

Declaration of Indigenous Peoples of North-East India

“In Unity with our Ancestors, for the Rights of our Children”

9th August, Dimapur, Nagaland

We stand here today because of our ancestors who have walked before us, and we hold our responsibilities to those who will follow us as sacred, and we recognize and thank the Indigenous People on whose land we meet today.

We have withstood untold sufferings from pre-colonial to the postcolonial era and have survived even near annihilation of our homelands. We have rose time and again and we stand proud refusing to perish because of the undaunting spirit of freedom that we have inherited from our ancestors.

When modern States emerged in the postcolonial era, it ushered in liberal form of democracy in South Asia transforming the notion of rights and governance. The idea of democratic governance systems was unknown to the precolonial era States, and it was only among the Indigenous Peoples that democratic forms of governance, different from liberal democracy, existed in the sub-continent.

In both precolonial era and postcolonial era, Indigenous Peoples have suffered from State societies. But as time and history continue to flow like water, our struggles and relationships also evolved. Solidarity and new partnerships have emerged among Indigenous Peoples and with others.

We recognize the importance of transforming conflicting relationships into one of peace and justice and we shall continue to work on it. Affirming that all peoples are equal and recognizing that other native peoples in the North-East region are also struggling for their rights, Indigenous Peoples of the region will continue to extend our hands for neighborly relationship and solidarity with the native peoples of the region.

In the face of State repression, Indigenous Peoples have organized themselves to uphold, promote, and exercise the inherent right to self-determination; and to respond to political, social, and economic domination, oppression, exploitation, and imposition of alien culture and legal systems. Indigenous Peoples of this region continue to make effort in building solidarity and unity, facilitating sharing of experiences and ideas toward common aspirations, reaching out to other marginalized and oppressed native peoples of the region, and collaborating with the national, regional and international community for equality, justice and peace.

We commemorate the International Day of the World’s Indigenous Peoples, as a common symbolic victory and in acknowledging our appreciation towards States and international community in recognizing the equal importance of extending the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, as well as the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action¹, and affirming the fundamental importance of the right to self-determination of all peoples, by virtue of which they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development.

¹ A/CONF.157/24 (Part I), chap. III

We acknowledge the importance of these instruments and processes that led to the adoption of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). The UNDRIP not only recognizes our rights but also emphasizes the unique characteristics of Indigenous Peoples that distinguish us from other natives of the region and the mainstream societies.

We collectively affirm that our unique characteristics that defines us as Indigenous Peoples contribute to diversity and enhance the richness of civilizations and cultures, which constitute the common heritage of humankind. We are determined in the continuity of our identity and achieving our inherent rights which derive from our political, economic and social structures and from our cultures, spiritual traditions, histories and philosophies, especially our notion of guardianship and collective right to lands, territories and resources.

We are convinced that the recognition of the rights of Indigenous Peoples enshrined in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples will enhance harmonious and cooperative relations between the States and Indigenous Peoples and with all societies, based on principles of justice, democracy, respect for human rights, non-discrimination and good faith. Thereby, we the members of Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact (AIPP): Indigenous Women's Forum of North-East India (IWFNEI), Naga People's Movement for Human Right (NPMHR), Karbi Human Rights Watch, Borok Indigenous/Tribal Peoples Development Center (BITPDC) and Zo Indigenous Forum solemnly proclaims the Declaration of Indigenous Peoples of North-East India to be pursued in a spirit of partnership and mutual respect:

1. That our struggles to restore our right to self-determination through self-governance is a social necessity and for the free determination of our political status and pursuance of our economic, social and cultural development. We stress that our struggle for self-determination is for democratization that encompasses our communitarian forms of democratic governance, indigenous worldview and universal human rights principles.

We recommit to work towards strengthening and building institutions that encourages the development and growth of our distinct political, legal, economic, social and cultural systems.

We also commit to cooperate, and work with States, international bodies, civil society organizations, marginalized groups and native peoples of the region towards building a democratic society and for equality, justice and peace.

2. That our customary institutions, governance systems and customary laws, which are firmly rooted in our worldview and ethos underpinned by the values of justice, fairness, and inclusiveness, have been greatly weakened by the imposition of State structures and alien legal systems, and the influence of foreign cultures.

