Cultural Impacts of *Sisimpur*, *Sesame Street*, in Rural Bangladesh: Views of Family Members and Teachers[*]

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INTRODUCTION

Early Childhood Development (ECD), consisting of targeted efforts to foster the intellectual and social development of preschool children, is a growing policy emphasis in developing countries (Penn, 2005; UNESCO, 2004; Young, 2002). The establishment of high quality early education centers has been a core goal of ECD advocates. But there has also been growing interest in alternative and more efficient means, such as the mass media, to promote ECD goals.

In this paper we explore the cultural effects of a specific ECD-centered mass media project in the developing world. *Sisimpur* is a popular children's educational TV program in Bangladesh that is one of the many international co-productions initiated by Sesame Workshop, the makers of Sesame Street. The program is produced in Bangladesh and features original Bangla-speaking muppets. Drawing on in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with family members and educators of young children in village areas, we explore how they view *Sisimpur* and its relationship to children.

ECD and Cultural Reception among Caregivers

Based on the idea that the preschool years (ages three to five) are crucial to cognitive and social development, the ECD (Early Childhood Development) framework posits the need for intensive intervention during these years in a child's life, especially for children from disadvantaged circumstances. For such children, opportunities to gain pre-academic and other skills in these early years are viewed as crucial for ensuring the child's later success in life. While ECD was originally developed in the U.S. as part of larger anti-poverty efforts in the country, it has increasingly become an important focus of economic and social

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development efforts in the developing world (see UNESCO, 2004). ECD advocates have argued that a policy emphasis on the education and well-being of preschool children in developing countries is among the most effective and cost-efficient ways to address the larger goals of development. They note how ECD programs can, for example, enhance the performance of children when they enter school, thus reducing the need for more costly remedial measures in the future. More generally, investments in ECD are likely to result in significant long-term human capital gains, as children who are exposed to such programs are more likely to grow up to be "capable and productive adults" (Young, 2002, p. 1).

If ECD is most often been associated with early education centers for preschool children, it has in practice come to encompass a broader set of initiatives, especially in developing countries. Most prominently, in an effort to ensure that the home environment is one that is supportive of young children and their healthy development, there may be parent training workshops and home visits in which ECD personnel try to educate caregivers about the needs of young children. Reflecting the core goals of ECD, such caregiver education is generally marked by the teaching of modern child-rearing practices on matters ranging from health and hygiene to play and language. Specific lessons for example may assert the importance of hand-washing for all family members and of providing a varied diet that is rich in nutrients for children. Caregivers are also instructed in how to interact with preschool children in order to actively promote their social and cognitive development. Based on notions of child development that are widely accepted in Western societies today, these proposed strategies of interaction are geared towards the creation of a developmentally appropriate and stimulating environment in the home for the preschool child. Thus caregivers may be encouraged to engage in interactive play and conversation with young children and to provide developmentally appropriate play materials for them.

ECD programs have been criticized for being culturally foreign and thus disruptive to the traditions of developing countries. To be sure, the importance for caregiver education and other ECD activities to be culturally sensitive, drawing on local practices and traditions whenever possible has been strenuously emphasized by ECD advocates (Myers, 1992, p. 121). Nonetheless, ECD initiatives clearly remain vulnerable to these criticisms, given that they often involve efforts to introduce child-rearing methods to the targeted group that are different from their established ones. Thus Helen Penn (2005), a critic of ECD, describes ECD projects in the developing world as culturally imperialist in character. These efforts, she contends, are rooted in Western conceptions of individualism, the nuclear family, and child development, in ways that are frequently in conflict with child-rearing traditions in the developing world.

Even as the potential for ECD initiatives to generate cultural resistance and resentment is widely recognized, the question of how they are actually understood by those who take care of children has received little attention. Rather, research on ECD has largely consisted of evaluations of specific programs in which what is assessed is their effectiveness in meeting specific ECD goals (Aboud, 2003; Kagiticibasi, Sunar & Bekman, 2001). The outcome of interest in these studies is whether or not the targeted caregivers have implemented ECD goals by caring for children in appropriate ways, such as for example by cognitively stimulating them with interactive play. Caregivers are thus viewed as ECD targets, of interest for the

.xtent to which they meet ECD goals. There is little attention to how caregivers themselves understand and respond to ECD programs, whether it is to absorb or resist them. The ECD programs themselves are furthermore viewed in static terms, as "given" rather than emergent projects which may be shaped by those who are seen to be its recipients.

In this paper, we approach ECD programs as emergent social institutions and activities that are shaped by the responses of those who are their targeted recipients. We focus on the particular case of *Sisimpur*, an educational children's television program in Bangladesh and how it is viewed by the caregivers of children in rural areas of the country. Based on qualitative data, we explore the following research questions: How is *Sisimpur* described and understood by the family members and teachers of young children in rural Bangladesh? How, if at all, has *Sisimpur* shaped the caregivers' understandings of early childhood and learning in Bangladesh? How do these caregivers perceive the relationship of *Sisimpur* to Bangladeshi culture?

