



INDIGENOUS PEOPLES OF ASIA SOLIDARITY FUND

**LIVING TRADITIONS:
STORIES OF ASIA'S INDIGENOUS PEOPLES**

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*Indigenous Peoples from Taiwan
Courtesy: Mr. Kaisanan Ahan*



**IPAS
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**JAKARTA, INDONESIA
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The climate crisis cannot be solved if Indigenous Peoples are left behind. For too long, our communities have carried the greatest responsibility to protect lands and waters with the least support. IPAS is more than funding. It is solidarity and shared responsibility.

BUILDING FROM WITHIN:

How IADC Strengthens Indigenous Leadership in Cambodia



Indigenous Women's Vegetables | Courtesy: IADC

In Phnom Village, Yeak Loam, Rattanakiri Province, a quiet transformation is underway. It is not marked by street protests or public rallies, but by the slow, deliberate strengthening of the very foundation that sustains Indigenous advocacy. This year, 2025 marked the *Indigenous Peoples for Agriculture Development in Cambodia's (IADC)* building of their organizational strength needed to stand taller on the national stage.

With support from the Indigenous Peoples of Asia Solidarity Fund (IPAS), IADC embarked on an initiative that might seem technical at first glance: installing QuickBooks software, conducting an internal audit, translating and finalizing policies, and holding an annual reflection meeting. Yet beneath these activities is the deeper goal of ensuring that Indigenous voices in Cambodia are represented not just arduously, but also credibly, transparently, and sustainably.

IADC recognized the reality that credibility is hard-earned for indigenous organizations across Asia. Communities expect accountability; donors require transparency; and governments demand compliance. Weak systems can undermine even the most passionate advocacy.

Though it had long worked alongside Indigenous communities in Rattanakiri, IADC's internal systems needed upgrading to match its expanding role. "Without strong internal governance, we cannot carry our communities' voices into national dialogue with confidence," explained Nhum Thuk, IADC's head. The six-month intervention spread over from January to June 2025 sought to remedy that.

Policies that Protect and Empower

One of the first steps was IADC's purchase and installation of QuickBooks, a financial management system. For years, financial records were maintained manually, consuming time and risking errors. Now, staff received orientation on the software, enabling more accurate and timely financial reporting. The change was immediate. Transactions could be tracked clearly, reports were generated in minutes, and accountability was strengthened.

QuickBooks was more than a tool for IADC as it was a signal to partners and communities alike that resources entrusted to the organization would be managed with integrity.

Alongside technology, IADC prioritized policies that would safeguard its operations and values. These included Financial Policy translated into Khmer to ensure all staff and stakeholders could understand and apply it. Information Technology and Communication Policy, Grievance Policy, Equity and Diversity Policy, and Protection from Sexual Exploitation, Abuse, and Harassment Policy, were all finalized in Khmer for notary processes.

Though translation and legal verification took longer than expected due to the Board of Directors' limited availability, the process itself proved invaluable. Board members provided detailed feedback, restructuring sections to ensure clarity and alignment with Indigenous cultural values. "These policies are not just documents, these are commitments," remarked one board member. "These policies reflect what our staff, our partners, and our communities stand for and how we work."

Accountability with Integrity

The internal audit conducted by the Board of Directors was another milestone. The audit highlighted areas for improvement by reviewing by-laws, staff policies, financial manuals, and agreements. Recommendations included clarifying IADC's identity in its by-law, updating staff policies to reflect current practices, and tightening financial manuals to delineate roles and responsibilities. Audits are often seen as punitive, but for IADC, the exercise became a moment of learning. "We saw the audit not as criticism, but as guidance," shared one staff member. "It showed us where to grow stronger."

Perhaps the most inspiring aspect of the initiative was the Annual Reflection Meeting which gathered staff, board members, community representatives, language networks, and partners. Far from a dry technical review, the event was both a cultural gathering and a governance process. Participants assessed their achievements in 2024, discussed the 2025 annual plan, and looked ahead to the 2026–2030 strategic period. The process was participatory, rooted in Indigenous values of dialogue, consensus, and respect for elders. The meeting was empowering for community representatives and one participant from Yeak Loam shared, "We see our voices reflected in the organization's direction. This is how Indigenous leadership should be."

National Relevance: From Villages to Policy Tables

While these were internal activities that took place within IADC, their ripple effects extended and reflected outward. By strengthening transparency and accountability, IADC built greater trust with partners and government stakeholders. By clarifying policies and governance, it rightfully positioned itself as a credible participant in national dialogues on Indigenous rights to land and identity and to Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC).

