

Challenges of Primary Education in Garo Community in Bangladesh

Akter Banu [1]

Abstract

Bangladesh is the land of diverse ethnic, religious and linguistic societies. Along with the mainstream people, there are about 46 different ethnic minority groups of people live here. Among the ethnic minorities, the Garo is one of the major tribal communities. Ethnic people bring a diversification in life and society of Bangladesh. Socioeconomic and cultural diversities along with their different living environment make indigenous people unique from mainstream population of the country. Their uniqueness of these areas are the main causes of their lagging behind in education too. The present study revealed the challenges of primary education in Garo community in Bangladesh.

Key words: Primary Education, Garo Community, Bangladesh etc.

Article History: Submitted: 13th November, 2021, Revised: 14th November, 2021, Accepted: 07th December, 2021, Published: 31st December, 2021.

I. INTRODUCTION

As the poorest members of the society of Bangladesh, the indigenous people face many problems such as unemployment, landlessness, illiteracy, poor health, poor housing and limited social and cultural integration (Sarkar, 2002).

About 45 ethnic minority groups live in the Bandarban, Rangamati and Khagrachari districts of Bangladesh. These three districts are also known as Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) areas. Ethnic minority children from the southeast Chittagong Hill Tract areas in Bangladesh, are the most illiterate and at high risk of dropout of schools (Irin, 2011). The dropout rate was 59 percent in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, whereas the national rate was 19.2 percent (BANBEIS, 2016).

In the socioreligious, cultural and progressive views, Garos are less conscious and backward than other tribal people of Bangladesh due to backwardness in education. Most of the household members of Garo children have no formal schooling. Like other minority groups, the enrolment, attendance and literacy rate is lower and the dropout rate is higher among Garos too, in primary schools. The literacy rate of Garos in Mymensingh district of Bangladesh was 24.67%, whereas the rate of male was 12.66% and the rate of female was 12.01% in 2009. (BRAC, 2009).

From the literature review and field study, it is observed that there are some challenges among Garo community which are responsible for lower education rate among them.

Rationale of the study: The study will reveal the challenges of primary education among Garo children. So that the government, policy makers will be benefited from this study to overcome them. As a result, the condition of Garo people will be enhanced. Government of Bangladesh is trying to increase the completion rate of primary education all over Bangladesh. As the dropout rate is higher among minority groups including Garo, the present study will help us to understand the causes of high dropout rate among Garo children and what steps can be taken to reduce that.

II. METHOD

The research methodology of the study was explanatorily and exploratory in nature. To conduct this qualitative research both primary and secondary data were used. Secondary data were collected from authentic writings, books, thesis, articles, documents etc. of eminent authors. Primary information of the study were collected through written questionnaire (open and close ended) and interviews of the respondents. Survey method also used to collect the relevant information.

The method of sampling of the study was purposive incidental. There were a total of 300 respondents (150 guardians and 150 teachers of Garo primary children of Garos who live in the study area) in the study. Most of the Garos live in Haluaghat and Dhobaura upazilas of Mymensingh district of Bangladesh. The study was conducted in Haluaghat upazila as it is expected that the findings of the present study will represent the whole Garo community of Bangladesh.

The present study adopted questionnaire method to collect basic information from the field. One close ended written questionnaire was developed by the researcher and was used for primary data collection. After surveying the study area and reviewing available literature on challenges of primary education in Garo community in Bangladesh, we constructed the questions of the questionnaire in the form of statements. Then the items of the questionnaire were given to several judges to ascertain whether the content of the items were relevant and appropriate for collecting the desired information for the present research. The objectives of the study are: i) to understand the socio-economic condition of Garo people as related to their education. ii) to find out the challenges of primary education in Garo people in Bangladesh.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The study shows that the Garos are suffering from various difficulties for access in primary education. The most important challenges are:

[1]Institute of Education and Research, Email:akterbanu74@yahoo.com

1. Understanding Problem for Linguistic Difference:

All ethnic groups have their own languages. Like all ethnic minority children, Garo children also use their mother tongue to communicate in their houses. But in schools, the children are bound to communicate with students and teachers in Bengali, as most of the students and teachers are from Bengali community and they speak in Bengali. Generally the Garo children enroll themselves lately in schools because of their inefficiency in Bengali language. For the same reason they cannot communicate properly with classmates and teachers in schools. This inability creates anxiety and inferiority complex among them. Consequently they start losing interest in schools and eventually many of them stop going to schools.

