

It's Time for India's Scheduled Tribes to Claim World Indigenous Peoples' Day

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The diversity of India's 700-plus ST communities must be acknowledged to avoid collapsing them into a single, static and an ahistorical administrative identity.



Members of the tribal community perform traditional dance to celebrate International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples, at Aarey colony, in Mumbai. Photo: PTI

On August 9, communities across the world observe International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples – a day dedicated to honouring the histories, cultures, and rights of peoples whose existence is deeply connected to their ancestral lands – first declared by the United Nations in 1994.

Originating from the UN's International Decade of the World's Indigenous People (1995-2004), it has grown into an annual

reminder that the struggles for justice, sovereignty and cultural survival remain far from over. Globally, it has become a powerful platform for indigenous communities to hold states accountable to commitments under instruments such as the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and ILO Convention 169.

In recent years, however, this day has begun to resonate more widely within India.

Even though the Union government refuses to recognise its own Scheduled Tribe (ST) communities as “indigenous peoples” under international law, tribal organisations, youth collectives and cultural forums across the country now mark August 9 with rallies, public meetings and cultural performances. Through these observances, communities affirm and project their ethnic distinctiveness and historical particularities across local, national and global arenas.

Public visibility is central to the politics of indigeneity, where community objectives extend beyond demands for self-identification or symbolic and moral reparations that acknowledge the detrimental effects of colonial injustices. For these groups, the day is less about securing formal recognition from the state and more about reclaiming dignity, asserting political agency and connecting local struggles to a global language of indigeneity.

Local struggles and global solidarity

India is home to over 700 ST communities, each with deep historical ties to their territories and distinctive cultural systems. Yet, the government’s position on indigeneity has remained unchanged. It rests on three arguments: first, that all Indian citizens are “indigenous” because of the subcontinent’s history of colonialism; second, that India does not share the settler-colonial history of countries like Canada or Australia; and third, that constitutional protections, through the Fifth and Sixth Schedules and reservations, already provide sufficient safeguards for tribal rights

For many tribal leaders, this reasoning ignores the lived realities of internal colonisation, mass displacement caused by the construction of dams and mines, the erosion of traditional governance systems, militarisation of their homelands, and the steady marginalisation of their cultures. Within this context, the discourse of indigeneity has gained strength because it reframes such experiences not as isolated grievances, but as part of a global pattern of dispossession, exploitation, resistance and demand for self-determination.

This global orientation took shape in the late 1980s when tribal leaders began entering international forums that the Indian state avoided. A key platform for this was the Indian Council of Indigenous and Tribal Peoples (ICITP), which sought to unite diverse tribal groups under a common umbrella and link them to the international indigenous rights movement.

Through ICITP, leaders like Ram Dayal Munda, renowned scholar and activist from Jharkhand, presented the concerns of Indian tribes at the UN Working Group on Indigenous Populations in Geneva. Munda spoke of the loss of land, the destruction of forest-dependent livelihoods and the erosion of cultural traditions, drawing direct parallels between the experiences of India's tribes and those of the First Nations in Canada or the Māori in Aotearoa New Zealand. These interventions were strategic, not symbolic, for they gave Indian tribal movements a moral vocabulary and an international audience.

Indigeneity in an era of extraction and militarisation

In the current political and economic climate, such global linkages have become even more urgent. Across the tribal heartlands, the state-corporate alliances are driving aggressive mining, damming of rivers, sanctioning of industrial projects and infrastructure expansion. From the mining of Jharkhand's coal-rich plateaus and Odisha's bauxite hills, to the deforestation of Bastar's dense sal forests and the indiscriminate dam constructions along the Teesta basin in the Sikkim-Darjeeling Hills, the march of "development" has left a detrimental footprint. Across the volatile landscapes of Nagaland and Manipur and other regions of the Northeast, that

demand alternate forms of self-governance, “development” often comes at the cost of displacement, environmental degradation and militarised state repression.

The structural pressures have deepened by escalating ethnic tensions, most visibly in the recent Meitei-Kuki conflict in Manipur, which fracture social cohesion, paralyse democracy and justify further militarisation.

In both, the Northeast and central India, protracted insurgencies and equally enduring counterinsurgency operations have transformed many tribal areas into permanent security zones, where democratic rights are curtailed and resistance is often criminalised as insurgency.

Within such conditions, indigeneity functions as both shield and strategy. It reframes the conversation, asserting that tribal peoples are not beneficiaries of state charity but rightful custodians of their ancestral territories. They are entitled to free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) under international law before any development project alters their land.

Indigeneity lends moral legitimacy to communities in militarised spaces, making it more difficult for the state to dismiss these movements as “anti-national” while simultaneously drawing the attention of international human rights mechanisms to their struggles. It unites mobilisations that might otherwise remain isolated, whether they concern autonomy in the Northeast, forest protection in Odisha, or land rights in Chhattisgarh, under a shared framework of indigenous sovereignty.

The discourse also transcends national boundaries, enabling Indian tribal movements to ally with global indigenous networks and influence corporate behaviour through tools like shareholder activism and consumer pressure. At the same time, it serves as a cultural anchor, affirming that tribal governance systems, ecological stewardship and sacred landscapes are not vestiges of the past, but living systems essential for sustainable futures.

Indigeneity as a path to justice

The rising visibility of World Indigenous Peoples' Day in India is a reflection of this convergence between local realities and global discourse. For ST communities, August 9 is not simply a date on the calendar, it is a political stage to speak to the state in the language of rights, to the world in the language of solidarity, and to themselves in the language of dignity and continuity.

At the same time, this discourse also demands caution. The diversity of India's 700-plus ST communities must be acknowledged to avoid collapsing them into a single, static and ahistorical administrative identity. Internal differences, gender relations, and local governance traditions need to remain central to any articulation of indigeneity. Moreover, the goal must extend beyond symbolic recognition to structural transformation; securing genuine control over resources, legal recognition of customary institutions, protection from militarisation and economic models that break away from the logic of relentless extraction.

On August 9, the message from India's tribal regions is clear: the struggle is not merely about survival, it is about shaping futures of communities that are culturally and affectively rooted in the very histories of the regions they inhabit.

In an era of intensifying extraction, ethnic violence, insurgency and counterinsurgency, indigeneity stands as both a shield against erasure and a platform for self-determination and the global struggle for justice.

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