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# The educational and cultural impact of *Sisimpur*

## Bangladesh's *Sesame Street*

Since 2005, the Bangladeshi *Sesame Street* is broadcast on national TV, and specially equipped rickshaws bring the programme into remote villages. *Sisimpur* has its own special Muppet characters, and the programme is found to foster basic literacy and mathematical skills as well as the notion of education being a joyful experience.

"They teach you what 'a' is for, what 'b' is for. I learn them. When they ask what 'jha' is for, Tuktuki flies away in a 'jhor' (storm) and then comes down on earth again."

Ratul, Mirka village, Bhaluka, Bangladesh (Kibria, 2006)

**R**atul, a boy from a village in Bhaluka in Bangladesh, is speaking about *Sisimpur*, the Bangladeshi co-production of *Ses-*

*me Street*.<sup>1</sup> In Bangladesh, the groundwork for *Sisimpur* began in 2003 when a team from Sesame Workshop visited Bangladesh to assess the feasibility of an educational TV programme for preschoolers. While Bangladesh has made significant strides in expanding primary school enrolment in the past decade (Lusk/Hashemi/Haq, 2004), government provisions for early childhood education programmes have remained limited. At the same time, television is a popular medium with growing reach among the population; it is also an important avenue for disseminating information (such as on health; Associates for Community and Population Research, 2002). Using television to deliver educational content promised to be a cost-effective way to provide informal early childhood opportunities to children throughout Bangladesh.

The project's educational objectives were shaped during a meeting in Dhaka in 2004, where Bangladeshi educational advisors with a range of expertise gathered and, together with the production and creative teams, crafted a set of educational objectives for the project that were culturally appropriate and reflected the most critical needs of Bangladeshi children. These goals were formalised in a "Statement of Educational Objectives", which serves as an educational framework for the series; they encompass diverse domains such as ba-

sic literacy and math skills, health, hygiene, nutrition, respect, understanding, diversity, family and community relations, and art and culture. Each piece of content produced for *Sisimpur* addresses a specific educational objective.

*Sisimpur* launched in April 2005 on Bangladesh Television, the country's only national television channel.<sup>2</sup> The show is set in a village that centres around a sweeping banyan tree and is dotted with homes and a sweet shop. As with many *Sesame Street* adaptations, Muppet characters lie at the heart of the project: Tuktuki, a 5-year-old girl Muppet created to help promote girls' education, has a voracious appetite for learning and cannot wait to go to school. She lives on *Sisimpur* along with neighbours Halum, a fun-loving Bengali tiger who is passionate about fish, fruits, and vegetables; Shiku, a 5-year-old jackal who is a scientist, inventor, detective, and collector; and Ikri Mikri, an inquisitive 3-year-old monster Muppet with

a vivid imagination. These Muppets are joined by a cast of humans, including a primary school teacher, an agriculturalist, a kind sweet-shop owner, and a beloved grandmother. In addition to breaking new ground in the areas of media production, writing, education, and research in Bangladesh, *Sisimpur* featured an element that has never been attempted on other *Sesame Street* co-productions. Bangladesh has had a long history of puppetry and the local team felt that it would be important to represent this tradition on the programme. Under the guidance of the production's chief creative advisor and Bangladesh's eminent puppeteer, Mustafa Monwar, the producers created 3 marionettes – Bhutto, Gaanwalla, and Hatim – for the series. They occupy a special place in the show in that these puppets live in the character Ikri Mikri's imagination and play out fantastical stories derived from traditional Bangladeshi folk tales. For the first time in the history of *Sesame Street*, local puppetry has been woven into a co-production, enriching the show and capturing the imaginations of Bangladeshi children.

The project includes a few other "firsts" for *Sesame Street* co-productions. An innovative "filmmakers project" that trained teenagers from rural areas in Bangladesh, gave young Bangladeshis an opportunity to produce live action segments for the series (see

a description of the project in Cole/Biel/Pai, 2007). And a novel community viewing programme conducted by 'Save the Children' brings the series to remote villages via specially equipped rickshaws which enable children who would otherwise not have access to watch the programme in large groups (see ill. 3).

*Sisimpur* is coming to the end of its 2<sup>nd</sup> season on air and has received funding for another 4 seasons of production. Such an educational media project is unprecedented in Bangladesh. As with many Sesame Workshop international projects, the team commissioned summative research to evaluate *Sisimpur*'s impact on multiple fronts. Specifically, third-party researchers assessed the project's impact in terms of its reach among the target audience, its educational effectiveness among children, and its influence on and perception within the broader culture.

### Results of the summative research on *Sisimpur*

Within 7 months of its broadcast, researchers found that *Sisimpur* has achieved broad reach, particularly

among families with a TV set (Inter-Media, 2006). Television ownership averaged 45 % overall; among these households, 76 % of mothers were aware of *Sisimpur*, and 75 % had children who had watched the series. Being successful in reaching the target audience is a first step toward achieving broad impact. To determine the project's educational impact among young children, a national survey was conducted among 9,704 mothers and 7,112 children ages 3 to 8 (Associates for Community and Population Research, 2007). Children were assessed on a variety of basic skills, including literacy (letter identification and vocabulary), mathematics (counting and number identification), and socio-cultural knowledge (such as knowing local musical instruments, the name of the country, and recognising disability). The research revealed that exposure to *Sisimpur* was linked to better skills in all 3 domains: Children who watched *Sisimpur* regularly (at least twice a week) demonstrated skills equivalent to non-viewers who were a year older. Moreover, the intensity of exposure was related to how well children performed on these measures: Children who watched *Sisimpur* frequently usually performed best, followed by those who watched somewhat frequently; followed by non-viewers. These associations remained robust above and beyond the effects of family income, parent education, child age and gender, and the child's