Strengthened internal systems allow IADC to represent communities more effectively at the national level. In a country where Indigenous voices are often sidelined, this credibility is invaluable.

However, the journey was not without hurdles. Limited internal expertise in policy development slowed progress. The board members' busy schedules delayed translations and approvals. "We learned that capacity-building is as important as policy-building," admitted one staff member.

These challenges underscore the need for external technical support in future projects in terms of legal experts, translators, and trainers who can complement Indigenous knowledge with specialized skills.

Lessons for the Future

IADC drew critical lessons from this initiative, and these are: time and expertise matter, especially since policy development is complex and requires early engagement of technical support; consultation strengthens ownership as inclusive processes take longer, but they ensure alignment with Indigenous values. Another crucial lesson is, capacity-building is an ongoing or continuous process where staff and board members must continually learn to keep governance systems strong. Next steps include finalizing professional translations, notarizing policies, and embedding regular review mechanisms to keep documents updated and relevant.

To some, QuickBooks installations and policy translations may seem like bureaucratic exercises. But for Indigenous organizations like IADC, there are steps to empowerment. They ensure that when Indigenous leaders sit at negotiation tables, whether with donors, government agencies, or other civil society actors, they do so with credibility, accountability, and authority.

This initiative proves that self-determination begins internally. **Strong governance allows Indigenous organizations to represent their peoples not as dependent recipients of aid, but as equal partners shaping the nation's future.**

"Our strength as Indigenous Peoples lies not just in our culture, but in our ability to govern ourselves with integrity," said Nhum Thuk. "This project gave us the tools to do that."

"Our strength as Indigenous Peoples lies not just in our culture, but in our ability to govern ourselves with integrity."



Leadership and Advocacy Training for Indigenous Women Representation in Gramsabha Group Discussion | Courtesy: ANGNA

MAINLAND INDIA · GRASSROOT GRANT

POWER TO THE PEOPLE: **Steering Transformative Work in Adivasi Communities**

For more than three decades, *Adivasi Navjeevan Gathan Navjyoti Agua (ANGNA)* has been walking alongside Indigenous peoples in Odisha, India, as they defend their lands, culture, and dignity. Since its founding in 1994, ANGNA has dedicated itself to strengthening Adivasi voices in their quest for land rights and self-determination.

With support from the Indigenous Peoples of Asia Solidarity Fund (IPAS), ANGNA recently launched an initiative in Sundargarh district, home to the Oraon, Munda, Khadia, Kissan, Turi, and Bhokta peoples. Here, Indigenous families continue to face hardships due to non-recognition of their land rights, low awareness of collective ownership, and the ongoing pressures of land grabbing and extractive industries. Rather than being silenced, communities are determined to chart their own path forward.

This initiative was a timely and spirited response: combining education, training, traditional knowledge, and direct application of skills so communities could stand stronger and prouder in asserting their rights.

Rooted in Community Strength

In just three months, the initiative reached 886 participants (539 women and 347 men). Its activities were wide-ranging, but each had one goal: to nurture self-governance, protect cultural practices, and empower communities to participate meaningfully in decision-making.

The activities included:

- Awareness meetings on land rights
- Leadership and advocacy training for women in the Gram Sabha (village assembly)
- Training on human rights and evidence-based advocacy
- Strengthening self-governance in Fifth Scheduled Areas
- Promotion of traditional agricultural practices within the Gram Sabha.

At the heart of all these was the recognition that Adivasi communities already carry within them the wisdom and resilience needed to lead transformative change. The initiative simply created the spaces for these strengths to flourish.

The Sundargarh Adivasi communities have long resisted external forces threatening their territories. Many face escalating violence and systemic marginalization, but their response has always been collective resilience. Through land rights awareness meetings, participants deepened their understanding of relevant laws such as inheritance rights, land registration procedures, and dispute resolution mechanisms. Such knowledge was not abstract; it was practical and empowering, equipping communities to defend their claims more effectively.

Women Rising in Leadership

A major focus of the initiative was strengthening women's leadership. In villages across Kutra, Rajgangpur, and Bargaon blocks, Indigenous women and youth took part in advocacy and leadership trainings that inspired many to step forward as active decision-makers.

