

INTERNATIONAL DAY OF THE WORLD'S INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

Protecting indigenous knowledge in the age of AI



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The International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples this year is focused on the impact of artificial intelligence on indigenous rights, identities, and cultural and linguistic identity. AI is essentially a set of regulated algorithms, governed by global power structures and colonial legacies. As a result, existing AI models tend to obscure or misrepresent the knowledge and voices of indigenous communities. Consequently, such discriminatory AI models contribute to marginalisation and dispossession of indigenous societies.

Dr Maneesha Perera and others (2025) reviewed research on indigenous knowledge and AI, published between 2012 and 2023. They found a substantial body of work on indigenous knowledge offering a global indigenous perspective through intergenerational knowledge systems. At the same time, promising and aspirational research on AI has also been published.

However, how these two strands of research intersect has not been discussed anywhere.

AI can play a crucial role in the development of indigenous knowledge. However, the potential risks to the indigenous knowledge systems must be considered as well. There is a risk of AI technology contributing to the erasure of indigenous cultural knowledge, committing biopiracy and violating the fundamental principles of indigenous data sovereignty. The expansion of AI technology could potentially exacerbate existing knowledge-based inequalities as well as structural discrimination.

In his address at the AI Action Summit 2025, UN Secretary-General António Guterres said, "AI has gone from the stuff of science fiction to a powerful force that is transforming our world. Reshaping the way we live, work, and interact. Fueling breakthroughs in education, healthcare, agriculture." However, he cautioned that with this tremendous potential comes significant risks. "It (artificial intelligence) must accelerate sustainable development—not entrench inequalities," he warned.

Colonial plunder and biopiracy

Indigenous communities have been integral to nearly all geographic identifiers and elements of national pride in Bangladesh. Yet, their contributions remain othered, mostly invisible, in the national narrative and

consciousness.

For example, Muslin and Jamdani, the signature fabrics of Bangladesh, used to be woven using *Phuti karpas*, a cotton variety cultivated by indigenous communities in the Bhawal and Madhupur region. The sesame molasses of Kushtia originated from indigenous jhum cultivation at the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). Even the puffed rice used to weave Tangail sarees came from the indigenous villages along the Sherpur-Jamalpur border. Indigenous communities have suffered due to colonial plunder and biopiracy, often in the name of control, governance, research, development, or management.

Indigenous peoples are arguably the most researched population in the world. Today, in the name of scientific inquiry, "bioprospecting" and genetic research, their biological resources and the traditional knowledge systems tied to these resources are being appropriated and stolen. Indigenous communities and their biological resources are the main target of biocolonialism. These resources are being taken without their consent and turned into patented commercial products.

Sporadic discussions have now emerged about how indigenous data and knowledge can be integrated, represented, and utilised within the broader AI ecosystem. The indigenous movement for information sovereignty has persisted for years, emphasising the right to own, control, and manage their own data. However, powerful states and corporations are steering the direction of AI to incorporate indigenous knowledge without ensuring the active inclusion of indigenous communities in decision-making and governance. This glaring absence poses a serious crisis, undermining the free flow of indigenous information and the commitment to prior informed consent. Particularly, the use of indigenous knowledge, data, images, or identities in AI frameworks—without consent or conditional participation—creates a disconnect between the indigenous peoples and the technologies being developed.

Hence, it is imperative to ensure active and respectful inclusion of indigenous peoples at every level of AI development. If there are any discrepancies regarding any content, they can flag and resolve such complexities at the outset.

Decisions and governance over how AI

models incorporate the genetic and cultural information of indigenous jhum crops and wild food sources must align with the traditional indigenous traditional systems. Otherwise, there will be a risk of unilateral commercial exploitation of these traditional knowledge systems.

Marginalisation, discrimination, and universal human rights

During the first wave of COVID pandemic, racism against indigenous communities spiked in the country, particularly on social media, as speculations about the virus originating from a "wildlife market" in Wuhan, China spread. Digital technologies failed to prevent the racism targeting them.

Human Rights. Such frameworks must ensure that indigenous peoples are not confined within digital boundaries or subjected to renewed oppression through neo-colonial or binary systems imposed on them.

Neoliberal AI commerce and the alarming environmental question

The environmental question is emerging as a central concern in the field of AI. The massive data centres required for AI model research, development, and expansion demand an enormous amount of energy. Evidence suggests that the raw materials for energy production—fossil fuels—are often extracted from indigenous territories, putting entire ecosystems at risk. Multinational mining

account the direct and indirect environmental impacts of AI technologies at all levels. The massive carbon emissions and energy consumption associated with AI development, data infrastructure, and governance must be assessed to understand their environmental impact. We hope that Bangladesh will place the issues of life, nature, and environment at the centre of its AI governance strategies.