Communication is always a two-way traffic and communication between persons, communities and people which is an ongoing process. Any communication is an interpretation of what is communicated to one by the other or vice versa. Therefore, one's own mother tongue is the best way to communicate in everywhere including in education too.

About more than 6,000 languages are spoken in the world today. Approximately 1.38 billion people are speakers of local languages, that may not be used for formal education because they are yet unwritten or deemed unsuitable for other reasons. School going children who are the speakers of local languages will be in struggling to take advantage of the education being offered, many of them will drop out early for lack of success or before finishing their primary cycle without mastering skills in their first language, not to mention skills in the official language or the language of teacher's and student's in schools, even will not be able to enrol in schools at all.

The situation in Bangladesh is also the same. Some NGOs like BRAC, CARITAS, PROSHIKA, SIL Bangladesh, CRWRC, GBC, MCE, PARI, GONOSHASTHAYA KENDRA, FOOD FOR THE HUNGRY etc. had started to use Garo, Telegu Santal, Sadri, Mru languages in primary education. Some missionary schools are also trying to start mother tongue in primary education programme. If the programmes run successfully, the indigenous children, including the Garo children will get equal opportunity of learning in their mother tongue.

Mother tongue languages enable learners to build a strong foundation in their language and also make a good binding to their second language. So that they can continue their learning in both languages. In addition to their cognitive factors, there are emotional ones. Members of minority ethnic groups, whether children or adults, are empowered when their first language is used. Conversely, when the mother tongue is not used, they are made to feel awkward, inferior and stupid. Their culture is denigrated and the children feel scared, confused and traumatised in schools. These all have long-term effects in the minds of school going students.

2. Bengali Texts:

The Garos once had written language which has been lost because of their strenuous and struggle some wild life and detachment from their ancestry. The Garo tongue belongs to

the Sino-Tibetan language group which is called "A Chick Kusik" in their terms meaning hill language. Garos if plain landers are bilingual - Garo and Bengali. In physical features, food habits, and some customs, the people of Garo tribes bear resemblance to the Chinese. Many common words and lores are still found in Garo and Chinese languages with or without variations.

The Garos speak an oral dialect which has no script or written form. There are two types of Garo dialect, namely "Mandy Kuchick" or universal dialect and "Achik Kuchik" or hilly dialect (Sattar, 1971). Among Garos living in the vicinity of Garo Hills, Achik Kuchik is the most commonly found language. Regional differences in accent and some added new words out of their dialects exist among the Garos as among any other people.

There is a strong relation between language and education. But the first experience of formal education of indigenous students starts with being admitted in a local primary school where most of the students and teachers are Bengali. The textbooks are also in Bengali and the whole teaching method is in Bangla.

The Garo students cannot express their feelings and ideas due to their poor knowledge of Bengali. They mindlessly memories Bengali rhymes that have no connection with their culture and context. While reading Bangali texts, Garo children can decode, but cannot comprehend them. As a result they fall behind in their studies without a proper grasp of Bengali. Garo students struggle a lot to understand the text but fail. Shortly after joining the school, Garo children lose interest in schools and leave before finishing primary education.

In 2018, the government of Bangladesh distributed textbooks in five Indigenous languages among pre-primary students. They are Chakma, Marma Garo, Sadri and Tripura. But Santals, Urao, Mahali, Khak, Humir, Muchi and others were left out of the list. It is found that most of the teachers could speak in the languages. But they did not know how to read or write them. In order to increase the literacy rate of the ethnic minority groups including Garos, the government of Bangladesh has to introduce primary education in their own languages, as education policy of Bangladesh-2010 has recommended so.