The Gram Sabha, a key mechanism in India's Panchayat Raj system, approves all development plans for local governance and resource management. For generations, women's voices were often underrepresented in these assemblies. Through the project, that imbalance began to shift. Women gained confidence and skills to speak up about land rights, local governance, and broader community concerns. They studied laws such as the Forest Rights Act and the Panchayats Extension to Scheduled Areas (PESA) Act of 1996, the latter being a landmark legislation that recognizes Adivasi autonomy. Discussions also touched on the gender gap in decision-making, sparking new awareness on why equal participation matters.

The results are already inspiring: ten women were elected as sarpanch, or elected leaders, of their Gram Sabha. Their leadership is reshaping local governance by ensuring women's ideas and priorities are heard and respected. This marks not only increased representation but also stronger political participation across generations.

Advocacy with Evidence

Beyond training, the project introduced participants to evidence-based advocacy. Community members learned how to document cases and engage with authorities using concrete reports and testimonies. With these skills, they were able to submit documented cases on land rights, making their demands harder to ignore. Such advocacy goes beyond confrontation. It reflects dignity and persistence. By presenting evidence, communities not only protect their land but also assert their rightful place as contributors to democratic governance.

While legal and technical knowledge were essential, the initiative also honored traditional cultural practices, which are equally powerful. In Sundargarh, these practices are more than rituals. They are the glue of identity, social cohesion, and intergenerational continuity. The initiative promoted traditional agricultural practices, reminding communities that their farming methods, developed through generations of observation and respect for nature, remain crucial for food security and sustainable livelihoods.

In community gatherings, many women with children by their side spoke proudly of their role as knowledge holders. They are not just participants but custodians of cultural heritage, ensuring that songs, rituals, and farming knowledge are passed on to the youth. Their leadership in cultural practices highlighted how women stand at the frontlines of defending land, rights, and resources.

The trainings on strengthening local self-governance and traditional cultural practices emphasized unity across villages, fostering inter-community solidarity. By celebrating shared traditions, communities were reminded that their strength lies in collective identity as much as in policy knowledge

A Step Toward Equality

One of the initiative's most valuable takeaways was the recognition of gender equality in governance. Participants saw clearly how imbalances in representation affect women's ability to articulate issues, access resources, and influence decisions. By creating opportunities for women to step into leadership roles, the project strengthened the conviction that governance must include the voices of women and youth. Already, women are contributing more actively in Gram Sabha deliberations, influencing development plans, and exercising their right to lead.



Strengthening Local Self-Governance | Courtesy: ANGNA

The project's success lies not only in the number of participants but in the shift of mindset and confidence it generated. Communities now approach governance processes with deeper awareness of their rights, a stronger commitment to gender equality, and renewed pride in their traditions.

Most importantly, it provided spaces where urgent community concerns could be discussed openly and collectively. This process of dialogue and unity is itself a form of healing and resistance, affirming that Adivasi peoples are not passive victims but active architects of their future.

Effectively Reaching the Grassroots

For IPAS, this initiative represents the very essence of grassroots empowerment: building from within, respecting culture, and amplifying community-led solutions. For ANGNA, it was another step in its long journey of partnership with Indigenous peoples in Odisha, which is always grounded in solidarity and dignity.

By fostering inter-community cooperation and reviving traditional knowledge, the initiative addressed not only technical governance issues but also the broader well-being of the communities. It was an empowering process that placed Indigenous women at its center, strengthened self-governance, and celebrated cultural identity.

Through this initiative, the people of Sundargarh showed that land rights are inseparable from dignity, culture, and identity. Their participation, especially that of women, has already shifted local governance structures, proving that change begins with collective action.

This project was not a gift from outside but a celebration of what Adivasi communities already hold: resilience, wisdom, and unity. It affirmed their ability to lead, decide, and protect their heritage for generations to come.

For every woman who stood up to speak, every youth who learned about their rights, and every elder who shared ancestral knowledge, the message was clear: **Adivasi peoples are proud, capable, and determined to shape their destiny.** What shone through most brightly was not only the trainings or the policies discussed, but the pride of the people themselves; a pride rooted in land, culture, and solidarity. And that pride, carried forward by the communities of Sundargarh, is the real power to the people.

DEFENDING INDIGENOUS PEOPLES' RIGHTS IN MINDANAO

Voices for Education, Land, and Environmental Justice

A Struggle for Education and Survival

When 16-year-old “Maria” received her new set of notebooks, pencils, and a handful of culturally grounded learning materials in Bukidnon, she clutched them tightly like they were treasures. Her Lumad school had been forcibly closed, her teachers harassed, and her classmates scattered. For months, she and other students had studied in makeshift learning spaces, uncertain if their right to education would ever be restored.

