

Exploring Multiple Pathways Towards the Realization of Self-Determination for Indigenous Peoples in Asia

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The Indigenous Peoples' movement in Asia is fundamentally about decolonization—challenging historical and present-day systems that suppress indigenous governance and autonomy. It is more than a cultural right; it is about expanding democratic space in authoritarian regimes. It reflects a larger call for political reform, particularly in states under authoritarian control such as Myanmar, Bangladesh, Nepal, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam, including countries like India and the Philippines exhibiting growing trends toward authoritarianism.

Indigenous self-governance existed long before colonialism. Colonial rule only layered new systems of domination on top of existing ones—what we can rightly call *dual colonialism*. Colonial powers introduced ideas like state sovereignty, eminent domain, and criminal law to justify their control. These concepts became weapons—used not just to govern, but to dispossess Indigenous Peoples of our rights and dignity. Even today, no matter how democratic the laws claim to be, states resist implementation and respond with militarisation of our territories.

Problems of the State

Exploring pathways to peace and justice must begin with understanding the fundamental problems of state architecture in Asia. In many Asian countries, the colonial hangover of state sovereignty that is *self-justifying and self-perpetuating* is deeply entrenched in the system of government and norms. Little attention has been paid to the *qualities* that make democratic governance possible.

In Asia, democracy is not about enabling people to govern themselves. It's about making people governable—obedient to authority. Right and wrong are often measured not by ethics or justice, but by whether one submits to power.

These characteristics were already deeply embedded from the start because many modern Asian states did not emerge from a shared cultural or moral consensus. They are made up of diverse historical societies brought together by force or convenience, where normalising obedience to control became necessary. What this implies is that the more the state grew, the more society shrank.

For example, indigenous governance structures functioned as democratic systems, with collective decision-making, participatory leadership, and consensus-based dispute resolution. But colonial and post-colonial states have undermined these structures, replacing them with governance models prioritizing state control. To take a case, in Northeast India, the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution provides limited autonomy to District Councils, yet state encroachment continues to undermine indigenous governance systems. Seeking state recognition of indigenous governance systems carries risks, as governments often attempt to co-

opt indigenous institutions by absorbing them into state structures, diluting or replacing their governance systems.

Pathways to peace and justice

Finding the pathways to peace and justices require understanding the fundamental position and vision of Indigenous Peoples. For instance, why do Indigenous People go to great lengths to protect their belief systems? It is because belief systems are not just ideas — they are frameworks that help us assign value, regulate emotions, and act meaningfully in the world.

Generally speaking, echoing the views of some scholars, a belief system allows a person to determine what is important, what is right or wrong, and how to behave within their social environment. In this way, belief systems serve as both internal compasses and social contracts.

Belief systems are not held in isolation; their efficacy depends heavily on being *shared*. This shared nature is what allows people to understand one another, form stable relationships, and coexist within a common cultural or moral “territory.” This is why challenges to belief systems often provoke strong emotional and existential reactions — because they threaten to unravel the very means by which people navigate the world.

They are shared structures that enable social cooperation and make life intelligible. When threatened, people defend them as they would defend their sense of identity and belonging. But when different belief systems come into contact, tensions often arise. One possibility is conflict or domination — where one system seeks to subordinate or eliminate the other. Another, more constructive possibility, is dialogue and negotiation — an effort to find some mutual understanding or a framework for coexistence. But such negotiations are complex, because belief systems cannot simply be discarded without profound disorientation.

This is where **pluralism** and **democratisation** matter. Pluralism recognises the coexistence of different value systems, while democratisation builds the space for fair negotiation, mutual respect, and shared principles. Therefore, key to finding solution is in identifying values that uphold dignity, reduce conflict, and allow us to live together without erasing differences—finding mechanisms that allow for disagreement without destruction. To build true democracy, we need to make space for multiple centres of belonging—multiple nations within a state.

Indigenous communities’ movement for self-governance centre around our worldview and value systems. We were the first self-governing polities prior to the formation of nation-states. We practiced forms of self-governance that were organically developed and negotiated within strong village or community foundations. The primary authority resided within the community itself, including ownership and control over our territory. Our systems were built with the understanding of the nature of things and beings, ensuring the well-being of both human and non-human beings—self-glorification or position of individuals played the least role.

Thus, indigenous conception of self-governance and democracy movement is clearly based on teleological freedom—the freedom to become who we are meant to be, to be agents of peace, justice and contributor to global concerns of planetary sustainability.

Conclusion

Let me conclude by stating that regardless of whether Member States recognise Indigenous Peoples in their borders—the UN does. The UNDRIP has settled the political debate on the right to self-determination of Indigenous Peoples. But for ‘Indigenous Peoples’ as ‘Peoples’ in international law, there is ambiguity on how the common Articles of ICCPR and ICESCR will be applied. Thereby, the UN must create effective and democratic mechanisms and procedures involving bodies like the Human Rights Committee, Human Rights Council, UNPFII, EMRIP, SRIP, Security Council, General Assembly and the ICJ dedicated to addressing Indigenous Peoples’ claims to post-colonial self-determination.

Secondly, the status of Indigenous Peoples must be elevated as political entities allowing us to participate as equal partners in negotiations that shape global policies and norms.

And finally, we must create permanent platforms for dialogue—bringing states, Indigenous Peoples, and civil society together to shape the future of self-determination as a force for democratic transformation.

Thank you.

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