classes are not working for them.⁵

Lack of access to television, radio and the Android phone has made it difficult for many children to get an education. In addition, despite having technology and equipment at home, children are unable to learn online using platforms (television, radio and Android phone) for a number of reasons, including the pressure to work at home, forced work, poor learning environment and lack of support.

⁵ Ibid

3.4. Lack of Internet Access

Going online for learning is not a feasible option for Bangladesh yet. There are around 5.0 per cent of the households who do not have a mobile phone. In the case of computer/tablet, only 5.60 per cent of the households have one. However, having computer/tablet is not sufficient, with only 37.60 per cent of the households having internet access at home.⁶

Since most of the villages of indigenous peoples are located in remote areas, there is no internet network. Moreover, it will not be possible for most indigenous students to bear the data service charges for online classes. Many students in peripheral areas will be deprived of this facility.

The problem is more compound for indigenous children in remote areas. Most of them depend on their parents' phones. Again, not everyone has a parent's phone. And if there is more than one sibling, then there is a problem between the siblings with the phone. In many cases the problem is more if the class is online at the same time. Again, many students are being deprived of online classes due to lack of technical knowledge.

Meanwhile, Punna Sku, a student at Dhaka University from Mymensingh expressed his frustration while talking with a media "the mobile network inside my village house is very poor. For which I have to go to a higher place outside the house and take classes. In this case, it is very difficult to concentrate or take notes in class."⁷

Similarly, Danwai Mro, a student from Bandarban studying at Dhaka University, said, "There is no good network at the end of my house. I have to go to the top of hill to talk on my mobile. Besides, I don't have the minimum Android set required to participate in online classes."⁸ On the other hand, the service charge for accessing online is quite expensive. This is how this student expressed his concern about online classes.

The condition of our network here is very bad. The social media Facebook cannot be logged in regularly. It is not possible to attend online classes from my

6 www.thefinancialexpress.com.bd, Effects of the pandemic on the education sector in Bangladesh, Mahtab Uddin, 13 June 2020.

7 www.ipnews.com.bd, 18 July 2020, available at:

https://ipnews.com.bd/15651/%e0%a6%85%e0%a6%a8%e0%a6%b2%e0%a6%be%e0%a6%87%e0%a6%a8-%e0%a6%95%e0%a7%8d%e0%a6%b2%e0%a6%be%e0%a6%b8-%e0%a6%85%e0%a6%82%e0%a6%b6-%e0%a6%a8%e0%a6%bf%e0%a6%a4%e0%a7%87-%e0%a6%aa%e0%a6%be%e0%a6%b0/?fbclid=IwAR3vZZSXuICW35jxufGrm1MaiGMZnrspoaL9ZTg1_rEkSfrP_gkMzl-OB1

8 Ibid

home. Coming to a relatively high hill outside the house or to the house of a relative, I am taking part in an online class. The student also said that this was an attempt to take part in the class with so much difficulty for fear of falling behind the rest of the classmates.

- *Nickel Chakma*

A student of History Department of Dhaka University, from Panchhari Upazila of Khagrachhari Hill District.⁹

3.5. Language Barrier

Many indigenous children are not fluent in Bangla which is the language of instruction in the online class. As a result, indigenous children are facing language problems in online classes. Many students are losing interest in studying and attending online classes because of language problems. The lowest participation of students from indigenous ethnic minorities is mainly triggered by the language barrier and deficiency in the flow of information.

3.6. Lack of Electricity Facilities

In many indigenous inhabited areas of the hills where there is no electricity and no network of telecommunication. This is also the same for the indigenous students living in different remote areas in the plain land. It seems that online education coverage to those areas is not possible practically. Therefore, most of the indigenous students from those areas are staying excluded to access the virtual education.

3.7. Impact on Indigenous Children in regard to Education

According to a CAMPE¹⁰ study, "children's engagement in income-generating and household works due to a slump in their family income will lead to increased numbers of school dropouts in Bangladesh once the coronavirus outbreak is over." The same research has also found that absenteeism and irregular attendance in schools will also increase in the post-pandemic period.¹¹ Indigenous children and youth (from pre-primary to tertiary) may drop out or not have access to school next year due to the

9 Ibid

10 Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE) is a non-government organization working for ensuring education rights for all.