But in October 2024, during the Mindanao Indigenous Peoples Month Celebration spearheaded by IPAS and allied organizations, Maria and 49 other Lumad students and educators received direct educational support. The modest assistance consisted of kits of books, culturally relevant resources, and moral solidarity. The impact was profound. It was a declaration that the Lumad’s right to education endures despite repression.

For Maria, and thousands like her, these moments of recognition and support are not just about learning. They are about survival. “Education is our way of protecting our land and our culture,” she said. “If schools are closed, then our voices are silenced.”

Amplifying Voices Amidst Criminalization

The month-long celebration began in Manila with a Campaign on Indigenous Peoples Education and the Criminalization of IP Schools and Advocates. For ten days, from October 8-18, advocates gathered to demand an end to school closures and the persecution of Indigenous educators.



Lumad School Support | Courtesy: KALUMARAN

Fifteen Indigenous and non-Indigenous advocates took the campaign to the national stage, generating significant media coverage and forcing conversations with lawmakers. Solidarity actions highlighted the plight of the Talaingod 13, a group of Indigenous leaders and educators criminalized for defending their right to education. Statements of support poured in from human rights groups, lawyers, and academic institutions.

Through online campaigns and offline forums, more than 50,000 individuals were reached, sparking solidarity well beyond Mindanao. Social media timelines were filled with testimonies, art, and calls for justice, amplifying Lumad voices. Policymakers who once ignored the issue were compelled to discuss education rights and protection measures for Indigenous children.

On October 19, attention shifted to Bukidnon where Lumad students and teachers stood resiliently in the face of continued closures. Educational kits were distributed and dialogues facilitated between educators, students, and community leaders. These exchanges became strategic conversations about sustaining alternative education systems rooted in Indigenous knowledge.

“Even if they shut down our schools, they cannot erase what we teach,” said one Lumad teacher. “We teach our children to respect the land, to honor our ancestors, and to defend our rights. That kind of education cannot be outlawed.” The climax of the month came in South Cotabato on October 24, during the IP Rights Workshop and Environmental Conference, where over 150 participants, including 40 Indigenous representatives gathered. Land defenders from mining-affected communities in Tampakan, Bukidnon, and Lake Sebu exchanged strategies, analyzed legal frameworks, and built new alliances. They identified concrete action plans to strengthen campaigns against destructive mining and push for Indigenous-led environmental justice.

Policy Impact and Systemic Change

The Mindanao Indigenous Peoples Month Celebration 2024 was not only a series of activities but a strategic intervention in public policy and systemic advocacy. The campaign directly influenced discussions on the reopening of Lumad schools. Lawmakers, legal groups, and human rights defenders were mobilized to challenge unjust policies and demand reforms to protect community-based education. The spotlight was on the destructive impacts of large-scale mining, bringing ancestral land protection into policy conversations. Indigenous testimonies were compiled into advocacy briefers and served as powerful tools for legislators and advocates alike. Storytelling sessions ensured that Lumad voices were documented and transmitted to national and international spaces, strengthening Indigenous participation in decision-making processes.

By the end of October, over 50,000 individuals, both direct and indirect beneficiaries, had been touched by the initiative. This included policymakers, lawyers, teachers, environmental groups, and communities on the frontlines of land defense.

Challenges Confronted with Courage

The celebration was not without risks. In Manila, advocates faced surveillance and intimidation from state forces during public forums. In Mindanao, financial and logistical challenges limited participation from remote areas. Mining companies, particularly in South Cotabato, continued to resist Indigenous-led campaigns. Yet, each challenge was met with courage and strategy with human rights organizations providing legal protection. Allied groups contributed in-kind support to cover costs. Online platforms were leveraged to bypass physical restrictions and keep campaigns alive.

In Bukidnon, when Lumad schools remained shuttered, the response was to strengthen alternative learning spaces. Advocates doubled down on coalition-building and international solidarity. These adaptive strategies not only safeguarded the initiative's impact but also strengthened the long-term resilience of Indigenous advocacy.

The 2024 Mindanao Indigenous Peoples Month Celebration became a living classroom of resilience and solidarity. One lesson that stood out clearly was: “collective action creates power.” When Indigenous leaders, human rights defenders, church groups, and environmental advocates united, the campaign gained a force greater than any one group alone. An organizer reflected, “When we link arms, our voices echo louder than the walls built to silence us.”



