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Indigenous Peoples' Rights and Civil Society Action against Language Death and Cultural Oppression: Evidence and Lessons from India – Bhil Language and Culture

Professor Sarbeswar Sahoo (Indian Institute of Technology Delhi), Professor Paul Chaney (Wales Institute of Social, Economic Research, Data and Methods – WISERD, Cardiff University), Dr Reenu Punnoose (Indian Institute of Technology Palakkad) and Dr Muhammed Haneefa (Indian Institute of Technology Jammu)

Introduction

This briefing is from the project 'Indigenous Peoples' Rights and Civil Society Action against Language Death and Cultural Oppression: Evidence and Lessons from India' funded by the Academy of Medical Sciences. The research explores the issues, challenges and lessons that emerge from civil society action to support indigenous languages and cultures. Specifically, we focus on two Indigenous Peoples, the Bhil in Rajasthan and the Irula tribes of Kerala. The Bhils are one of the oldest tribes in India and speak a language of Indo-Aryan origin. Irula are the second largest tribe in Kerala. They live in the Attappady region of Palakkad District. The Irula language is an independent Southern Dravidian language that is akin to Tamil. In this non-technical briefing, we focus on the Bhil and draw on the findings of fieldwork, including workshops held in 2024-25 with indigenous peoples, civil society organizations (CSOs) and academics in India and set out some of the emerging findings from the research. Our second publication (Non-Technical Briefing Paper No.2 www.wiserd.ac.uk) discusses the contemporary situation of the Irula Peoples.

The Concept of Indigeneity

Today, in much of Asia and beyond, indigeneity is a contested concept. Observers in parts of Asia and Africa have refrained from acknowledging indigenous people (IP) as a category of citizens who are eligible for special rights and benefits on the basis of being oppressed because, they argue the wider literature often advances an interpretation indigeneity that relates to specifics of the American populations.

In policy terms, an international milestone came in 2007 with the publication of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). Its purpose is to identify standards by which governments can recognize the rights of indigenous peoples. Reflecting the contested nature of the term IP, UNDRIP avoids a fixed, universal definition. Instead, Article 8 states that, '*Indigenous peoples have a collective and individual right to maintain and develop their distinct identities and characteristics, including the right to identify themselves as indigenous and to be recognized as such*' (United Nations 2007, p.27, emphasis added).

Successive Indian governments have held a firm position on the notion of indigeneity. Whilst India supported the adoption of UNDRIP by the UN General Assembly in 2007, the official position is that at independence, after the departure of the colonizers, all its people, including its tribal people, are considered as indigenous to India. We acknowledge the contested nature of indigeneity and the Indian Government's position. At the same time, we define IP in India as any group of people native to a specific region. It refers to people who lived there before colonists or settlers arrived, defined new borders, and began to occupy the land. Key defining factors are that

indigenous people have close attachment to the land and natural resources and distinctive local languages and cultures.

Indigenous Peoples (IP) in Today's India

As Xaxa and Puia (2020, p.27) explain, 'indigenous people politics is embedded within the politics and imagination of the nation. In India, it is members of the tribal communities who have come to be referred to as indigenous people. From the time of colonial rule, tribes were more or less put under administrative isolation from the dominant mainstream society...'. They continue,

Colonial rule to the tribes marked the loss of their autonomy that was further accentuated by the increasing penetration of non-tribals in their areas... tribes were persistent in their demand for self-rule against colonial and post-colonial state. The struggle for self-rule is the underlying unity that informs tribal struggles across different regions in India. What tribals seek through such demand was the recognition of their rights over their land and identity and the right to self-govern. Autonomy movements for the tribes in a sense represent an expression of the larger question of national identity articulation of tribes.¹

There are an estimated 104 million indigenous people in India (alternatively, known as *Adivasi*, 8.6% of the national population). Although there are 705 officially recognized ethnic groups, there are many more that would qualify for the scheduled tribe status, but which are not officially recognized. Therefore, the total number of tribal groups is undoubtedly higher than the official figure. In total 'Adivasis are spread over 28 states and 8 union territories. They are not evenly distributed over the Indian land mass. There are pockets of Adivasis across the country – mainly in the forested, hilly and mountainous areas [- the largest concentrations are found in the seven northeastern states, and the so-called "central tribal belt" that stretches from Rajasthan to West Bengal] – populating nearly 20 per cent of the geographical area of the country. Apart from small gaps, the habitat of the Adivasis runs continuously from the Thane district of Maharashtra to the Tengnoupal district of Manipur' (MRG 1999, np).²