Early Education and Parenting in Bangladesh

In Bangladesh as in other countries of the developing world, the goal of achieving universal primary education is widely viewed by policy-makers as central to the larger project of social and economic development for the country. Thus since the 1990s a variety of stipend programs, targeting girls in particular, have been introduced in the country with the goal of enhancing rates of primary school attendance and completion. Reflecting these efforts, there has been important progress in these areas, particularly with respect to the schooling of girls. However, available information suggests that about 40% of children in Bangladesh do not graduate from primary school due to a combination of drop-out as well as non-enrollment in school (CAMPE, 2002; UNDP, 2001). Among the specific barriers to schooling is the importance of children's work for many families. Especially among the poor, children begin to assume adult responsibilities as young as seven or eight years of age. They may take care of younger siblings, perform domestic chores or work outside the home to supplement parental wages (Amin et al, 2006; Jahan, 2002). Observers of the schooling system also note its inability to motivate children to learn due to its reliance on a rote-based pedagogical approach that is focused on the memorization of texts and its emphasis on teaching children through fear and punishment (JBIC, 2002).

A policy of greater attention to early childhood or preschool education is widely identified by development officials today as one potential means to improve primary education rates. By imparting basic academic and social skills to the preschool child, these programs may enhance the child's future interest in learning and facilitate her success when she enters school. Reflecting these ideas, in Bangladesh, the pressing need for more ECD programs has been acknowledged in recent years by government officials and policy makers. As a signatory to the 1990 Jomtien Declaration for the Education for All initiative, the Bangladesh government has recognized that 3-5 year old children should be the target of early childhood programs. However, such programs in actuality remain quite limited, especially for the more disadvantaged sectors of the population. According to UNESCO studies (2004; 2006), an estimated twenty-five percent of Bangladeshi children are enrolled in preschool classes. Often housed in primary schools and referred to as "baby" or "infant" classes, these are of

uncertain quality, frequently marked by an absence of developmentally appropriate and child-oriented teaching methods.

ECD advocates have also called for an expansion of child caregiver education in Bangladesh (Akhtar, 2004). Observers note a widespread normative acknowledgement among parents in Bangladesh of the importance of schooling for children, especially in light of the official policy emphasis since the 1990s on universal primary education (Arends-Kuenning & Amin, 2004). In general however, rural families, especially those with low levels of education, are frequently characterized by policy analysts as deficient with respect to ECD goals in such areas as child health, nutrition and hygiene as well as the social and cognitive development of children (Guldan *et al*, 1993; UNICEF, 2001). For example, rural child caregivers in Bangladesh are found to be largely unaware of the need to foster curiosity, self-confidence and creative play in children. Studies report a pattern of minimal conversation between adults and children, with most verbal interactions involving adult directives and instructions to children. Caregivers are rarely engaged in play with children, and make little effort to ensure that children have a stimulating and appropriate play environment (Akhtar, 2004).

Underlying these patterns of interaction with children as described above is a "natural growth" approach towards child development (Lareau, 2003) in which the caregiver role is normatively defined as allowing the child to naturally grow, without undue adult interference. Thus Kotlava (1993) notes in her study of rural families in Bangladesh that child development is widely seen as "an organic process, regulated by nature and God and therefore beyond parental control" (p. 68). This "natural growth" approach is especially evident with respect to young children under the age of seven who are seen to be in an early developmental stage of non-reason or an inability to understand, as captured by the phrase "*bujhe na*" (Aziz & Maloney, 1985). As the child grows older, the normative child-rearing stance shifts towards one of more active intervention, in which parents and other caregivers are expected to guide and monitor the child's movement into adult roles and responsibilities.

The above discussion suggests that ECD efforts face a challenging environment in Bangladesh. There are of course the basic economic and other structural difficulties of offering high quality widely available early education programs in the country. Beyond this, the cultural environment that surrounds young children in rural Bangladesh appears inimical to the realization of core ECD goals. Under these conditions, it seems likely that ECD programs are generally associated with social change in Bangladesh, signaling a break from the established patterns of the past.

Sisimpur in Bangladesh

Among development planners, there is growing interest in the use of mass media as a potentially effective and cost-efficient way to promote ECD goals (Morduchowicz, 2002; Young, 1996). Sesame Workshop, the company behind the U.S. children's educational TV program Sesame Street, has been an important player in such mass media initiatives. Drawing on its long and acclaimed record of providing high quality educational television to preschoolers in the U.S., Sesame Workshop has co-produced twenty international programs, in Egypt, India, Israel and other countries. These programs have emerged through intensive

localization strategies whereby Sesame Workshop has partnered with local educators and producers in an effort to develop a program that is reflective of the local culture even as it retains the educational strategies that have been developed on Sesame Street (Cole *et al*, 2001, p. 155; Moran, 2006).

In Bangladesh, Sesame Workshop has worked to develop *Sisimpur*, which first appeared in April 2005 on Bangladesh national television (BTV) where it now airs four times a week. *Sisimpur* is co-produced in Bangladesh by the local company Nayantara Communications.[1] The show features Bangla-speaking muppets such as Halum (a tiger), Tuktuki (a 5 year old girl), Shiku (a jackal) and Ikri Mikri (a 3 year old girl). In its curriculum and other content, *Sisimpur* strives to promote ECD goals. As highlighted by a statement from Sesame Workshop, *Sisimpur* seeks to offer a variety of lessons to preschool children, in academics, health and prosocial values, as well as Bangali culture:

With a curriculum defined by Bangladeshi educators, the series emphasizes not only literacy, math and science, but also helps foster values such as self-respect, empathy and cooperation. Other key objectives include educational opportunities for young girls; promoting good nutrition, hygiene and safety; and encouraging appreciation of the shared cultural heritage of diverse segments of Bangladeshi society (Sesame Workshop, 2007).