11 www.tbsnews.net, Students could become worst victims of prolonged closure, Mir Mohammad Jasim, 13 July 2020.



pandemic's economic impact alone. There is growing concern that if these learners are not properly supported, they may never return to school.

4. Good Practice:

In some tribal areas, the initiative has been taken by the indigenous youths and students studying higher educational institutions to teach primary and secondary students in remote areas, which is very commendable and inspiring. One such initiative is 'Pohr Chhidok'.¹²

Educational institutions closed last March at the risk of COVID 19. Maclin Chakma returned to the village at that time. He is student of Chittagong University from Hajachara village in Barkal upazila of Rangamati hill district. About 400 people live there. There is a government primary school in the village. High school is quite far. Electricity has not yet reached this village.

After the lockdown, several indigenous students from the village, who were studying outside like Maclin Chakma, returned to the village. Due to closure of the school, the indigenous school children in the village

start moving away from books. Some people start going to Jum farm with their parents. The class started on television. But television classes are out of reach in the remote hills, electricity-less village. Maclin Chakma said, 'I saw that if it continued like this, the boys and girls would fall behind. Maybe someone will drop out of education altogether. Something has to be done, they have to go back to school.' So, an organisation named 'Pohr Chhidok' was formed. In Chakma language which means 'let the light spread'.

The members of the college-university students of 'Pohr Chhidok' took initiative to teach the students of class I to X for free of cost. In the beginning, due to fear of infection of coronavirus, the parents did not want their children to attend to the 'Pohr Chhidok' coaching center. Parents were made understand by the members of 'Pohr Chhidok' in collaboration with village primary school teachers and dignitaries. It is said that there is no outbreak of corona virus in Hajachara village. And there are no people outside the village. So, the environment is much safer. Teaching there will not be a problem. The parents then feel confident and convinced to send their children to the 'Pohr Chhidok'. Most people's mental health is at risk because of corona. Some mental and health protection activities have also been taken for that. For which songs, dances and sports have been organized for the students of this coaching.

12 Coronai Paharhe 'Pohr Chhidok', Prothom Alo (national daily in Bangla), 09 August 2020, available at:

<https://www.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/article/1673463/%E0%A6%95%E0%A6%B0%E0%A7%87%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%A8%E0%A6%BE%E0%A7%9F-%E0%A6%AA%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%B9%E0%A6%BE%E0%A7%9C%E0%A7%87-%E2%80%98%E0%A6%AA%E0%A6%B9%E0%A6%B0-%E0%A6%9B%E0%A6%BF%E0%A6%A6%E0%A7%87%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%95%E2%80%99>

5. Conclusion:

Coronavirus (Covid-19) is having a major negative impact on the education of indigenous peoples. It is feared that a large number of indigenous students will drop out of education once the situation returns to normal. In this way, the indigenous people will fall behind in education. Experience with the overall situation of indigenous peoples suggests that most indigenous learners will be excluded from this system. It is unlikely that more than 10-15 percent of Indigenous students will be able to attend online classes. It is true that they have to go for online education but if the government does not solve the problems that are 'basic', the state will deprive many of them where the number of indigenous students will be the majority.

The online education system is not based on merit but also on financial capacity and consistency of position. If the state is only leaning on big mega projects and does not take special measures for the development of the marginalized and the masses including indigenous children, then there will be such discrimination. Many also demanded that students in remote areas be provided with low-cost laptops or Android mobiles on demand. In addition, it is essential that online classes are not limited to participation at the scheduled time, but if it is necessary to keep the records and give the opportunity to learn by watching the dropped students.

Most indigenous students do not live within the network position required for online learning. Therefore, it is important to take timely and special measures for indigenous students. The indigenous leaders also urged the authorities to take a relaxed and flexible decision, at least for them, so that the indigenous students do not fall behind and drop out of school.

- (a) The Government should adopt special, targeted measures to address and mitigate the impact of the pandemic on indigenous peoples.
- (b) The government should prioritize the most accessible, 'low-or-no-tech' approaches in distance learning.
- (c) The government should develop inclusive contents and adjust the teaching process so that the indigenous students can be reached out equally effectively.
- (d) The government should provide free electronic devices and internet access/packages for indigenous children on priority

basis during this crisis time to avail online educational opportunities.

- (e) The government should provide incentives to indigenous students and teachers to ensure their participation in online classes and to prevent their drop out.

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Funded by European Union



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