



WHO WE ARE

INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

IN ASIA



More and more people in Asia identify themselves as belonging to Indigenous Peoples.

This however does not mean that we claim to be the only people native to our countries. In most cases we are the “aboriginal” or “native” people of the lands we live in, and other people have come to settle there later. But we have also lived side-by-side with other peoples, native to their own lands, who however do not call themselves Indigenous Peoples. These are usually the dominant people, who have the economic and political power in our countries.

In some cases communities of Indigenous Peoples were forced to leave their lands because of violent conflicts, and to move to another country, like to Thailand, Vietnam, or Laos. There, they are clearly not the first inhabitants, the aboriginal or native people. But they still remain Indigenous Peoples.

Most of our peoples are small in numbers. Some have populations of just a few thousand, or even just a few hundred. But we all have our own distinct language, culture, customary laws and social and political institutions that are very different from those of the dominant ethnic groups in our countries. While we find an enormous diversity among Indigenous Peoples, common to us all are the strong cultural attachment to and the dependence of our livelihoods on land, forests or the sea, and the natural resources therein.

We are using the term Indigenous Peoples with a meaning that is different from that given in dictionaries, or how it is understood by many governments. Over the past decades, the concept of Indigenous Peoples has evolved beyond the original meaning still found in dictionaries, and it is now well established in international law. That is why we are writing it with capital initial letters.





It is a foreign term for most of us, and it is often difficult to translate it into our own languages. In our countries we first of all use the names which our ancestors have given us. Then there are the names which other people have given us. In many cases they are derogatory, and we resent them.

And there are the names which governments use to refer to us collectively – like "*ethnic*

minorities", "*hill tribes*", "*tribal people*", "*aboriginal people*", "*native people*". Some of the names outsiders have given us are not appreciated by many of us, since they often imply notions of cultural inferiority, being "*primitive*" or "*backward*".

Examples are *chuncheat* (meaning "*ethnicity*", or literally "*national people*" in Cambodia), *upajati* ("*tribal*") in Bangladesh, *sakai* (literally meaning "*slave*") used in Thailand for some hunter-gatherer groups, or *fan* ("*primitive people*") introduced by the Han Chinese settlers when they came to the island of Taiwan. However, in some countries the popular or official terms have come to be accepted and are now often used by ourselves (like "*tribal*" in India).





"Indigenous communities, peoples and nations [are] those which, having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of societies now prevailing in those territories or parts of them. They form at present non-dominant sectors of society and are determined to preserve, develop, and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories and their ethnic identity as the basis of their continued existence as peoples, in accordance with their own cultural patterns, social institutions and legal systems."

Definition of Indigenous Peoples according to Rodolfo Stavenhagen,
UN Special Rapporteur for the study of discrimination
against Indigenous Peoples

The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UN-DRIP) adopted in September 2007 by the UN General Assembly set the minimum standard in recognizing the collective rights of indigenous peoples. It provides for the necessary measures to address the particular situation of indigenous peoples in rectifying the historical injustices and discrimination of indigenous peoples, regardless of how we are called.

We are not asking for privileges when we demand the recognition of our distinct identities, cultures and collective rights. We are merely asserting the respect for who we are and how we want to live in peace and harmony together with others. We value cultural diversity and promote solidarity.



How are Indigenous Peoples called in Asia?

A few examples:

China

The dominant Han Chinese have historically used various terms for non-Han "tribes", such as "*fan*" and "*man*". These carry the connotations of "barbarian", "primitive", "backward", or "uncivilized". Besides these general terms, more specific designations for the "the uncivilized tribes" living in the hinterlands have been used, like *nan man* for the diverse peoples of the hills and mountains in the southwest. Today, they are officially called "ethnic minorities".

India

The Indian government refers to Indigenous Peoples as Scheduled Tribes. In mainland India, *adivasi* has become the popular term. It means "original people". The Indigenous Peoples of India's North East do not call themselves *adivasi* in spite of the fact that the meaning of the term very much applies to them as well. They prefer to use the English terms "tribals" or Indigenous Peoples.