3. Teachers from Bengali Community

Like other ethnic children, Garo children also enter into a totally different environment in schools, as the teachers and students are from another community and the texts are written in a different language. Most of the Bengali teachers do not understand the Garo tribal language. The Garo students also do not understand the teachers lessons delivered in Bengali. So lack of efficient teachers from Garo community is another obstacle to the education of Garo students. Bengali teachers do not know tribal languages and there are insufficient government primary teachers from the indigenous community. Most of the time, indigenous teachers are not assigned to their own community schools, as they are appointed to other indigenous or Bengali schools. Moreover, the Bengali teachers are not trained enough to understand diverse cultures or sensitized about the indigenous way of life. So the lack of indigenous teachers and efficient or trained teachers in schools are the other obstacles

to the education of Garo students. If the teachers of primary schools come from ethnic minority communities, like other ethnic pupils, the Garo children also will have a similar environment like home in schools.

4. Cultural Clash and Hostile Attitude of Students and Teachers in Schools:

The Garo's tribal language, lifestyle and cultures are distinct from mainstream society. In schools Garo children are labeled as "backward" or "wild" by mainstream students as their knowledge, skills, food habit, clothes, cultures etc. are considered as inferior and uncivilized to plain land children though Garo children love those as their very own. So adaptation of Garo students in schools, as a new environment, is a haul to them.

The mainstream children neglect the Garo children for their language and socio-cultural system and very often they insult them and laugh when the Garo children says their own language. So the Garo students for this humiliation hesitate to sit in all together in classes. Many embarrassed situation forces them to stop going to schools.

This attitude of plain land students towards Garo students places an extra pressure on the mentality of Garo students. When Garo students learn from their classmates that their lifestyle is backward, they consequently consider their cultures as inferior and uncivilized. As a result they feel a huge stress and cultural clash for which Garo children face isolation in their classes and schools and they compelled to retreat into their own circles.

Garo children are denied the right to celebrate their own cultures in schools and inaccurate presentation of their cultures in textbooks, retelling of their history by students and teachers cause major inequalities from structural racism embedded in school systems too. This is how Garo students become associated with poor performances in classes and ultimately dropout from schools.

5. Shortage and Distance of Schools:

Shortage of primary schools in rural and hilly areas of Bangladesh is another hurdle to boosting literacy among the ethnic groups. The study area, Haluaghat upazila of Mymensingh District, is a remote one, where there was no electricity connection before 2001 and most of the roads are not good. Everyday the Garo students need to run a long distance to go to school. There is no comfortable means of communication to these schools, especially during the rainy season when the roads are muddy. So the shortage and distance of schools are another obstacles to education of Garo children. The Government should establish more primary schools near the Garo community to reduce the distance to schools for Garo children.

6. Lack of Awareness of Guardians:

55.2 percent of all ethnic household members of Chittagong Hill Tract areas have no formal schooling (Irin, 2011). Like other minority groups, most of the Garo people are illiterate and not conscious about the importance of education of their children. This is a serious obstacle to the education of Garo students. In most of the cases, it is found that as the Garo guardians do not realize the necessity of their children's education, they become happier, if their children help them in

their household activities rather than going to schools. Many guardians keep their school going children busy in taking care of their younger babies instead of sending them school.

7. Poverty:

Ethnic people are very poor. Hunting is the principal means of subsistence of the Garos. The Garos like hunting wild animals and birds and they are habituated in eating almost all kinds of animals. They hunt tigers, wild dogs, deer, wild hogs, silver, pheasants, snipe, jungle-owl, hares, partridges, quails, pigs, wild buffaloes, cattle etc.

Hills and forests are the part and parcel of the Garo way of life. The Garos still practice primitive method of production Jhum chash is a peculiar type of horticulture on the slopes of the hills. The Jhum cultivation is long-rooted in the ways of life of Garos and inseparably associated with their rites and rituals.

The jhum cultivation is the most common agricultural tradition of Garos. Jhum chash is extremely difficult as farmers cannot use any kind of farming instrument for cultivation on the slopes of the hills. Moreover, having taken off two crops, Garos have to shift their cultivation to a new spot leaving the former field outcropped for few years. As the fertility of the soil is spent up after one or two crops, Garos prepare new Jhum by cutting and cleaning jungles, which is very laborious and risky too, because of wild animals. In the Jhum cultivation rice, vegetables, pulses, cotton, brinjal, turmeric, Indian corn, chillies, ginger etc. are produced. Now-a-days, the economic structure of the Garo community is mainly based on agriculture.

