

LEARNING IN ETHNIC LANGUAGES

Book supply falls short of demand

SANJOY KUMAR BARUA, Bandarban

Mother language is one of the most important gifts any person might have and 11-year-old May Hla Sing from the Marma community in Bandarban is no exception.

A fifth grader at Kolackong Government Primary School in the remote area of the hilly district, she wishes to learn her class lessons in her own mother language every day.

But she is not sure if her dream would ever come true as she has no books in her own language.

"Every day I walk two hours to get to my school. I would have done better if I could read books in my own language," she told this correspondent.

The government for the first time has distributed pre-primary textbooks in five ethnic languages to facilitate their learning, but there is no visible initiative yet to print textbooks for students of class-I and above in those languages.

The National Curriculum and Textbook Board has printed 24,600 copies of textbooks in Chakma, Marma, Tripura, Sadri and Garo languages for the students across the country.

However, many students and teachers of different schools in Bandarban complained that they did not get the books.

Only 744 copies of pre-primary textbooks have been distributed among the students of Chakma and Marma communities in Bandarban, although the local authorities had earlier said 5,121 copies would be needed for students of Tripura, Marma and Chakma communities.

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Of the 5,121 pre-primary students, 4,048 are Marmas, 865 Tripuras and 208 are Chakmas.

Tripura students still did not get any books yet, said Riton Kumar Barua, district primary education officer.

In Bandarban, 83,521 students are studying in 343 schools and around 60 percent of them are from different ethnic minorities, he added.

Contacted, NCTB Chairman Prof Narayan Chandra Saha said, "There was a delay in starting the printing procedure of the books for the ethnic minorities, but I think the books have already reached the schools by now."

He added apart from the books, the NCTB was also providing study materials like flipcharts, but there might be delay in sending those to children.

There are also Tangchangya, Mro, Khumi, Pankhua, Lusai, Khayang, Bawm and Chak communities in the hills and each of them has their own language.

Teachers of different schools said the languages of these communities represent a special culture, but their children have no opportunities to

learn in their mother tongue.

Those children are forced to learn a second language and therefore their self-confidence as learners and their interest in what they are learning gradually decline, leading to early dropout, they observed.

"Dialects are like mother and should not be disregarded. It will be a great loss if dialects and mother tongues die out," said Dow My U Marma, headteacher of Kolackong Government Primary School.

U Shwe Mong Marma, a guardian, said, "We dream our children will study in their own languages, raise question without any hesitation and overcome language barriers to seek knowledge."

"We hope the government will take necessary initiatives to that end in future," he said.

Both the guardians and teachers stressed the need for providing training to teachers in necessary language skills and teaching guide.

"Success of the initiative largely depends on the teachers in the classrooms. If the teacher cannot speak the language, students who speak the particular language may fail to understand the lessons," another guardian observed.