Campaign on IP Education and Criminalization of IP Schools and Advocates | Courtesy: KALUMARAN

It also showed that persistent advocacy matters. Policy reforms may be slow, but the consistent presence of Indigenous voices kept their struggles from being ignored. A youth advocate from Bukidnon said it best: “We cannot stop knocking, because one day, the door will open.”

Equally important was the reminder that cultural anchoring strengthens movements. Storytelling, rituals, and traditional songs inspired participation by grounding the struggle in identity and heritage. An elder shared, “Our culture is our weapon, our shield, and our compass.”

At the same time, the events made it clear that security is non-negotiable. Faced with intimidation, communities adapted by building stronger protections and leaning on human rights allies. And finally, they proved that capacity building ensures continuity. Legal workshops, environmental trainings, and youth leadership sessions gave Indigenous leaders the tools to sustain their campaigns. As one Lumad youth declared: “They may close our schools, but they cannot stop us from learning how to lead.”

Together, these lessons show that Indigenous communities rise united, persistent, rooted in culture, protecting one another, and building skills for the future. They remind us that resilience is not just survival, but the art of transforming struggle into hope.

Toward Self-Determination

At its core, the celebration was an exercise in self-determination. It enabled Indigenous communities to reclaim their right to define their education, protect their lands, and participate in governance on their own terms.

Indigenous organizations like *KALUMARAN (Kusog sa Katawhang Mindanao)* and *Defend Tampakan* were strengthened through expanded networks and new partnerships. Lumad elders, through storytelling panels, passed down governance practices and ecological wisdom to younger generations. And through advocacy briefers, Indigenous narratives were preserved as enduring policy tools.

In the words of one community leader from South Cotabato: **“We are not just defending our lands. We are defending our future, our children’s right to learn, and the wisdom of our ancestors. This is what self-determination means.”**

As the celebration concluded, it left behind not just memories but concrete commitments to expand advocacy for Indigenous education and push for the reopening of Lumad schools; to strengthen legal support networks for persecuted educators and land defenders; to develop sustainable alternative learning spaces that honor Indigenous knowledge; and to intensify resistance against environmental destruction by linking local struggles to global solidarity.

For Maria, the young Lumad student, this journey is personal. She dreams of becoming a teacher one day, to continue what her mentors began. As she lifted her new books under the Mindanao sun, her words captured the spirit of the entire celebration:

“They may try to silence us. But as long as we learn, as long as we teach, as long as we defend our land, we will never disappear.”

SHELTER IN THE STORM

Persons with Disabilities Lead Emergency Relief for the Raute



The Tent Distribution to the Raute Community | Courtesy: CIPDRD

On a cold January morning in Girighat, Ward No. 2 of Birendranagar Municipality, colorful tents stood out against the stark winter landscape. For the Raute community, one of Nepal's last nomadic Indigenous groups, these tents represented more than just shelter — they were symbols of survival, dignity, and solidarity.

The Emergency Tent Distribution Program, held on 20 January 2025, was organized by the *Centre for Indigenous Persons with Disability, Research and Development (CIPDRD)* with support from the Indigenous Peoples of Asia Solidarity Fund (IPAS). It brought together Indigenous leaders, disability advocates, government officials, and civil society allies in a rare moment of shared purpose: to meet urgent needs while amplifying Indigenous voices, including those of persons with disabilities.

Unlike many relief efforts that focus only on immediate supplies, this program was conceived and led by an Indigenous disability-rights organization. CIPDRD ensured that relief distribution was not just about tents, but about inclusion, representation, and visibility. The event was chaired by Prathama Shrestha, President of CIPDRD and a strong advocate for Indigenous persons with disabilities.

For community members, the leadership of CIPDRD carried deep meaning. It signaled that persons with disabilities are not passive recipients of aid but active organizers and decision-makers, capable of coordinating large-scale, multi-stakeholder relief efforts. This shift in roles from “beneficiaries” to “leaders” was itself a form of empowerment. “Relief is not charity. It is justice. And justice must always include the voices of Indigenous persons with disabilities,” Shrestha declared in her closing remarks.