Nepal

Nepal is one of the countries in Asia where Indigenous peoples are constitutionally and legally recognized. They are officially called "Indigenous Nationalities".

Philippines

"*Tribo*" (tribe) is still quite commonly used, but Indigenous Peoples and its translation into local languages are now well established in popular usage. The Philippines have officially recognized Indigenous Peoples. In the constitution, laws and other official documents they are called as "Indigenous Cultural Communities/Indigenous Peoples".

Vietnam

Indigenous Peoples in Vietnam are subsumed under the category "ethnic minorities" (*dan toc thieu so, dan toc it nguoi*). This refers to all people who do not belong to the dominant ethnic group, the Kinh. It therefore also includes ethnic groups like Chinese or Khmer, who are minorities but generally not considered to be Indigenous Peoples.





How many Indigenous Peoples are there in Asia?

Language is often used as an indicator for cultural diversity. Studies estimate that today there are 5,000 to 7,000 spoken languages in the world. Between 4,000 and 5,000 of these languages are regarded as indigenous peoples' languages. So although globally indigenous peoples are believed to number only about 300 million and thus constitute merely 4.4% of the world's population, they represent between 70 and 80% of our cultural diversity. But all these figures are mere approximations. There is hardly any reliable country-level census data on indigenous populations available, simply because few countries recognize indigenous peoples, or if they do, their identity has not been taken into account during preparations of national population censuses. If more accurate data becomes available, the global figures may have to be corrected considerably. Rough estimates for South, Southeast and East Asia lead us to the conclusion that indigenous peoples may number as many as, or even more than 260 million people. In any case, it is now widely recognized that the majority of the world's indigenous peoples live in Asia, and that Asia therefore also holds the world's most diverse indigenous population.

The table on next page illustrates this very well. It presents a compilation of some of the available information for a selection of Asian countries. For the reasons just mentioned, the figures provided have to be taken with caution. They have been



retrieved from various source, which are often diverging considerably, and in many if not most cases they are at best based on informed estimates.

COUNTRY	COMMON EXTERNAL DESIGNATIONS	NUMBER OF ETHNIC GROUPS	ESTIMATED TOTAL POPULATION
Bangladesh	Pahari, Jumma, Adivasi, Tribal	45	1.7 - 3.7 mio 1.2 - 2.5%
Burma/Myanmar	Ethnic Minorities	135	14.4 - 19.2 mio 30 - 40%
Cambodia	Indigenous Minorities	19-21	101,000 - 190,000 0.9 - 1.4%
China	Ethnic Minorities	ca. 400 (grouped into 55 officially recognized "ethnic minorities")	105 mio 8.5%
India	Scheduled Tribes, Adivasi	622-635 (622 recognized "Scheduled Tribes")	84.32 mio 8.3%
Indonesia	Masyarakat Adat	over 700	50 - 70 mio 20 - 29%
Japan	Indigenous Peoples (now officially applied to the Ainu)	2	Ainu: 50,000-100,000 (0.04 - 0.08%) Ryukans: 1.3 mio (1%)
Laos	Ethnic Minorities	ca. 200 (49 officially recognized "ethnic minorities")	2.4 - 4.8 mio 35-70%
Malaysia	Orang Asli, Natives, Orang Asal	97	3.4 mio 12%
Nepal	Adivasi, Janajati, Indigenous Nationalities	over 80 (59 recognized "Indigenous Nationalities")	10.6 mio 37.1%
Pakistan	Adi vaas, Tribal People	over 20	35 - 42 mio 21 - 25%
Philippines	Indigenous Cultural Communities/Indigenous Peoples	110 officially recognized Indigenous Peoples	6.9-12 mio 10-15%
Thailand	Ethnic Minorities, Hill Tribes, Hill/Mountain People	over 25 (10 officially recognized "hill tribes")	over 900,000 1.5%
Vietnam	Ethnic Minorities	over 90 (53 officially recognized "ethnic minorities")	10 mio 13.8%





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