The production and airing of *Sisimpur* on Bangladesh national television has been accompanied by outreach programs that are designed to maximize the show's impact and ability to foster ECD goals. These include efforts to reach children in remote areas that lack electricity supply and access to television sets. In these cases, rickshaws or vans are equipped with a TV, a DVD player and generator, and episodes of *Sisimpur* are aired on a weekly schedule at central public locations such as schools. There are also parent and trainer workshops in which participants are given *Sisimpur* educational play kits and instructed in how to use them with young children in order to facilitate learning. The educational play kits include storybooks, children's growth charts, flash cards and board games that incorporate *Sisimpur* characters and the themes of nutrition, health and hygiene. By August 2006 over 3200 such kits had been distributed to parents. In addition, *Sisimpur* posters have been distributed and Awareness Workshops have been conducted through local NGOs in rural areas with the goal of ensuring that *Sisimpur* reaches a wide audience of children and caregivers (Sesame Workshop, 2007).

In addition to these outreach efforts, *Sisimpur* also tends to stand out from other children's educational television programs in Bangladesh due to its incorporation of varied themes and goals. Other available programs have tended to be focus on specific themes, such as the teaching of music, art or religion. A particularly notable children's program is Meena, the popular UNICEF-sponsored animation series. The program centers on a nine year-old South Asian girl named Meena and presents prosocial messages on health and education, and ideas that support the education and empowerment of girls. Many of these prosocial messages are also part of *Sisimpur*, where they are however incorporated into a larger package that includes entertainment, academics, music, storytelling and a variety of other features.

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METHODS

The data presented here are drawn from a larger study of the social and cultural impacts of *Sisimpur* in Bangladesh. The study used a variety of qualitative methods–household observations, focus group discussions and individual interviews–to explore perceptions of *Sisimpur*.

Location

Table 1:

Information on Research Sites

	Barguna, Barisal	Bhaluka, Mymenshingh	Gazipur, Dhaka
Area (in sq. kms)	1831	444	1741
Population	848554	30875	2031891
Literacy (%)	12.7	42.7	24.4
5 to 9 year-old boys attending school, percentage (%)	42.1	44	56.6
5 to 9 year-old girls attending school, percentage (%)	42	43	56.4

Source: Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, Upazila/Thana (2001)

We collected our data from specific *zillas*[2] or districts in the Barisal, Mymensingh and Dhaka divisions of Bangladesh, which are located in the Central and Southern areas of the country. These divisions were chosen due to their varied geographic locations, marking varied proximity to Dhaka, the capital city and the political, economic and cultural center of the country. The Gazipur division was closest to Dhaka city and Barguna the farthest, with the Bhaluka division at mid-distance. As explored in further detail below, the divisions were also diverse in their reported rates of literacy.

In each of the targeted districts, we collected data from a number of villages and small towns. Agriculture is the primary means of livelihood in these areas, although Gazipur, due to its relative proximity to the capital city of the country, has a growing industrial belt. As we see in Table 1, the reported adult literacy rate is highly varied, ranging from a low of 12.7% in the relatively remote coastal area of Barguna to a high of 42.7% in the district of Bhaluka. There is less of a gap in the rates of school attendance for children. The reported percentages of five to nine year old children attending school range from a high of 56% in Gazipur to a low of 42% in Barguna. Of note is the apparent absence of a gender gap in the reported rates of school attendance for boys and girls, reflecting perhaps the impact of the national programs that have targeted schooling for girls.

[2] From the lowest tier to highest tier, the administrative set-up of Bangladesh consists of unions (groups of villages), *upazillas* (sub-districts), *zillas* (districts) and divisions (which overlook the functioning of zillas).

Participants

Our informants included children, parents, educators and community leaders from a variety of settings in Bangladesh. The recruitment of subjects for the study occurred with the cooperation and assistance of local NGOs and community leaders. To gain a sharper understanding of *Sisimpur*'s impacts, the study occurred in two phases. The first phase took place in March-April 2005, just before the scheduled premiere of *Sisimpur* on Bangladesh television. The second phase took place a year later, in 2006, and included follow-up observations and interviews with participants from the previous phase as well as additional informants. We were able to re-interview all of those with whom we conducted in-depth individual interviews in the first phase. For focus group participants, the "drop-out" rate was approximately ten percent. In a few such cases the participants had relocated but more frequently, we were told that s/he was unable to make to the time and place that had been scheduled for the second focus group discussion.

In this paper we draw on materials collected during the second 2006 phase of the study. With the exception of one village, all of the communities studied had been part of *Sisimpur* outreach efforts and thus the general exposure to *Sisimpur* was quite high. Rickshaw/van viewings of *Sisimpur* had been organized in these communities, although the duration and intensity of these viewings varied considerably across them. In one village for example, *Sisimpur* had been shown several times for a period of about five days while in another, *Sisimpur* van viewings had occurred once a week over the course of six months. Even with these variations, we found child caregivers to be familiar with *Sisimpur* and to have quite definite views and opinions about it.

