The International Baccalaureate covers the K-12 spectrum with three linked but varied programs: the Primary Years Programme (K-4), Middle Years Program (6-10) where BHP is most likely to be taught, and the Diploma Programme (11-2) which includes the IB’s signature Theory of Knowledge course.

When an Australian historian and an American philanthropist teamed up to create Big History, it was already evident that the project would reach well beyond any one school, country, or continent. So it’s hardly surprising to hear Koel Ray, Dean of Studies at the Aga Khan Academy in Hyderabad, India, discuss with depth and enthusiasm, her journey in bringing Big History to her school.

Not to be confused with Khan Academy, the terrific but unrelated online educational resource, this school was established by His Highness, the Aga Khan IV, who has been described in the media as a “millionaire, philanthropist, and spiritual leader of approximately 15 million Ismaili Muslims.”

As a full IB school teaching all programs except for the Career-related Programme (CP), the Hyderabad campus is part of an expanding network of Aga Khan Academies that, as Koel puts it, “emphasize pluralism, culture, economics for development,” and educating students to be “twenty-first century leaders.”

“You know, we talk about students being lifelong learners or teachers being lifelong learners… I love exploring new things. I don’t think you lose anything, you just gain.”

– Koel Ray

When she attended a BHP conference in Seattle in 2014, Koel’s first thought was how well Big History seemed to overlap with the Theory of Knowledge, the 11th-12th grade IB course grounded in inquiry-based learning. “But as I explore it more now I realize that it... also aligns with the ATL, or the Approaches to Learning skills,” a hallmark of the IB curriculum.
Koel was the first to teach Big History at the Aga Khan Academy, and has now been joined by two more teachers. Their model is to cover the first five units, reaching Life by the end of Grade 8, then continue in Grade 9 with Early Humans and the remaining units. Spreading the course out over two years allows them to cover each unit in detail without compromising the existing curriculum.

“I have been interviewing some of the students who did the project with me last year. I asked them, ‘does Big History answer your questions or does it ask more questions?’ They said... it does answer some questions but those answers lead to further questions, and I thought that was really beautiful considering it was coming from Grade 8.”

While Koel and her teaching peers are devotedly focused on student learning, she says that Big History meets her own learning needs as an educator. “You know, we talk about students being lifelong learners or teachers being lifelong learners... I love exploring new things. I don’t think you lose anything, you just gain.” This was the argument that swayed her principal, who was initially skeptical of BHP’s relevance in an IB context, but was soon persuaded by Koel’s enthusiasm and the engagement of the students.

Koel’s learning did not stop there. When asked how well the BHP curriculum overlaps not just with IB but also with Hyderabad, India, she told us of an exciting adaptation she made, inspired by the Historos Caves activity from Unit 6: Early Humans.

“What I did... was to bring in a little flavor of our own history. I introduced the to them Ajanta and Ellora caves, which are very, very ancient caves in India.” She stressed that it was important that students not miss out on an opportunity to learn their own history, even while using the skills and activities of the curriculum. Koel provided students with articles about modern scientists who had been studying these 2,300 year-old caves. “There was this group, that included an anthropologist, archaeologist, geologist, and paleontologist – and they had to work as a team.”

By asking students to deal with the articles as if they were primary sources, she encouraged them to each take the perspective of one type of research. “So the beauty of this type of a project is you actually learn collaboration skills, you learn communication skills -- if the anthropologist and the archeologist, and the geologist and the paleontologist don’t collaborate, don’t share information or share perspective, then the project doesn’t proceed.”

The project was such a hit, Koel intends to do it again. “I would love to have taken them to the caves, actually. They are about a day’s journey from Hydrabad, but maybe we will do that this year.”

For Koel, the most memorable Big History lesson occurred not on one of the many occasions when students showed engagement and enthusiasm for inquiry-based learning, but when her classroom was visited by none other than His Highness the Aga Khan. “He came to the Big History class so he could see what we meant by collective learning, and he saw how collective learning brings man together, and how collective learning also can bring war and empires and can break up society.” Koel said that His Highness deeply appreciated this perspective, and gave the lesson high praise. “You know, just looking at the agricultural age, when you look at what agriculture is doing to bring the people together, you see how that is also the starting point of all conflict and problems in society.”

While Koel and the other teachers keep the BHP units in Grades 8 and 9, she says they have sometimes been helpful in the Theory of Knowledge course as well. The skills of claim-testing and inquiry, as articulated in BHP, have been useful in these higher grades. “I did use the Jane Goodall video when I was introducing the Pre-DP course to the DP cohorts. I was doing a segment called ‘The Profile of the Holistic Learner,’ so I used that video to show that a holistic learner is someone who is not just concerned about himself or herself, but thinks about the environment and deals with problems and tries to find solutions.”

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