Global and national policies: The indigenous message

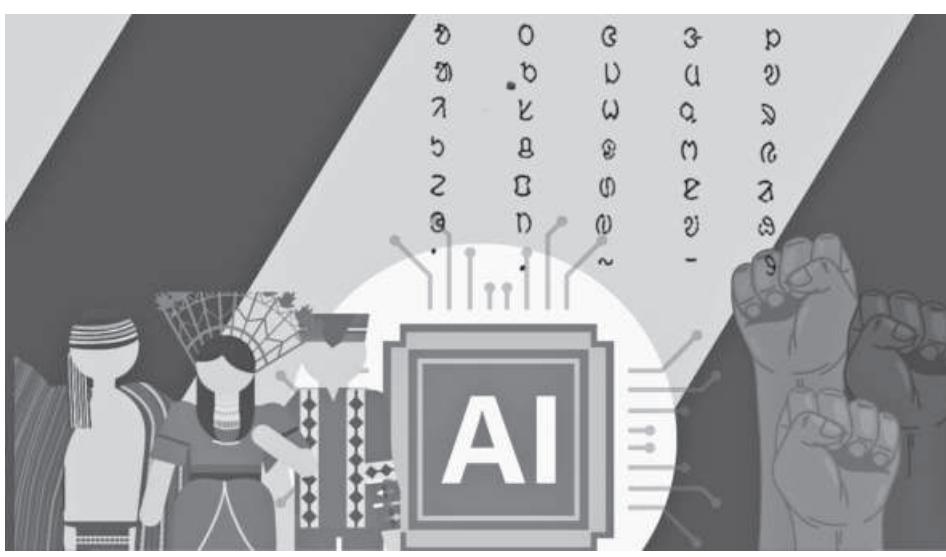
The theme for the International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples 2025 is "Indigenous Peoples and AI: Defending Rights, Shaping Futures." UNESCO believes that AI technologies can be used in multiple ways to support indigenous peoples and can serve as tools for positive transformation. They can be particularly useful in revitalising endangered and disappearing indigenous mother tongues.

How will the indigenous communities in Bangladesh engage with AI? Will the narratives of colonialism, entrenched binaries, ethnonationalism, and authoritarianism remain silent in this context? Certainly not. The decisions regarding the adoption or rejection of AI must emerge through the collective consent, control, and decision-making of indigenous communities. AI technology can play a significant role in protecting indigenous rights and reducing binary divisions and inequalities, especially through the preservation and expansion of indigenous languages. However, AI technologies must evolve through the ongoing critiques and diverse dialogues to truly gain the resilience and legitimacy it needs.

The Small Ethnic Minority Cultural Institution Act, 2010 legally commits to the preservation of the languages, cultures, and heritages of the indigenous peoples in Bangladesh. Meanwhile, one of the 12 stated objectives of the National Innovation and Intellectual Property Policy, 2018 is to "make the citizens of the country more informed, aware, and skilled regarding intellectual property." Bangladesh needs to decide on officially recognising indigenous self-identity.

At the same time, multifaceted engagement with the indigenous communities must take place regarding their local knowledge, natural resource rights, and intellectual property, as well as the realms of digital technologies and AI. Before any decisions are made, indigenous communities must be introduced to fundamental concepts such as global power structures, the politics of AI, algorithmic bias, open and communal uses of AI technologies, and digital colonialism. Any decisions made without prior learning risk fostering both alienation and intense dispossession.

This article has been translated from Bangla.



VISUAL: MONOROM POLOK

The current AI frameworks have yet to set compelling examples of eliminating discrimination or safeguarding indigenous rights. In March 2024, a caution was raised at the UN General Assembly that AI must respect, protect, and promote human rights and fundamental freedoms. Respect for indigenous rights can serve as a powerful opportunity for AI technologies to curb widespread inequalities and risks. Without comprehensive safeguards, AI technologies are more likely to deepen digital inequalities than to create positive opportunities for indigenous peoples. At the 24th session of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues in 2021, a resolution was adopted to ensure meaningful inclusion of indigenous peoples in all aspects of AI development, application, and governance.

In Bangladesh's case, discussions around AI technologies must give due importance to the knowledge, values, and rights of indigenous peoples. The country must adopt AI governance policies that are aligned with the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, global AI principles, and the values enshrined in the Universal Declaration of

operations linked to AI technologies have left the indigenous Atacameño territories in Chile endangered and devastated. Lithium and copper—key minerals used in digital hardware and electric supply systems—are being extracted from these indigenous territories. Reports indicate that the data centres release vast amounts of mercury, lead, and other toxic materials, causing severe public health risks.

Indigenous communities in Bangladesh live under severe environmental stress. The people of the hills have grown up with the wounds inflicted by the Kaptai hydropower development project. From Phulbari to Lawachara, from Lama to Bagdabarm, indigenous homesteads and their lives, nature, environment and ecology have been damaged by the so-called development projects. Natural forests have been cleared in indigenous areas to plant aggressive monoculture plantations. These regions are constantly targeted for commercial extraction, putting indigenous villages from Sherpur to Moulibazar at risk.

To safeguard the environment and ecosystems, the UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of AI (2021) urges that member-states and the business community take into

Land rights can ensure the overall rights of indigenous peoples



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The aim of the International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples, observed annually on August 9, is to raise awareness and promote the rights, cultures, and unique contributions of indigenous populations worldwide. The day also serves to acknowledge the challenges indigenous peoples face and to strengthen international cooperation in addressing issues such as human rights, environmental protection, development, education, and health.