Data Collection

To explore our research questions, we gathered data in 2006 from seven focus group discussions and fourteen individual interviews from rural and semi-rural areas of Bangladesh. In total, we draw in this paper on the views of sixty-three caregivers of children in Bangladesh. In addition to the discussions and interviews, we conducted eleven observations of households that contained at least one young child. While these observations were focused on the child, they often offered important supplemental information on how caregivers viewed *Sisimpur*.

The focus groups consisted of six to eight participants. One member of the research team worked as discussion facilitator while one or two others took notes. As was the case with the individual interviews, the discussions lasted about two hours and most were tape-recorded. For both the focus groups and the individual interviews we began by asking informants to talk about their views on such general subjects as the impact of television on children, the problems faced by parents in rural Bangladesh, and how families could best prepare a young child to enter school. We then posed a series of questions (see APPENDIX I) about *Sisimpur* and their assessments of its character and impact, including such topics as whether they encouraged children to watch it, how they compared it to other television shows, and how the show had impacted their own experiences as a caregiver.

Data Analysis

Following data collection, the Bangla transcripts and write-ups of the interviews and observations were translated into English. All identifying names were removed from the transcripts and each informant was assigned a different name for the purposes of the study. In examining our data, we used a content analysis strategy that aimed to generate grounded theory through an inductive approach (Berg, 2007; Miles & Huberman, 1994). That is, we worked to identify the dimensions or themes in the data that were meaningful to the informants. Specifically, data analysis proceeded in the following manner. We began with the organization of the data into files that were based on the major topics of the project as listed on the interview schedule. Thus, for example, all data relevant to the theme of "encouraging children to watch *Sisimpur*" were consolidated into a single file, with all interview excerpts identified by transcript number. Following this, we moved on to intensive coding of the data within each of the files. At the second stage, we followed an open-ended coding strategy, searching for new and emerging themes and concepts in the data. In this "discovery" coding stage, we paid particular attention to "in-vivo" themes or the literal ways in which respondents spoke of particular experiences. The third stage was one in which the data was repetitively coded with the goal of refining and connecting the themes that had emerged and of expanding their theoretical scope. The fourth stage was one in which we compared individual cases to identify general patterns across the data.

RESULTS

In the analysis that follows, we first look at the views of family members, including parents and relatives (i.e., aunt, grandmother), followed by those of teachers. All names used in the discussion are assigned, in order to maintain the anonymity of informants. In general, as we will see, *Sisimpur* was viewed by these caregivers as a positive force in the lives of children. In talking about the specific benefits of *Sisimpur*, caregivers invoked several generalized understandings of children. Among family members in particular, discussions of *Sisimpur* were marked by an understanding of children as part of a better future and also as persons who are deserving, and requiring for their healthy development, the active and respectful attention of their caregivers. In the case of teachers, children were understood as playful learners, as persons who learned most effectively through playful interactions and engagements with their surroundings. Finally, we turn to a notion that marked the views on *Sisimpur* of both family members and teachers. This was of the "modern nationalist child"– a child who absorbed education and the benefits of modernity even as s/he remained firmly rooted, in loyalty and identity, to Bangladesh.

View of Family Members

In consonance with *Sisimpur*'s official goals, family members affirmed a variety of educational and prosocial (i.e., positive social behaviors) benefits of the show for children. In doing so, they spoke of how children were central to the future and to social progress. Children were identified as a source of new and positive knowledge and the privileged beneficiaries of previously unavailable opportunities. Through these notions of children, family members affirmed the value of *Sisimpur* as a source of positive and modernizing social change.

The association of *Sisimpur* with an optimistic modernity was evident in discussions about the health and hygiene messages that are part of the show. Such practices as washing hands, brushing teeth and eating a varied diet with plenty of vegetables are encouraged by *Sisimpur* with scenes of children and muppet characters in which they are shown to be happily engaged in such healthful activities as brushing their teeth. Family members spoke with appreciation of how these portrayals could facilitate their own efforts to impose good habits on children. But besides supporting already held goals, *Sisimpur* was also understood to be a source of new information for family members about these matters. Several parents spoke to us of learning from *Sisimpur* about good health practices—a finding that affirms the positive role of *Sisimpur* in fostering ECD goals through parent education. Children, we were told, were central to this learning, not just as targets or persons to whom the knowledge was directed, but also as teachers themselves. Rehana Begum for example, spoke of learning from *Sisimpur* through the children. A mother of four from a village in the southern district of Barisal, she speaks of trying to incorporate the health lessons of *Sisimpur* into her parenting practices. The child here appears as a source of new information and more generally, as a signifier of progress:

> We want our children to watch TV. We learn from the children. *Sisimpur* shows a lot of things that we should know about. Suppose, the child has used the toilet and then s/he sits down to eat without washing up. This is not right. Because if you do toilet in an open area then dirt can spread. In *Sisimpur* it shows one child telling another child, "Look, the child's mother has given him lunch without making him wash his hands first. The child will get sick, it is harmful for him." *Sisimpur* also shows that it's important for children to eat red spinach. Now I try to give this to my children and they willingly eat it.