We commit ourselves in revitalizing our customary institutions, governance systems, and laws to secure space for their efficient transmission and continuance through rebuilding our communities, developing new culturally appropriate structures that are meaningful and relevant for us.

3. That the continuity of our relationship with our lands, territories, and resources, and the preservation of our identity through our own language, religion and customs is continually under threat by means such as militarization, unjust laws, unsustainable development programs, displacement, cultural domination, and imposition of alien education systems.

We therefore reiterate our resolve to reclaim our guardianship over our lands, territories, and resources in accordance with our concept of communal and community ownership and control, and processes and means that we ourselves will determine according to change in circumstances.

4. That despite the heroic struggles and contribution of indigenous women against militarization, in peace making, and in the preservation and propagation of indigenous societies, inroads that have been made in empowering and advancing the rights of indigenous women have not been adequate and there continue to be significant challenges in securing their equal treatment, particularly in land rights, and decision-making processes within our political spheres.

Recognizing the need for urgent action in this regard, we pledge to ensure actions that would contribute toward ensuring the equal rights of indigenous women.

5. That much progress needs to be made in addressing the distinct rights and needs of special sectors such as indigenous knowledge holders, children, youth, elders and persons with disabilities within indigenous communities.

We commit ourselves in bolstering the momentum to ensure that their distinct rights and needs are addressed.

6. That the challenges posed by the loss of biodiversity and unprecedented rate of climate change is spurring erratic widespread events spanning borders that potentially threatens peoples' lives, welfare and world peace. We, as peoples with intimate symbiotic relationship and directly dependent on environment, our survival is at grave risk. The crisis wrought by biodiversity loss and climate change implicates moral and political responsibility for all States and peoples to come together to ignite transformation from local to global levels.

We therefore commit ourselves to cooperate, and work with States, international agencies, civil society organisations, and other groups to develop carefully coordinated solutions recognizing the leadership role of Indigenous Peoples, particularly indigenous women, and to complement and share responsibilities.

7. That despite the headway and opportunities provided with the adoption of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, we are concerned that not much progress has been made in achieving the rights enshrined in it and that governments in India are reluctant to embrace it.

We undertake to explore every opportunity provided by the UNDRIP to engage with the Government of India and call on to the native peoples of the region and people of India for greater understanding, unity and solidarity, especially the civil societies, human rights bodies and institutions, media and other relevant bodies to strengthen support for the rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Having committed ourselves to the above, and affirming that all doctrines, policies and practices based on or advocating superiority of peoples or individuals on the basis of national origin or racial, religious, ethnic or cultural differences are racist, scientifically false, legally invalid, morally condemnable and socially unjust, we call on the Government of India:

1. To acknowledge that Indigenous Peoples in the country have suffered from historic injustices as a result of, inter alia, their conquest, colonization and dispossession of their lands, territories and resources, thus preventing them from exercising, in particular, their right to self-governance and

self-determined development in accordance with their own needs and in service to the larger society as well.

2. To comply with and effectively implement all their obligations as they apply to Indigenous Peoples under international instruments, in particular the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and those related to human rights, in dialogue and cooperation with the Indigenous Peoples concerned.
3. To undertake prompt review of the peace accords, agreements and other arrangements made with Indigenous Peoples of North-East India for rectifying its inherent weaknesses and defects to comply with the minimum international standard as set out in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and other human rights instruments. Such peace accords, agreements and arrangements include, inter alia, with the Boroks of Tripura, the Karbis and other Indigenous Peoples of Assam; the Indigenous Peoples of Mizoram, Manipur, Meghalaya, and Arunachal Pradesh.
4. To evoke its commitment to the Indo-Naga peace process that has dragged on for 25 years without solutions at sight. It has lost its momentum and a break down will be detrimental to the peace in the region and the potentiality of boosting a meaningful democratization process in the region towards a transformative resolution of political conflicts will be derailed. The Government of India must refresh its memory and learn the lesson that the current peace talk is the result of the hard efforts of committed leaders and intellectuals from both sides which was brokered 25 years ago after more than five decades of bloody armed conflicts with heavy casualties on both sides.
5. To recognize the contribution of demilitarization of the lands and territories of Indigenous Peoples to peace, economic and social progress and sustainable development, understanding and friendly relations among different communities and the larger society of the country and the world; and urgently repeal all extra constitutional laws, especially the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, 1958, and initiate withdrawal of its armed forces from the region.