



# d/Deaf in Bangladesh

by rafa  
khan

This project looks specifically at d/Deaf children in Bangladesh and on what educational opportunities are available to them (focusing on who they are provided by and whether they are location and age dependent)

# SIGN LANGUAGES IN BANGLADESH

there is no official sign language in bangladesh - home sign & the three languages below are what is most commonly used

## indo-pakistani sign language (IPSL)

ISPL is the most commonly used sign language in South Asia - with almost 7 million signers and due to the proximity and prevalence of Indian media and publications some d/Deaf folks in Bangladesh access ISPL through the internet and other resources.

However, the popularity of IPSL is largely citizen centered, since deaf schools in India & Pakistan follow an oralist approach - IPSL is taught through different nonprofit efforts

## bangla sign language (BaSL)

Post partition, West Bengal sign language (signed in Kolkata) evolved to BaSL and the two are now very distinct from each other. There are 31 million d/Deaf folks in Bangladesh and only 3% have any introduction to BaSL or other sign languages.

Schools also use an oralist approach and less than 5% of all d/Deaf children stay in school past 5th grade. BaSL is taught by dedicated deaf schools in Bangladesh but as of 2016, only 2700 students can attend such schools.

## american sign language (ASL)

ASL is used by very few d/Deaf folks in Bangladesh but is taught by missionaries, undergoing a dual mission of conversion to christianity and deaf education.

These programs have a larger internet presence than any other deaf education programs in Bangladesh and so do a lot of advertisement.

**what is home sign?** home sign is the gestural communication system generated by the conditions of having a deaf child and a hearing family, and no access to any deaf community (therefore no access to any formal sign languages). In Bangladesh, deaf folks anywhere besides the two largest cities have no access to formal deaf education and so home sign becomes the prevalent mode of communication for their community (this is 82% of the deaf population). This system is very isolated for the one community in which it originates and is not passed down from generation to generation in the same way as IPSL might be. When BaSL was transforming from IPSL, home signs from different folks was integrated into the language to have the signs for things that are unique to Bangla language & culture.



Unfortunately, there is very little research/media on on home sign in Bangladesh and so I am not able to find examples of real people using home sign and how that affects communication with their community. This is an area for further research with more time and resources.



as of 2009, BaSL has been recognised as an official language of Bangladesh but this recognition has not done anything for institutionalising the language (which is why only 2 million of the 31 million d/Deaf folks can sign in BaSL)

**বাংলা বর্ণমালার সংকেত**  
(BENGALI MANUAL ALPHABET)

|   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| অ | আ | ই | উ | এ | ঐ | ঔ |
| ক | খ | গ | ঘ | ঙ | চ | ছ |
| জ | ঝ | ট | ঠ | ড | ঢ | ণ |
| ত | থ | দ | ধ | প | ফ | ব |
| ম | ন | ং | হ | ল | শ | ষ |
| স | স | হ | ং | স | হ | ং |

বিশ্ব দূর বন্ধির ইশারার জন্য মোট ৫১টি বাংলা বর্ণকে সমউচ্চারণের দিক বিচার করে ৩৮টি সংকেত প্রকাশ করা হলো।



# Different actors of deaf education in Bangladesh

As of 2018, there are 32 primary schools that admit d/Deaf students - totalling to 2600 students and there is just 1 secondary school with 100 students and the funding that comes with these illuminates how deafness is used to further personal and religious projects.

## HICARE school

HICARE school is the only k-12 school for d/Deaf children in Bangladesh - it is in Dhaka and a private school (although the tuition isn't public information) and is also the first school that offered any type of d/Deaf education, started in 1982.

This school uses the auditory oral method and does not have any sign languages taught at all, which means that the only secondary school in Bangladesh does not teach BaSL - thus putting the burden on the students and families to self-teach or find a tutor if they want to use BaSL.

"I have a profound hearing loss. In spite of that, if I can talk, why can't the others? A hearing impaired person remains speech impaired simply because he/she cannot hear. But if the person is trained to develop speech, even the hearing impaired can talk," Shams-Ul-Haque, Principal, HICARE School.

Our children may be born with impairment, but it is us who have to guide them to the right path and enable them to break free from all shackles of disability! - The motto of the school

the motto of the school shows that they follow the "disability is terrible" model and illuminates the first type of deaf education in Bangladesh: private, oralist schools. They also view the ultimate success to be when students transfer out to mainstream schools and that shows that they are aiming to make deaf folks as non-disabled as possible, not make education more accessible.



# The Joshua Project



This is a project that implants American missionaries in Bangladesh to teach ASL to primary school aged students and introduce christianity. They focus on opening programs in rural areas of Bangladesh - where there is no alternate options for deaf education and at the cost of conversion to christianity at the end of the program.