Collaboration Across Communities

The event drew 61 participants, including Raute families, local government representatives, and leaders from Indigenous women's and nationalities federations. Guests included the Ward No. 2 President, NGO Federation leaders, Indigenous federations, and women's organizations. Importantly, IPAS board member Ratna Rana attended, underlining international solidarity for Indigenous rights.

A total of 45 Raute households received high-quality emergency tents, most of them collected by women, as men were away for work. The act of women stepping forward to receive and manage household relief reflected not only necessity but also empowerment, reinforcing women's central role in family and community survival.

"This is more than aid; it is recognition of our dignity," said one Raute woman as she held the tent assigned to her family. "Our families now have a place to rest and recover."

The event also welcomed participants from the Magar, Gurung, Raji, and Chhetri communities, showing that emergency response can strengthen solidarity across diverse Indigenous and local groups.

The program took deliberate steps to make inclusion real. Persons with disabilities were directly involved in planning, leadership, and implementation through CIPDRD. Women were prioritized in the distribution process, acknowledging their role in household resilience.

Inter-community solidarity was emphasized, with multiple Indigenous groups participating in the event. Such measures ensured that emergency relief was not just functional but transformative. It was a demonstration that inclusive models of aid are possible and effective.

Challenges in the Margins

Organizing relief for nomadic communities is never simple. The road to Girighat was long and treacherous. Travel delays caused by poor road conditions nearly derailed the program. Communication barriers with the Raute who continue to practice a nomadic lifestyle with limited interaction in mainstream governance, made coordination more complex.

Community members also voiced requests for additional support, including rice and blankets, which went beyond the initial scope of the program. These pleas underscored the extent of deprivation faced by nomadic Indigenous groups and highlighted the need for sustained, not just one-off, interventions.

Despite these challenges, the program succeeded because of CIPDRD's structured preparation from pre-event feasibility studies to careful coordination with SOSEC Nepal, the NGO Federation, Indigenous nationalities and women's federations, and local government leaders.

Learning from the Raute

Beyond distributing tents, the program became a moment of cultural exchange and reflection. Organizers and guests gained insights into the Raute community's traditional ways of life, their dependence on forests, their unique survival strategies, and their social cohesion despite modern pressures.

Even small details carried significance: the Raute, who traditionally used white and black cloths, expressed delight at the colorful, machine-stitched tents, showing adaptability and appreciation for new forms of shelter. "Even in the 21st century, we see how Indigenous nomadic peoples survive in the jungle age," reflected one organizer. "Their art, traditions, and strength teach us much about resilience."

The Emergency Tent Distribution Program was not only about physical relief but also about symbolic power. It demonstrated how Indigenous persons with disabilities, often sidelined, can lead, coordinate, and deliver aid in times of crisis. By doing so, it challenged deep-rooted narratives of vulnerability. It showed that communities often seen as "marginal" are in fact central to resilience and innovation when given opportunities.



The Raute, the only nomadic community in Nepal
Courtesy: CIPDRD

"Relief is not charity. It is justice. And justice must always include the voices of Indigenous persons with disabilities."

The program concluded with prayers of gratitude and collective affirmations of unity. Leaders from various organizations pledged to continue supporting Indigenous rights, land security, and inclusive development.

For the Raute community, these tents meant immediate protection from cold nights and harsh conditions. For CIPDRD and IPAS, they meant something enduring: **proof that disability-inclusive Indigenous leadership can transform not only who receives aid but also who organizes it.** By putting persons with disabilities at the forefront of this initiative, the program shifted perceptions. It showed that those often labeled "vulnerable" are also leaders, organizers, and defenders of community dignity.

Shrestha reminded participants that "Relief is not charity. It is justice. And justice must always include the voices of Indigenous persons with disabilities."

DIGITAL ROOTS: Indigenous Youth Revitalize Culture in Malaysia

On one November morning in Penampang, Sabah, 14 Indigenous youth from across Malaysia arrived at Housie Management Homestay. Many carried not just their bags, but also their heritage of songs of their elders, the dances of their ancestors, the identity markers of their tribes. They had come together for a bold experiment: to preserve their cultural heritage using the power of digital storytelling.

This was the JOAS Youth Digital Program, funded by IPAS and organized by the *Jaringan Orang Asal SeMalaysia (JOAS)*, the national Indigenous Peoples network of Malaysia. Over five days, participants from Sabah, Sarawak, and Peninsular Malaysia learned how to document, celebrate, and share their cultures online, blending tradition with technology.