The Garos who live in the plain land grow rice, jute, mustard oil etc. by normal process of cultivation. As an alternative profession, some Garos works as NGO workers, beauty-parlour workers, garment workers, house servants, workers in the missionaries etc. and some operate small businesses.

When they have nothing to eat, parents prefer to employ their children in any work, rather than sending them to schools. As the Garos rely on nature and traditionally they collect their livelihood through hunting, cutting woods in jungle, farming etc., mostly Garo parents fail to manage their children's educational expenditure and very often they are forced to send their children to work in other houses as a cowboy, where they learn agricultural and household activities. So maximum Garo children don't get opportunity of formal schooling from their early childhood due to their parents' poverty. Garo girls are also forced to send to Dhaka city to engage them in household activities as a maid.

8. Habit of Drinking Alcohol:

Most tribal communities use their homemade wine in their al socio-cultural and religious feast and festivals all over the world. Drinking alcohol is ceremonial menu among Garos too. They drink wine irrespective of their age and sex. Even many Garo mothers give a little amount of alcohol to their babies as soon as they can swallow, especially at the time of outing, so that the babies can sleep comfortably on their mother's back. In this way the Garo children become habituated and addicted to alcohol as their traditional habit which practice is difficult to stop. Drinking wine make changes in physical structure, activities and habits of Garos like their voices become harsh and behaviours become wild.

After drinking alcohol, Garo students feel drowsy and they do not want to go to school from hesitation as the wine creates bad smell in them, which the mainstream students do not like at all. So their habit of drinking alcohol is another obstacle to their education.

9. Frustration from Deprivation of Property:

In matrilineal practice, Garo females are the real authority of their parental property. So the daughter and her husband become successor of the ancestor's property instead of sons. After marriage Garo males leave their parent's house for their mother-in-law's house. This system creates a frustration among the male members of Garo family as they see the opposite scenario among the mainstream people of Bangladesh. This pessimistic trend makes Garo children indifferent to education.

There are some other causes responsible for the deprivation of property and economic hardship of the Garos and of other indigenous communities, as well as their low rate of education. These are:

Problem of Land Rights: In early days, among the Garos, ownership of property was communal in nature. All the properties and lands belonged to the community as a whole. It has become abolished from their society, as it is not recognised in Bangladesh. Due to the invasion of state sponsored individual ownership instead of communal ownership, there arises conflict between the traditional land rights of the Garos and the present land laws and administration of Bangladesh. For the state sponsored individual ownership, the Garo people have to record their names in the record of rights. As they were regulated by the customary law, they were not aware of the land record system. Therefore, most of them were unable to record their names in the record of Cadastral Survey (C.S. record during the British Period) as land owners during the British colonial period. Later, the State Acquisition and Tenancy Act, 1950 empowered the state to seize all the rent receiving interests from landlords and lands held under their khas possession (Sadaka, 2006). The tenants were made proprietors of land provided that they should prove possession of holding directly under the rent-receivers (The State Acquisition and Tenancy Act, 1950).

In this respect, the Garo people were totally ignorant about ascribing holding rights before settlement office or survey process, which is the first requisite to become land owners under the State Acquisition and Tenancy Act, 1950. As a result, in the Settlement Attestation, most of them failed to record their names as owners of their lands. Declaring those unrecorded lands as Khas lands, the government allotted those to the landless Bengalis. To avoid the complexity of land litigation, the Garo people always remain far from civil court to recover their lands, as they know that they are unable to meet the financial support to continue that litigation.

Use of Force and Forged Documents: The Garo community is also threatened by the hooligans who are engaged by the Bengali neighbours in respect of their lands. And the Garos do not get any help from the police and the land related government officials. At last they have to be evicted from their own land. Very often, the Garos are victimized through forged documents made by the Bengali people and lose their lands.

So the complexity of land litigation in Bangladesh and the unprotected regime of Khas lands have given the land grabbers an opportunity to work to their advantages (Barkat and Rahim, 2001).

Unethical Attitude of Government Officials and the Officials of the TWA towards Garos:

From the field visits, it is found that, before the permission of the Revenue Officer, a recommendation of the concerned branch of the Tribal Welfare Association (TWA) is necessary to transfer the Garos land. In this circumstance the Garo becomes the victim of harassments of extortion by the government officials and also by the Officials of the TWA.