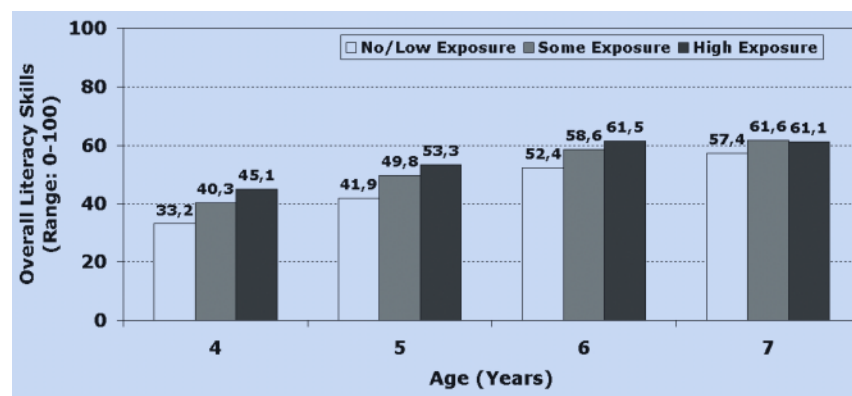


Table 1: Overall literacy skills by age of the children and exposure to the TV programme

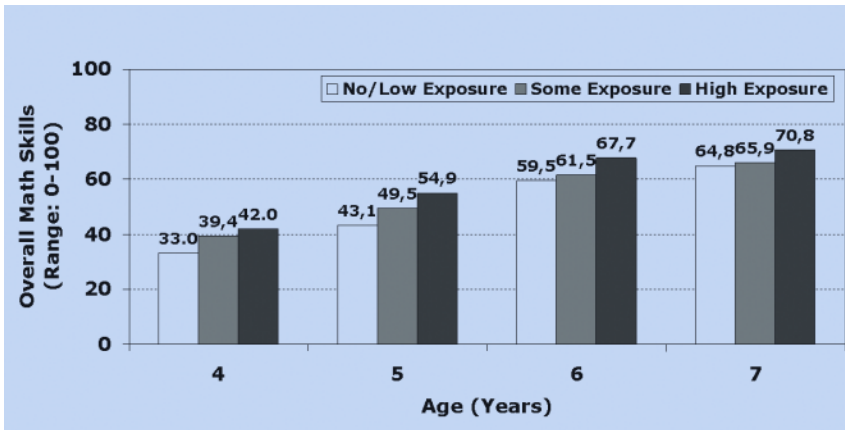


Table 2: Overall maths skills by age of the children and exposure to the TV programme

skills in the previous year (cf. table 1 and 2).

Recent cultural anthropological studies by Professor Nazli Kibria offer further insight into *Sisimpur*'s impact. Dr. Kibria's research involved in-depth interviews, focus groups, and observations among children, educators, parents, and community leaders, and allows for a more intimate view of the role of *Sisimpur* among these constituents. In a baseline study conducted prior to *Sisimpur*'s launch (Kibria, 2005), Dr. Kibria found that the prevailing attitude toward early childhood was one of "natural growth" rather than a deliberate cultivation of skills that can help prepare children for future success. Education was also regarded as a process of rote memorisation rather than a joyful experience. During the follow-up interviews, one year after *Sisimpur*'s broadcast, the research team detected shifts in these attitudes.

The research team discovered that *Sisimpur* was extremely popular not only among its target audience of 3- to 6-year-olds, but also among older children. Researchers provided vivid descriptions of how much children looked forward to the show. On several occasions, researchers observed the children keenly hoping that the power would not go out while they were watching the episode. Some children were very articulate about what they had learnt from the show, citing letters, numbers, tooth brush-

ing, hand washing, and politeness. *Sisimpur* has also touched the lives of adults who care for young children. Educators reported that the series stirred them to think more creatively about how to teach their young charges. Some incorporated songs from the show in their interactions with their students; others were inspired by the Bangladeshi live action films that showed ingenious ways of re-using discarded materials. Some educators also noticed that their students were more enthusiastic about learning and came to school better prepared with basic skills in literacy and math. Findings among parents also suggest a shift toward regarding parenting as a mindful and purposeful task that involves active interactions with children. As one mother pointed out, "[*Sisimpur*] shows you how you should behave with your children" (Kibria, 2006, p. 25). These glimpses into stakeholders' perceptions testify to how warmly *Sisimpur* has been embraced by Bangladeshis and the ripple effects it has had in cultural attitudes toward early childhood, parenting, and education. ■

NOTES

<sup>1</sup> While *Sesame Street* is a cultural icon in the United States and in many countries in the West, many are less familiar with the range of international manifestations of *Sesame Street*. These co-productions (over 30 in number) vary in scale and draw from a rich array of existing material from the *Sesame Street* segment library (which includes

content produced all over the world). Each co-production also has elements that reflect the lives of children in the country or region in which it was produced, in the form of live action films, animated segments, and a neighbourhood or "street" inhabited by *Muppets* and humans. While each international co-production is unique, they all share common elements that make each project distinctly *Sesame*.

<sup>2</sup> With a grant from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), *Sesame Workshop* and its Bangladesh production partner, *Nayantara Communications*, embarked on the creation of the first 2 seasons of *Sisimpur*.

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