The table on the right shows the different elements missionaries consider when trying to use deaf education as a mode of conversion. This is the second type of deaf education in Bangladesh: Missionary led education. They are often evening programs that work in a tutoring format to teach ASL (which begs the question of why they are trying to teach ASL when BaSL is the official sign language of Bangladesh?) It could be to create a Deaf community that is attached to christianity that can only be accessed through ASL and so if they are taught ASL they cannot easily join other Deaf communities that use BaSL or IPSL. So the colonising project at hand is one of conversion to christianity and ostrichisation from BaSL communities.

| <u>Religion &amp; Response</u>          |   |
|---|---|
| Attitude to Christianity<br>Comment     | Very resistant<br>Many Deaf tend to be very receptive to the gospel's hope and love message. However, Deaf are members of their hearing families and the risk of converting is subject to intense family pressure to keep the "traditional" religious values. Eighty-nine and half percent of the population is Muslim.   |
| Attitude to Religious Change            | Very resistant  |
| Resistance/Receptivity                  | Unknown   |
| House Gatherings and Corporate Meetings | Unless obviously God-orchestrated and initiated by the Deaf themselves, large corporate meetings are not recommended initially. Instead, already existing smaller Deaf social groups meeting in homes or wherever they normally gather as the Lord raises up Deaf persons of peace who want to be taught of Jesus and pass on what they have learned to their friends is a preferred initial strategy. The Deaf themselves will decide where and when to meet.<br><br>Each small Deaf group would designate their own leader who will receive teaching to bring back to them. Teaching will usually be a Bible story or the gospel presented in a visual way. Normal in-home hospitality with "tea" would be extended to the guests by the hosts. Prayer and worship would be incorporated more and more as the group grows in discipleship |
| How Will the Church Be Led?             | A behind-the-scenes mature, committed hearing disciple or team and face-to-face Deaf maturing disciples would provide ongoing input, training and leadership as asked to by the growing believers and house churches. Since the Deaf have no Bible and no way to learn more independently, a behind-the-scenes discipling/leadership team would teach designated Deaf who in turn will go and teach their Deaf friends. The discipling leadership team will teach the Deaf teachers individually or in groups as the Deaf themselves initiate. The discipling source leaders should be ready to counsel, troubleshoot, advocate for, interpret for, mediate disputes if called upon, etc. as the face-to-face Deaf leaders pursue their help. A good working knowledge of BaSL is a given for both hearing and deaf leaders.                |

These missionary projects are also white saviour projects on a few different levels - coming to Bangladesh as white people and "rescuing" d/Deaf people from home sign, asserting ASL as the sign language to be using as opposed to BaSL which would provide larger opportunities for d/Deaf folks in Bangladesh. These missions also target the families of deaf children and try to say that Christianity will help "cure" the child and is what brought this opportunity to them.

# Hear Schools

Hear schools are a group of extremely small schools (with fewer than 30 students in each school) for 5-12 year olds spread throughout rural and urban parts of Bangladesh and are funded and run by World Concern. This is a non-government organisation (NGO) that is based in Christianity and so has some elements of missionary work but not quite so outward as The Joshua Project. These schools are free of cost and are both oralist and provide and implant every student with cochlear implants/hearing aids and similarly to HICARE, have the aim of adjusting students to speech so that they can transfer to a mainstream school.

They get funding from all around the world by painting a picture of d/Deaf children in Bangladesh as helpless and without a will to live and advertising like:

"With your support, Nijhum received hearing aids and instruction by patient, experienced teachers. She is now reading and writing in Bengali and English and is doing well in math. She's also a dancer and an artist, taking dance at a local school and painting beautiful pictures for her friends and family. Her parents are overjoyed with her progress. Before Nijhum came to the Hear School, her future was uncertain. Today, her parents dream of the day she will be a famous dancer!" - quote from World Concern website, attached to an image of a small girl with hearing aids smiling

World Concern is a Christian global relief and development organization. With our supporters, our faith compels us to extend life-saving help and opportunity to people facing the most profound human challenges of extreme poverty - description from their donation flyers

However, they do not provide assistance to buy replacement batteries for hearing aids or any further programs for students who are older than 12 years old. This is the third type of deaf education program found in Bangladesh: NGO run. NGO run programs also do not need to report to anyone, follow educational milestones like public or even private schools and get tax breaks from the government which make it so students have fewer protections.

The work that World Concern does in Bangladesh extends beyond deaf education: "Our areas of expertise include disaster response, clean water, education, food security, child protection, micro-finance and health." This is a bizarre combination of sectors that they want to fund, but also control by making their own systems instead of funding existing systems. The NGO's in Bangladesh that do similar "philanthropic" are often tied to the funding that is controlled overseas (i.e. so even if they realise oralist education is not working they cannot change the way they teach due to funding being attached to oralism). This dynamic is unique because it attaches moral value to the privatisation of education hires local teachers and workers to be the face of the schools.