The investigation of TWA and government officials about the purchasers of lands of the Garos is not trustworthy. Very often the officials of the TWA do not investigate whether the purchaser is an indigenous or not before approving the sale. As there is no monitoring system, the government officials take a long time to investigate about the purchaser and sometimes they demand extra charge from the indigenous people. All of these situations drive the Garos in more helpless position. That is why the Garos have no faith on the activities of the TWA and the government officials regarding transfer of lands and they try to avoid taking permission from them.

Eco Park: The forest department of the country continues to declare the lands of the indigenous people's ancestral lands as reserved forest and protected forest in the name of rubber plantation project, social forestry, agro forestry and development of Eco Park. All these activists drive the Garos from their lands, upon which they earn their livelihood.

One of the controversial development project of Bangladesh government was Madhupur National Park Development Project (MNPDP), mostly known as Eco-park, where the government investigated US 9.93 million with the help of Asian Development Bank.

"The project was on 3,000 acres of core zone, out of comprehension 20,000 acres including 21 Garo and Koch villages is in threatening with eviction to 1,510 families by construction of 61,000 feet length concrete wall. The area coverage plan of government for MNPDP is at Aronkola Mouza 11,872.70 acres, at Gachabari Mouza 52.00 acres, at Pirgacha Mouza 88,179.53 acres, at Chapaid Mouza 140.00 acres, at Rosulpur Mouza 350.00 acres, at Bijoypur Mouza 243.00 acres. At these 6 Mouzas, there are total 20,873.23 acres (8437 Hectors) land will be used (Albert, 2004).

10. Absenteeism and Lack of Supervision:

Generally indigenous people live in isolated and remote areas, outside the mainstream of economies and development support, where there is a lack of basic infrastructures such as roads, markets, schools, health facilities, than the other areas of population. Generally teachers do not want to go to schools of remote areas. For this reason, posts of teachers remain vacant for a long time. High teacher absenteeism is also a problem as teachers who live in the town areas, do not always want to travel to work. This applies to monitoring and supervision as those responsible also do not want to travel, or do not have time to visit the more remote areas. This means lessons are not planned or delivered properly. Because of their remoteness and the lack of community interest,

buildings are frequently neglected and badly maintained, and textbooks do not arrive on time. Sometimes shortage of supplies of textbooks creates education troublesome for Garo students.

11. Content of Curriculum:

The curriculum and textbooks of primary schools do not reflect indigenous life and history properly. Noticeably indigenous life and culture are presented in a negative manner. This leads to low self-esteem within the indigenous population and misconceptions and promotion of stereotypes amongst the mainstream Bengalis. In promoting only the culture of majority, schools are not only telling the minority groups but also the majority who are not given the chance to understand the complex diversity of the society in which they live.

12. Dropout of Students during Harvesting:

Indigenous children do not go to schools during harvesting time. Instead they go to the field for helping their parents or look after younger brother or sisters at home. Christian Missionary Schools allows long vacation during the crop seasons, so that the students can assist their parents.

13. Child Labor:

In Garo society, as predominated by an agrarian economy, children are highly valued as they add extra hands to help with the tasks required by agricultural necessities. For economic insecurity, poor parents need to take help of their children at the cost of their schooling. A marginal farmer cannot afford to hire adult labor and he is forced by his poverty to use young children in household and agricultural works, especially during the harvesting season. Free schooling also fails to hold the poorer and older children once they are old enough to be of meaningful aid to their parents in agricultural tasks in home and in fields. So highly valued child labor is one of the most important causes of low enrolment and high dropout of Garo students.

14. Lack of Political Representation

Bengalis are predominated in Bangladesh as they are large in number. However, there are at least twenty-nine other ethnic groups which are, according to 1991 census data, a total of 12 million people, that constitute about one percent of the nation's total population of 20 million (Mohosin, 1997). The number of indigenous communities and their population size seem to be much higher than being reported by the census of 1991. Bangladesh Indigenous People's Forum (BIPF) claims that there are more than 45 indigenous communities in Bangladesh and they altogether make a total of about 3 millions of population (Sonjeeb, 2006).