The Bhils of Rajasthan

The Bhils are descendants of some of the original inhabitants of India living in various parts of the country particularly southern Rajasthan, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh. They are mostly tribal people who have managed to preserve many of their tribal customs despite longstanding oppression and discrimination from other communities. Popularly known as the bow men, the Bhils are one of the largest indigenous ethnic communities in India. Their total population is estimated at 17 million. Agriculture is one of the mainstays of Bhil life. Typically, this involves share-cropping with around 80 per cent keeping bullocks, cows, buffalos and goats. In

Rajasthan, the Bhil mostly reside in the southern half of the state. They live in the forests and highlands, and the primary sources of their livelihood are shifting cultivation, hunting, and collection of forest produce. In contemporary times, many have shifted to nearby cities to work as daily wage migrant workers. Those not engaged in agriculture may also be metal workers, weavers and potters. Over the decades Bhil lands have been threatened by dams and other development projects.

A notable feature of the Bhil in Western India is their longstanding activism for a home state. This demand has existed since the British era, yet over recent years there is a resurgent call for a separate Bhil state in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Gujarat, and Maharashtra. Part of the reason for this is past and present administrative and state boundaries have paid scant attention to Adivasi subregional identities. Notably, they do not reflect the linguistic identity of the Bhil. The formation of new states in India that better reflect Indigenous and linguistic identities (such as Jarkhand in 1999 and Telangana in 2014) has fuelled the demand for Bhilistan once again. Recently, this has seen IP mobilisation on the issue. The *Adivasi Parivar* was an ideological group that emerged from Adivasi student politics in 2015. They contested nine seats in the 2018 Legislative Assembly elections under the name the Bharatiya Tribal Party (BTP). Six years later, after splitting from the BTP, the new Bharat Adivasi Party (BAP) founded by Rajkumar Roat, a young Bhil leader, won three state Legislative Assembly seats and one seat in the lower house of Indian Parliament. Writing under the heading 'Vision - Empowering Tribal Communities for a Better Tomorrow' the Party asserts,

The Bharat Adivasi Party is dedicated to improving the lives of tribal communities. We believe in simple, everyday words and actions that make a positive difference. We are committed to ensuring that Aboriginal people have access to education, health care, and economic opportunities, so that they can lead full lives with dignity and respect. The Bharat Adivasi Party is very concerned about the environment. We pledge to work tirelessly to protect and conserve our natural world. We will support policies that promote clean energy, reduce pollution and protect our precious ecosystems for the benefit of present and future generations.³

Emerging Findings

- Our workshop participants spoke of their common language Bhili. It is a spoken/oral language; it does not have any written script of its own. For them, indigenous knowledge, and myths and stories are transmitted orally from one generation to another. As Professor Ayesha Kidwai aptly notes, "Tribal languages are a treasure trove of knowledge about a region's flora, fauna and medicinal plants. Usually, this information is passed from generation to generation. However, when a language declines, that knowledge system is completely gone. With the loss of language comes the loss of everything in culture and loss of solidarity, the loss of Man himself".⁴

- Workshop participants expressed concerns that their language is increasingly vulnerable in the face of a generational shift. Many younger Bhils are moving to the cities for education and jobs, and they do not use Bhili, instead preferring the dominant and aspirational languages - Hindi and/or English. The decline in indigenous language use is compounded for many Bhils who migrated to the cities send their children to English medium schools where they have no opportunity to learn Bhili. Our workshop participants also spoke of how Bhil youths do not want to use traditional Bhil names like Virji, Hurji, and Mavji. For them there is a sense of shame. They think that these names represent backwardness. Instead, they use Hindu or Biblical names. One key message that emerges from this is that Bhil youth's conversion to modernity is having significant negative impact on the Bhili language.
- Our workshop participants also spoke of state neglect and apathy contributing to the decline of their language. The government has not provided any opportunities for young Bhils to learn their language and there are no language institutes. As Bhili is not a written language, it is not taught in schools. Instead, pupils are taught Hindi, Sanskrit, Urdu or Rajasthani languages. Importantly, because Bhili is a non-scheduled language, it has no official status – which increases its endangerment.
- Notwithstanding, all these challenges, Bhili is still spoken by a large number of people in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and Maharashtra. It is not as vulnerable as the languages of the Irula of Kerala. Necessary steps must be taken by the state and actors within civil society to stop it from dying.
- Apart from language, our research also highlights the Bhils' rich and diverse cultural history. Workshop participants discussed how, although they follow animistic practices and worship several local deities, their religious life is heavily influenced by mainstream Hinduism. They also worship Hindu gods and goddesses such as Ganeshji, Shivji, Durgaji and celebrate festivals like Gavari.
- Gavari is one of the most popular festivals of the Bhils in south Rajasthan. It is an annual mythical folk dance-based festival performed by men that lasts for 40 days during the rainy season. It worships Gauri Mata (wife of Lord Shiva). The Gavari dances and performances are deeply rooted in the myths and stories of the Bhil community and celebrates the victory of good over the evil.