Besides modern health and hygiene practices, the prosocial goals of *Sisimpur* have included the promotion of such values as cooperation and empathy. Our informants expressed awareness of and appreciation for these *Sisimpur* goals. For example, Nargis Khatun, from a small town in the district of Mymensingh, spoke to us at some length of a particular episode of *Sisimpur* that emphasizes the importance of persistence—to keep on trying to achieve a goal or task, whatever its difficulties. As we see in the remarks below, she did not see the notion of persistent effort to be fundamentally new or different from her own values. The impact of Sisimpur was rather in making such ideas explicit and moreover in its ability to package them to children in attractive ways:

> On *Sisimpur* they have shown how it is important to keep on trying, even if you don't succeed you should keep on trying and not give up. This is something that we always want to teach our children. But the way they show it on *Sisimpur* makes it attractive for children. They see other children, children from all over the world, also learning these things. We try to teach our children that it is important to play nicely with everyone. But we cannot show it to them in the beautiful way that *Sisimpur* shows it.

If family members felt the prosocial values of *Sisimpur* to be in harmony with their own, they also recognized how *Sisimpur* at times introduced new practices in support of these values. For example, *Sisimpur* has shown children and muppet characters saying "thank you" to each other. In Bangladesh, the practice of saying "thank you" (*dhonnobad*), is for the most

part reserved for formal settings and not common in daily encounters. Thanks are conveyed rather through more lengthy expressions of gratitude such as "you have taken a lot of trouble for me." Middle-class Bangladeshis are however increasingly turning to the practice of saying 'thank you' in their social interactions with peers. Several family members remarked on how children were now beginning to say "thank you" and indeed to remind and urge their elders to so as well. While it is certainly possible to imagine elders reacting negatively to children's demands, the family members spoke with both amusement and pride about how the child was introducing new practices—in effect becoming an agent of cultural change. Saleha, the mother of a 6 year old boy whom we observed playing in his home, spoke of how her son had learned many things from *Sisimpur*, including 'thank you', which he was now trying to teach other family members:

> If I say something it falls on deaf ears. But now he himself wants to wash his hands with soap and to brush his teeth. And he has learned to say thank you. In fact he is teaching 'thank you' to us. When he does something he reminds me, "Mother, you didn't say 'thank you' to me." He is learning good things from *Sisimpur* and then teaching us.

As reported earlier, there is widespread normative acknowledgement in Bangladesh today about the value of schooling for children. Reflecting this context, virtually all the family members interviewed, regardless of their own levels of education, spoke with enthusiasm about how *Sisimpur* taught valuable academic skills to children which prepared them to do well at school. Thus Afroza, a mother of two young children from a small town in Mymensingh who had herself gone to school for 4 years, expressed appreciation for *Sisimpur*'s teaching of numbers to children. She, like many other informants, saw *Sisimpur* as part of a general expansion of educational opportunities for children in Bangladesh and with that an opening up of their futures. As highlighted by her words, *Sisimpur* was seen as part of a better future, one that was integrally tied to children:

> Children can gain literacy (*pora-lekha*) through *Sisimpur*. Here they show how a snake turns into '1'. After writing '1' with a snake, one person asks another person, "What is this?" Then another person answers, "This is 1." Or another person says, "What is this?" And another person says, "This is 2." This is how children can learn numbers. When we were growing up we did not have these opportunities to learn; we did not have shows like *Sisimpur*. Now we know that it is important for our children to be educated, to go to school. It is a new age (*notun joog*). We can hope now for the future, that our children will have a better life.

Along with affirmation of the centrality of children to a hopeful future, *Sisimpur* also generated a rise in consciousness among family members, especially mothers, of their roles and responsibilities in caring for children. In fact, we were told that *Sisimpur* was working to transform "good mothering," from a taken-for-granted activity to a conscious and deliberate one. This growth in reflexivity was informed by the centering of children's perspectives that occurred on the *Sisimpur* television program. That is, caregivers noted a focus on children and the worlds of children as seen through children's eyes to be a key feature of *Sisimpur*. Thus against the backdrop of *Sisimpur*, the specificities of good parenting could no longer be assumed but instead required negotiation with children. What *Sisimpur* promoted then

was an understanding of children as deserving and requiring the active and responsive attention of adults.

Family members spoke of how *Sisimpur*'s child-centered approach was new, marking a break from traditional ways of dealing with children. According to Renu, a woman in her 40s, Sisimpur taught rural parents many things of which they had previously been unaware, including the importance of paying attention to children. Renu now took care of her nephews after many years of raising her own children:

Sisimpur teaches us that it's important to pay attention to children, to look at the world from their eyes. Parents (*Ma-Bap*) can learn how to treat their children well. We are village folk (*grammo-manush*) who are ignorant of a lot of matters. There is a lot to be learned from this program. On *Sisimpur*, they show you that if you can't do something the first time, then try again. This is something I can later show my child, tੁach my child in a way that s/he understands.

