

**Getting ready for school in the Chittagong Hill Tracts:  
A comparative analysis of mother-tongue and national-language-based pre-  
schools in Adivasi communities.**

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In Bangladesh's Chittagong Hill Tracts, entry to school often represents the indigenous *Adivasi* children's first encounter with the dominant Bangla culture – and their marginalization from it. The Shishur Khamatayan<sup>1</sup> Project (SKP) aims to transform this potentially traumatic first encounter with school into a child-friendly and culturally meaningful experience. SKP currently provides 1,664 *Adivasi* children in 100 pre-primary centres with activity-based learning in their mother tongue, introducing oral Bangla in the last six months of instruction.

This analysis compares school readiness outcomes of children in SKP pre-schools with children in Bangla-medium pre-schools in similar communities. One-on-one assessments reveal that, halfway through their second pre-primary year, SKP children significantly outperform their counterparts in language development, quantitative reasoning, and environmental and cultural awareness. In addition, classroom observations show more engaged children and participatory, culturally relevant learning environments than in comparison classrooms. Finally, focus group discussions show that parents in SKP communities feel better equipped to support their children's learning than their peers. However, SKP is not significantly associated with performance in writing and in letter recognition, areas that play an important role in the primary school curriculum.

While highlighting the strengths of SKP's approach, these findings point to the challenges of teaching literacy in the mother-tongue in areas where it is largely absent from the print environment. They also raise questions about the limits of an activity-based, mother-tongue-based pre-primary programme in a context where primary schools emphasize rote learning in the dominant Bangla language. This paper provides an overview of the research methods and findings, and discusses their implications for future practice.

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<sup>1</sup> Children's Action Through Education