The ethnic communities in Bangladesh has increasingly been mobilized for cultural rights, political powers and for the resources. Therefore many ethnic leaders, humans and indigenous rights activists are voicing the need of more participation and representation of the ethnic communities in the parliament of Bangladesh. So that they can resolve the education related infrastructural and academic barriers, along with their other needs to fulfill.

IV. CONCLUSION

Bangladesh is a signatory to many international conventions and initiatives to promote equity and equality in educational opportunities, including the convention on the Rights of the Child, 1990, which emphasizes that an equal opportunity to access in education is a basic primary right of every child. This is reflected in the government's initiative to achieve the Millennium Development Goals to eliminate gender disparities and to achieve universal commitment of primary education for all children by 2015.

A further commitment to meet the Education for All (EFA) goals that all children should have access to a completely free and compulsory primary education of good quality, means those schools should accommodate all children, regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional or other conditions. This should include disabled and gifted children, street and working children, children from remote or nomadic populations, children from ethnic or cultural minorities and children from other disadvantaged or marginalized areas or groups.

The right to education is a key instrument for achieving equitable development and respect for cultural diversity. Education is an investment, in the future, a means to reduce poverty and counter discrimination. Indigenous people have the right to get the equality in primary education that is sensitive to their holistic worldview, traditional knowledge and other aspects of their cultures, which contribute to human dignity and intellectual dialogue.

But most of the Garo people are illiterate, landless and poor. Although education is a basic necessity of life, tribal people have a limited access in Bangladesh due to their poverty. Illiteracy limits their opportunity of for training, skill development, employment and prosperity as a whole. As socio-economic development of any community is related to their education and primary education is the basis of all education, so without solving the problems of primary education, it is quite impossible to make the development of the Garo community.

The special affairs division of Bangladesh provide funds for indigenous population outside the Chittagong Hill Tracts for their development including stipends for students. The stipend is given once in a year to students of colleges and higher classes for purchase of books, tuition fees etc. The national constitution of Bangladesh provides scope for affirmative action (positive discrimination) in favour of the backward section of citizens of the country. Upon this provision, a small percentage of public sector jobs and seats in a number of government educational institutions are reserved for indigenous people of Bangladesh.

Yet the government should take a special programme for poverty reduction among indigenous people, including the Garos, and should incorporate their culture in the national curriculum. It is necessary to provide education to indigenous people with a curriculum that allows learning in their own languages at the primary level. The government also should formulate a policy for the development of indigenous people and should implement some laws regarding land ownership of them.

The findings of the study will help the policy makers, social scientists, researchers, counsellors, psychologists and lawmakers to take necessary steps to reduce the illiteracy among Garo people by solving the problems of primary education among them.

V. REFERENCES

- Albert, M. The Rights of Adibasis on Land and Forests, Bangladesh Government's Perspective, 2004, p.59.
- BANBEIS (2016) Educational Statistics of Bangladesh, Ministry of Education, Dhaka.
- Barkat, A. and Rahim, S. Political Economy of Khas Lands in Bangladesh, Dhaka, 2001, p. 122-130
- BRAC(2009). BRAC, RED, Ethnic Survey Report : 2009.
- Halim, Sadeka. Situation of Garo Women: Some observations in Indigenous People have the Rights to Territory Land and Natural Resources, Solidarity, 2006 Bangladesh Indigenous People's Forum, Dhaka, Bangladesh, p.30-41.
- Irin (2011) Ethnic minorities face higher school dropout risk - Bangladesh, relifeweb.int.
- Mohosin, A Politics of Ethnicities in History of Bangladesh, 1704-1971, Sirajul Islam (Ed), Dhaka Asiatic Society, 1997, p. 544-574.
- Sarkar, P. (2002) Paradigms of practice if ethno medicine for health care among the tribals in Bangladesh. Paper presented at the Living and Curing Old Age in the World Conference, Genoa, Italy, December, 2001.
- Sattar Abdus, In the Sylvan Shadows, Bangla Academy, Dhaka, 1971, p. 193.
- Sonjeeb Drong, Indigenous People: Facing Uncertain Future in Solidarity 2006, Sonjeeb Drong (Ed), Dhaka, Bangladesh Indigenous People's Forum, p. 55-61.
- The State Acquisition and Tenancy Act, 1950, section 3(e).