Among the specific lessons that *Sisimpur* was understood to convey was the importance for caregivers of building a relationship of closeness and intimacy with the child in a manner that engaged the child with her or his interests. In a focus group we conducted with family members in a small town, the telling of stories to children was a major theme in the discussion. A regular segment on *Sisimpur* features *Nanu* (grandmother) who relates stories to the baby muppet character *Ikri Mikri*. Puppets and music derived from Bengali folk traditions are further used to narrate the stories. As we see below, family members spoke not only of how *Sisimpur* conveys the message that it is good to tell stories to children, but also that *Sisimpur* is itself a source of stories and more generally of shared enjoyment with children:

P: I really like this program. And you can learn a lot from it. It isn't only the children who can learn from it, adults can learn a lot from it too. They tell you what kind of food to feed your children. They show a lot of little things. They give you a lot of information about children.

L: They tell stories on *Sisimpur*. So if you sit down with your children to watch the program then you also get to hear the stories together. You can talk about the stories together. They teach children all sorts of things which we can also learn and so we can understand them better.

A: We can learn how they tell stories to children. If I learn how to tell stories and tell her then she will feel good and she will go to sleep. I watch it for my daughter.

PJ: You see how to behave with children. How to tell children stories. I've seen that children love to hear stories but we get irritated telling them. But on this program they tell stories. *Sisimpur* also shows how and why one needs to give time to their children.

Family members often spoke of the culturally Bangali character of *Sisimpur*. Indeed, when we raised this topic to our informants they often expressed surprise. They pointed out to us that

the show was in Bangla and that it showed Bangladesh and its people and culture. Here it is worth noting that few persons in rural Bangladesh are familiar with the pioneering U.S. television program Sesame Street. Thus there is no particular sense that *Sisimpur* is a foreign import and/or U.S.-derived. Indeed, a number of informants expressed appreciation for how *Sisimpur* was helping to preserve, through its portrayals of rural Bangladesh, a traditional way of life that is being threatened by the forces of change. During a focus group discussion, a mother from a village in Mymensingh spoke with appreciation of how children could learn about the tradition of *Boishaki Mela* (Bengali New Year's Festival) in Bangladesh. It is of note that while *Boishakhi Mela* remains important in Bangladesh, it has become contested in some rural areas due to the growing influence of conservative Islamist movements that oppose such festivals (Riaz, 2004):

> I have not seen any other program like *Sisimpur*. Both children and adults can learn from it. Whatever they show here are things that are part of our country. Things like sailboats, grassfields, making things out of coconut leaves–our children make all these things. *Boishakhi Mela* is a tradition in our country. It holds on to the past. How did our ancestors celebrate this fair? By watching this fair our children get to know what our country is like.

Sisimpur was also seen as a potential vehicle for fostering an understanding of Bangladesh around the world. In fact, several informants urged us to tell the producers of *Sisimpur* to air the Bangladesh segments of the show in other countries. Sajeda Amin, a mother in Barisal, felt that in this way viewers in other countries could gain exposure to Bangladesh and its people. This exposure would furthermore affirm the resilience and creativity of the Bangladeshi people to the world, and so counteract the international image of passive poverty that is attached to the country. These requests indicate an understanding of *Sisimpur* as playing a role in shaping global conceptions of nationality:

We want you to please tell them [the producers of *Sisimpur*] from us that just as we are getting to know about other foreign countries, we would really appreciate it if they could let other people of the world know about our country. They must show the foreigners how the children in our country make so many things with clay and coconut leaves. Then they too will know that we might be poor but we can still do a lot of things.

View of Teachers

As did family caregivers, the teachers we interviewed also spoke with appreciation of how *Sisimpur* helped to prepare children for school by giving them basic academic skills as well as enthusiasm for learning. But from teachers in particular, we heard of how *Sisimpur* offered to them a model of teaching young children that was different from traditional methods with their emphasis on rote memorization and the motivation of children through punishment. Their understandings of *Sisimpur* were embedded in a notion of "the playfully learning child," a construction in which children learn in self-motivated and thus natural ways, through fun and play. Through its representations of the "playfully learning child," *Sisimpur* affirmed the value of modern methods of teaching children.

Md. Rahman, a school teacher in a relatively poor and remote village in Mymensingh, was struck by *Sisimpur*'s success in motivating and teaching children through such vehicles as play and music. He noted how the strict boundaries between schooling and play–a separation that has been so central to the education system in Bangladesh–may be challenged by *Sisimpur*: "*Sisimpur* has taught me that it's possible to teach children by making them laugh. It is better than punishing them. After all, it is better if they are happy." On a similar note, Salman Haque, a teacher in a small town in Barisal, also spoke of how *Sisimpur* effectively taught children through fun and games. He felt that his work as a teacher was facilitated by *Sisimpur* as children eagerly referred to their alphabet books after watching the show:

> *Sisimpur* is good for the children because it creates an interest in them to learn and to study. What usually happens right after they watch the program is that they quickly open their text books to verify the letters of the alphabet that they have just seen. For example, they see an 'E' or a 'P' and they quickly open their books to see if the alphabet is the same alphabet they just saw. S/he can then retain this information much better. Children are taught a lot of things by *Sisimpur*. They are learning and are experiencing how they can study and recognize letters. I would say that *Sisimpur* is bringing or helping to bring a lot of changes to our education system. The fact that *Sisimpur* is teaching them through fun and games is not only making them happy, but also making the lives of us educators much easier.