The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), adopted in 2007 and supported by Bangladesh, along with the International Labour Organization's (ILO) Convention No. 107 on Indigenous and Tribal Populations, which Bangladesh ratified in 1972, form the basis for recognising indigenous peoples' rights in the country.

Effective implementation of these rights also depends on national frameworks such as the Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord, 1997 and the State Acquisition and Tenancy Act, 1950.

While past governments have expressed rhetorical support for the UNDRIP and have at times mentioned ILO Convention No. 169, Bangladesh has not ratified the latter. The rights to land, forests, natural resources, education, and cultural preservation are enshrined in ILO Convention No. 107. Given that Bangladesh is a state party to this convention, it bears legal responsibility to uphold and implement these provisions.

The reality is different, however. The traditional rights of Jumma people to their mouza and jhum-farming lands were taken away. The lands are now leased to companies from outside the CHT region and influential

individuals, which is a direct violation of ILO Convention No. 107. The establishment of tourist centres, declaration of reserve forests, expansion of military oversight, and construction of roads are also taking away the Jumma people's traditional land rights in the CHT.

Similar violations of ILO Convention No. 107 include the destruction and occupation of Paanjum belonging to the Khasi community in Sylhet, declaration of a reserve forest in Madhupur without any discussion with or consent from the Garos, occupation of cremation grounds of the Rakhines in the coastal areas and eviction of their villages for the Payra port without any compensation, occupation and eviction of lands belonging to indigenous peoples in northern Bangladesh, and the initiative to establish an export processing zone in the Bagdabarm area of Gaibandha district, instead of returning the land to the indigenous Santal people as per agreement.

Recognising Bangladesh's indigenous peoples as "indigenous" in the constitution is the first, most critical step towards securing their rights. The ongoing constitutional reform presents a historic opportunity to do so, honouring their right to self-identification under the UNDRIP. But a name is not

enough. This recognition must be backed by concrete constitutional guarantees for their rights to land, culture, and self-governance. Ultimately, international law protects their rights; whether they are called "tribal" or "indigenous," the fight is for both the dignity of the correct name and the tangible rights that must come with it.

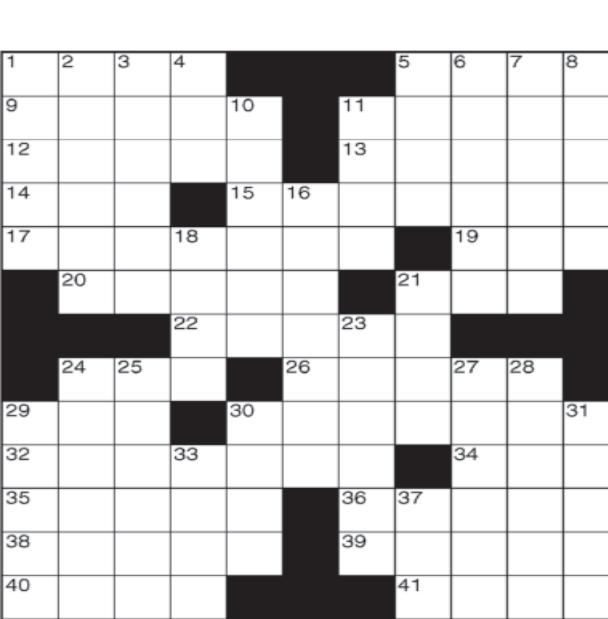
Many put forward excuses, saying recognising indigenous peoples as "indigenous" will threaten the sovereignty of the country. In this regard, Article 46(l) of the UNDRIP clearly states that "Nothing in this Declaration may be... construed as authorizing or encouraging any action which would dismember or impair, totally or in part, the territorial integrity or political unity of sovereign and independent States." Therefore, there is no possibility of the sovereignty of the country being threatened or undermined.

The framework of special governance for the CHT region lies in the proper implementation of the CHT Accord. The special governance system will become effective through the proper implementation of the three Hill District Council (HDC) Acts and the CHT Regional Council Act made in accordance with the CHT Accord. In this case, law and order, land management, forest and environment, tourism, secondary education,

development of communication systems, etc must be entrusted to the HDCs.

According to the Regional Council Act, the CHT Regional Council is tasked with the comprehensive oversight of the region. Its duties include supervising the administration, security, and development functions of the three hill district councils and coordinating all local government bodies and NGOs. The council is also responsible for upholding indigenous law, issuing licences for heavy industry, and directing the CHT Development Board. Crucially, the act mandates that the central government must consult the council before enacting any laws of the CHT, establishing it as the principal authority for regional governance.

or the indigenous peoples of the plains, achieving cultural autonomy requires dedicated initiatives to preserve their unique customs, traditions, and languages. Their cultural heritage is inextricably linked to their ancestral lands, forests, and natural resources. Consequently, any meaningful effort to protect their culture must also guarantee their customary rights over these territories. A critical legal foundation for this is the proper and full implementation of the relevant sections of the State Acquisition and Tenancy Act, 1950.



YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

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