- Even though Gavari is considered a vital aspect of Bhil cultural identity, several of our workshop participants spoke of tensions with modern life. They criticised the festival's long duration. In order to perform this practice, many male members of the Bhil community do not return to the village for months and in the process, they lose their jobs, which keeps them in perpetual poverty and indebtedness.
- Workshop participants also spoke of how, in the seventy plus years of Indian independence, the Bhil community's social and economic life has not improved much. State neglect (irrespective of which political party comes to power) has been a major factor responsible for their poverty, indebtedness and joblessness. They expressed doubts that mainstream political parties can represent the interests of the Bhils. For them, these parties only make false promises and once the election is over, they disappear.
- In response, many workshop participants noted that only Bhils can fight for their own rights, and they cited the example of Bharat Adivasi Party (BAP), which was founded by a young Bhil leader a year before 2024 Elections. The party has won three state legislative assembly seats and one seat in the lower house of Indian Parliament. BAP has been advocating for Bhil rights and dignity. A majority of the workshop participants were excited about this party and believed that only political parties and civil society organisations led by young Bhils can improve their socio-economic conditions and restore their rich and diverse cultural history.

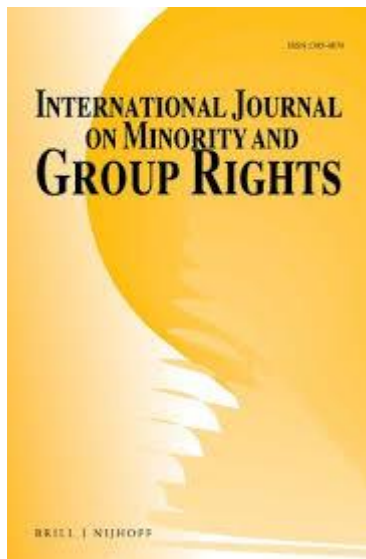
Our Research Publications



A full account of our research findings is forthcoming in this new book

‘Indigeneity, Culture and Citizenship in Today’s India: New Perspectives on the Bhil and Irula Peoples’ by Sarbeswar Sahoo, Paul Chaney, Reenu Punnoose and Muhammed Haneefa (Bloomsbury Publishing, New Delhi).

Parallel findings from our work on Indigenous Peoples in Bangladesh and Nepal can be found in:



Chaney, P., Sahoo, S., Punnoose, R., & Haneefa, M. (2025). Civil Society Organisations’ Perspectives on the Contemporary Human Rights Situation of Indigenous Peoples in Bangladesh: A Critical Analysis. **International Journal on Minority and Group Rights** (published online ahead of print 2025).
<https://doi.org/10.1163/15718115-bja10229> [Open Access]



Chaney, P. (2025, forthcoming) Critical Analysis of Civil Society Organisations' Perspectives on the Contemporary Human Rights Situation of Indigenous Peoples in Nepal, **Journal of Asian and African Studies**, SAGE, DOI: 10.1177/00219096251357302 [Open Access]



Chaney, P. (2024). Cultural genocide? Civil society perspectives on the contemporary human rights situation of indigenous people in Bolivia: A critical analysis. **Journal of Civil Society**, 21(1), 41–65. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17448689.2024.2437579> [Open Access]

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¹ Xaxa, V. and Puia, R. (2020) 'Indigenous peoples and nation interface in India', chapter 5 (pp.121-137) in G. N. Devy and G. V. Davis (eds) *Indigeneity and Nation*, Delhi, Routledge India.

² Minority Rights Group (1999) The Adivasis of India, <https://minorityrights.org/resources/the-adivasis-of-india/>

³ <https://bharatadivasiparty.org/>

⁴ <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/governance/seven-decades-after-independence-many-tribal-languages-in-india-face-extinction-threat-73071>