In recognition of the interest in learning that was generated by *Sisimpur*, there were some teachers who referred to *Sisimpur* characters or sang songs from *Sisimpur* at school in order to stimulate students and to establish rapport with them. This was mentioned by Roxana Ahmed, a teacher at a village school. She contrasts *Sisimpur*'s playful teaching style with the methods of schooling with which she herself had been raised. We see that as in the case of family members as described earlier, *Sisimpur* characters and music may be viewed as an effective focus of shared interest with children and thus a means of building rapport with them:

> I have been teaching for a short time but I have learnt a lot from *Sisimpur* within this time. When I learnt all this as a child, my teachers did not make my lessons this attractive for me. One day I speak in a high tone and then a low tone in my class. All the children then start shouting that Madam, you have learnt this yesterday from Tuktuki and Shiku. I talk like certain characters from *Sisimpur* and the children enjoy it and learn faster. That's why they really love me.

Several teachers spoke of trying to incorporate methods of teaching that they had learned from *Sisimpur* into their classroom practices. This included not just music and stories to stimulate children, but also the creative use of materials from the natural environment. *Sisimpur* has segments in which children and adults are shown to be creatively using easily available materials such as clay and fruits to fashion toys, make art, and illustrate numbers and letters of the alphabet. Joynal Abedin, a teacher in a remote and poor village in Mymensingh, spoke of how *Sisimpur* had inspired him to these strategies of using "natural things." The very notion of "the playfully learning child" acquires an organic, naturalistic quality here:

We always have fairs in our village but it never occurred to us that we could make letter shaped fried sweets. We also have sweets in the shops in all shapes such as circles, triangles, squares etc., yet we never even thought about using them to teach the children about shapes. I really liked learning about all these things, how one can use natural, simple things that are around us. If we can teach them in this way then they will also find studying interesting and the fear they have of studying will slowly dissipate. Then one day I saw they showed how the sliced an okra, a starfruit and then put some leaves on a papers and put paint over it and made a beautiful picture. I never knew one could make a painting so easily. Now even I will try to teach the children to paint this way. '*Jho*' is the letter for '*Jhar*' (storm) and *Tuktuki* flies away in a storm—I loved that.

If *Sisimpur* was appreciated by teachers for its portrayals of life in Bangladesh, it was also valued for teaching children about other parts of the world. *Sisimpur* has regular international segments in which children from different countries are shown as they engage in various activities, including play and local festivals. These segments, we were told by teachers, helped children to situate themselves in the world and thus to understand themselves as Bangladeshi; they produced a globally located national consciousness among children. Thus *Sisimpur* affirmed a notion of the "modern nationalist child," a conceptual construction in which the child is a loyal member of the national community of Bangladesh, an identity that is informed and strengthened by an awareness of the world in which Bangladesh is located. Jamil Mustafa, a teacher working in a small town, was among those who appreciated the international segments of *Sisimpur* for how they helped to broaden children's horizons. He felt that by doing so they strengthened children's sense of pride and identification as Bangladeshi:

> I like the parts of *Sisimpur* when they show other countries. It teaches our children a lot. I see them asking questions like, "Where is that country, why do they dress like that?" And then we can say, "This is Egypt that they are showing and we can see how they celebrate Eid. We are Bangalis and we speak a different language and we celebrate Eid a little differently." The children come to understand that they are from Bangladesh and I feel that they will love their country more.

As did family members, the teachers also spoke of how *Sisimpur* was valuable for teaching children in Bangladesh about their own country. *Sisimpur* was understood here as a representation and indeed as a vehicle for the preservation of traditional Bangali culture. The role of *Sisimpur* as teacher of Bangali cultural traditions to children was made especially relevant by the fact that these traditions were seen to be under growing threat from the forces of change. Thus Maneeza Hossain, a teacher in a small town, spoke of *Sisimpur* as a true reflection of children's lives in the villages. She speaks with some nostalgia about her childhood in the village and how *Sisimpur* reminded her of those times:

> *Sisimpur* is a reflection of the children's lives. For instance—the children in the villages make watches, spectacles, bangles, birds with coconut leaves, earthen dolls. The children from the cities don't make them but they can learn how to do them. One day I saw on *Sisimpur* they were showing a game of how two girls can become friends. I saw how two families exchanged gifts in a friendly manner and established a friendship between the

two girls. When we were in the village in our childhood, this is how we used to establish our friendships.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Research on Early Childhood Development initiatives in developing countries has been limited in its attention to their larger cultural impacts. In this paper we have argued for the value of an approach that recognizes the fluid and contested nature of ECD initiatives and concurrently, the active role of those who are the intended recipients in shaping their character and consequences. With the goal of understanding the cultural impacts of *Sisimpur*, an educational children's television program in Bangladesh that is based on Sesame Street and promotes ECD goals, we studied views and ideas about the program among family members and teachers in rural Bangladesh. We found that among these caregivers of children, *Sisimpur* was widely viewed as an important educational resource, not only for their children but also for themselves. The informants appreciated *Sisimpur* as a source of new ideas on how best to deal with children. The program was understood to provide useful information about health practices for children. Family members spoke of how *Sisimpur* taught them the value of interacting and engaging with children in a manner that was child-centered, focused on children's perspectives and interests. Our educator informants felt that *Sisimpur* had improved their ability to teach young children effectively, through such stimulating methods as play, music and art. Perhaps our most striking finding was the heightened self-consciousness in relations with children that was reported by our informants in their accounts of what they had learned from *Sisimpur*. That is, parents and teachers spoke of how *Sisimpur* encouraged them to more closely scrutinize how they interacted with children. There is then a certain democratizing of adult-child relations, a questioning of norms by which the perspectives of children can legitimately be ignored by adults as part of the dynamics of age hierarchy.