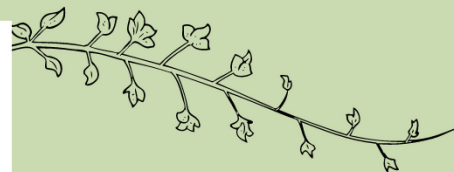
# Early Childhood Development Centers



Early Childhood Development Centers are the only early intervention programs in Bangladesh for d/Deaf children, that work to introduce BaSL as sign language for students 6 and under. They also help families learn BaSL in community support programs. This program, run by an NGO called AID foundation, is the only program that doesn't use any oralism and takes a 100% sign language approach to communication. There are 4 of these development centers (2 in major cities, 2 in rural areas) but they have very limited capacities. Although they do not have any programs for older children, they work to make sure that the students continue their education into primary school by matching them with government schools which have the resources to teach d/Deaf children.



**Deaf children practicing sign language**



"Classes also provide opportunities for deaf children to meet other deaf children, often for the first time in their lives, and to develop social skills and a greater sense of identity and confidence"

This is an example of an NGO that cares about social determinants of d/Deafness and not just securing funding or furthering its own interests. By providing families with communication tools through the teaching of BaSL and by connecting d/Deaf families to one another, they are creating a care network that will extend beyond school hours.





# Government Schools

Bangladesh recently signed onto UNICEF's inclusive education vows to make sure disabled students are able to get an education at free, government schools. The roll out to make that happen has been a very slow one, with most schools now having some type of special education program but not many having programs that can accommodate d/Deaf students. However, Access Bangladesh, a disability advocacy group started and based in Bangladesh has been trying to accelerate that and provide government schools with trained teachers to teach in BaSL and work with AID foundation to match d/Deaf students who went through early intervention to government schools.

The three organisations advocating for deaf education, rights and assistance are:

- AID foundation
- Access Bangladesh
- Songshoptaque

These advocacy groups are fighting an uphill battle but have managed to obtain some wins including:

- A local hospital has agreed to waive fees and provide free medical facilities for all persons with disabilities and advocacy is ongoing to secure the same support from hospitals in other districts.
- 32 deaf young people receiving financial assistance from the Government to access education and other services and helping many more apply for support.
- 42 deaf young people are accessing free vocational skills training and two have received sewing machines enabling them to start their own business.

## however,

All of the programs that this project examines were only created with d/Deaf folks in mind. Even though there are very limited opportunities for deaf education in Bangladesh, there are even fewer options for individuals with multiple disabilities. When researching this topic I only found one resource for folks with multiple disabilities: the option, through Access Bangladesh, for a social worker to come to your house and personally work with the disabled person to create a learning program (a program that currently has a long waitlist).



## Bibliography

- “বগুড়ার মূক-বধির স্কুল আলো ছড়াচ্ছে উত্তরে | বাংলাদেশ প্রতিদিন.” n.d. Bangladesh Pratidin. Accessed May 21, 2021.  
<https://www.bd-pratidin.com/last-page/2018/02/09/304821>.
- admin. n.d. “Songshoptaque – Non Government Organization.” Accessed May 21, 2021. <http://songshoptaque.org/>
- N.a “World concern donation flyer.” Accessed May 21, 2021  
<https://www.globalgiving.org/pfil/13537/projdoc.pdf>
- “Advocacy in Bangladesh | Deaf Child Worldwide.” n.d. Accessed May 21, 2021.  
<https://www.ndcs.org.uk/deaf-child-worldwide/deaf-child-worldwide-blog/advocacy-in-bangladesh/>.
- “::: Star Campus :::” n.d. Accessed May 21, 2021.  
[http://archive.thedailystar.net/campus/2011/10/04/spotlight.htm?fbclid=IwAR0kychOyRBRD9kNoEO\\_Oh9LucCfpmNS40IzCpKXxMCOrSJcKLSHuvrCDr4](http://archive.thedailystar.net/campus/2011/10/04/spotlight.htm?fbclid=IwAR0kychOyRBRD9kNoEO_Oh9LucCfpmNS40IzCpKXxMCOrSJcKLSHuvrCDr4).
- “DEAF-BLIND SUPPORT.” n.d. Accessed May 21, 2021.  
<https://cdd.org.bd/deaf-blind-support/>.
- WWDF. “Persons with Disabilities Rights And Protection Act 2013”. Accessed May 21, 2021  
<https://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/docs/ELECTRONIC/95795/118013/F51789448/BGD95795%20Booklet.pdf>