As we have summarized above, our results generally affirm the potential for mass media ECD initiatives such as *Sisimpur* to have an important impact on the child-rearing attitudes of family members and teachers in developing societies. We must however emphasize the preliminary nature of these conclusions, given both our focus on a specific case (i.e., *Sisimpur* in Bangladesh) as well as the limited number of caregivers with whom we spoke in Bangladesh. Also, our data does not directly address behavioral shifts, or the critical question of how the attitudinal shifts such as those we have described in this paper actually impact the daily interactions of caregivers with children. It is also important to note that in order to ensure their exposure to *Sisimpur*, we drew our informants from communities where community showings of *Sisimpur* had been organized. Thus we can expect the general impacts of *Sisimpur* in rural Bangladesh to be far less than what we have described here, given the fact that access to the show has been limited by such structural barriers as inadequate power supply and limited numbers of television sets (see Jain & Kibria, 2007).

In our analysis of the perspectives of family members and teachers, we found their assertions of the value of *Sisimpur* to be nested in a more general affirmation of the benefits of modernizing social change. Indeed, *Sisimpur*'s successful packaging of modernity or its ability to portray the benefits of social change in acceptable ways may be critical to its successful reception. Scholars of childhood have noted the particular significance of

understandings of "the child" as a symbolic arena in societies that are experiencing shifts of modernity (Jenks, 1996; Peterson, 2005). Indeed, Sharon Stephens (1995) has argued that "the child" is a crucial site for the contests of cultural identity and meaning that are generated by modernity and thus "pivotal in the structuring of modernity" (p. 6). Reflecting these processes, the family members and teachers we spoke to referred to certain generalized understandings of children when they discussed the benefits of *Sisimpur*. These included, for example, the notion of children as embodiments of a better future. There was also the idea of the "modern nationalist child," an understanding that was perhaps especially crucial in favorably resolving the potential cultural tensions posed by *Sisimpur*. Here it is important to underline the apparent success with which *Sisimpur* has established itself as a local Bangladeshi production, as suggested by the fact that there was little sense among our informants that it was a foreign import. Indeed, *Sisimpur* was understood to be a source of modern nationalism–of a strengthened identification among children with the traditional national culture of Bangladesh coupled with an awareness of the larger world. Among the factors that may facilitate the ability of *Sisimpur* as a television production to generate such ideas for viewers is the relative ethnic and linguistic homogeneity of Bangladesh as a country. These conditions allow for the invoking of nationalist symbols and imagery in a manner that generates consensus rather than conflict among viewers. Future studies that are comparative in design, examining different ECD initiatives across varied social and national contexts may provide better insight into the particular conditions that promote the successful cultural reception of Early Child Development programs among the caregivers of children.

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APPENDIX I

Interview Questions about *Sisimpur*

1. When was the last time you saw Sisimpur?

2. How often do you watch it?

3. Where do you watch it?

4. Who watches with you?

5. Do your children watch *Sisimpur*? If so, how often do they watch it?

6. Do you encourage your children to watch *Sisimpur*? Why or why not?

7. Is there anything that particularly stands out for you about *Sisimpur*?

8. What do you like the most about it?

9. What do you like the least about it?

10. Which of the regular characters do you like the most? Why?

11. Do you think that *Sisimpur* helps to prepare young children to attend school? What are some specific ways in which it does so?

12. Have you ever heard people in your area talking about *Sisimpur*? What do they say about it?

13. When you think of all the different shows on TV, are there others like *Sisimpur*? What makes *Sisimpur* the same or different from other children's programs on television?

14. Do you think that *Sisimpur* has had an impact on children's lives and experiences? If so, how?

15. FOR FAMILY MEMBERS: How about in terms of how you deal with the children under your care? Has *Sisimpur* had an impact? If so, how? Has it changed your view of yourself as a caregiver or of the children under your care?

16. FOR TEACHERS: *Sisimpur* aims to provide pre-school children with exposure to informal educational opportunities like fundamental learning skills, social skills, and health knowledge. To what extent do you think *Sisimpur* has succeeded in this goal? How about in terms of your work as a teacher? Has *Sisimpur* had an impact? If so, how? Has it changed your view of yourself as a teacher or of your students?

17. What can one learn from *Sisimpur*?

18. Do you think that *Sisimpur* reflects the realities of children's lives in Bangladesh? In what ways?

19. Do you have any advice for those who make *Sisimpur*, in terms of what they can do to make the show better?

20. When you think of all the different shows on TV, are there others like *Sisimpur*?

21. What makes *Sisimpur* the same as or different from other children's programs on television?

22. Do you think that *Sisimpur* has had an impact on children's lives and experiences? If so, how?