Culture at Risk, Youth on the Frontlines

For many Indigenous communities in Malaysia, modernization and migration have threatened traditional knowledge systems. Rituals, oral histories, and artistic practices often remain undocumented, making them vulnerable to loss. But for these young participants, their cultures are not relics but living legacies worth defending. "We wanted to learn how to share our stories with the world," said Roy, a Temiar participant from Peninsular Malaysia, proudly displaying his *dalai* beads, believed to protect the wearer from evil spirits. "If we don't tell our own stories, someone else will and they may not get it right."

Indigenous youth from Sarawak, Sabah and Peninsular
Courtesy: JOAS



Learning the Language of Technology

The program combined hands-on digital training with intergenerational cultural exchanges. Under the guidance of JOAS facilitators, the youth explored identity markers namely, indigenous languages, costumes, food, music, and traditional knowledge like bamboo water sourcing and rice wine brewing. Then, they learned to preserve these elements using modern media.

On Day 2, facilitators Jan and Isaac guided participants in building their own cultural websites. Using the “box method,” they deconstructed website design and published online portals showcasing their identity markers. Each regional group produced a digital home for its culture:

- Sabah: kebudayaanetnikdusun.framer.website
- Sarawak: maroon-three-028571.framer.app
- Peninsular: forceful-manager-026163.framer.app

For many participants, this was their first time seeing their culture represented online in their own voices. The workshops didn’t stop at websites. Chris and Egn introduced podcasting, showing participants how to record and share indigenous stories with broader audiences. After brainstorming themes based on their cultural identity markers, each group recorded a 10–15 minute podcast episode. Youth who had never spoken publicly before stepped up to the microphone with confidence.

“Podcasting helped me realize our voices matter,” said one participant from Sarawak. “We can reach people beyond our villages, even internationally.”

Later, filmmaker Kenneth Lo taught digital storytelling techniques. Participants practiced framing shots, filming in public spaces, and editing short videos that brought their heritage to life. At the end of the program, they presented 3-5 minute videos based on their identity markers, combining traditional narratives with modern editing styles.

Taking Stories Public

The program culminated with a cultural exchange event on World Human Rights Day, December 10, 2024, where youth showcased their digital projects to indigenous communities from other regions. They presented their websites, podcasts, and videos, sparking conversations about how technology can strengthen Indigenous advocacy. The event was more than a showcase; it was a celebration of solidarity. “We’re proud that our culture is now online,” said a participant from Sabah. “But we’re even prouder that we’re working with other Indigenous groups to keep these traditions alive.”

The program delivered profound results. Fourteen Indigenous youth gained technical skills and the confidence to document and share their culture, while dozens of identity markers were digitally archived to preserve heritage for future generations. Elders' stories and traditional practices were recorded in the participants' own voices, fostering intergenerational knowledge transfer. As a result, Indigenous cultures from Malaysia now have a growing digital footprint with the potential to reach both national and global audiences.

For JOAS, the success of the program lies not only in the skills participants acquired, but also in the sense of ownership and pride they felt. "When Indigenous youth see themselves as cultural custodians, they become powerful advocates," said Cassandra Albanus, one of the facilitators. "Technology is just the tool; their passion drives the change."

Challenges and Next Steps

As with any innovation, challenges remain. Internet access and digital resources are limited in some Indigenous areas. Moreover, translating cultural heritage into digital formats requires sensitivity to avoid misrepresentation. JOAS plans to continue supporting participants beyond the training, helping them manage and expand their digital platforms. The goal is to create a network of Indigenous digital storytellers across Malaysia and beyond.

"We are the bridge between our ancestors and the future. Digital tools help us carry their voices farther than ever before."

The JOAS Youth Digital Program is a blueprint for youth-led cultural preservation. It shows how Indigenous youth can reclaim narratives often told for them, instead of by them. **By combining ancestral wisdom with modern tools, these young leaders are ensuring their communities are not left behind in the digital age.** As one participant said during the closing ceremony, certificate in hand: "We are the bridge between our ancestors and the future. Digital tools help us carry their voices farther than ever before."



Indigenous youth from Malaysia combining powers for their podcast recording | Courtesy: JOAS

A STEP TOWARDS RIGHTS AND SELF-RELIANCE

Bhunjiya Women of Chhattisgarh Break Barriers



Indigenous women walked into district offices for the first time
Courtesy: LASS

Over just three months, Bhunjiya women stepped onto playgrounds, entered courtrooms, spoke on public stages, and walked into district offices for the first time.

Over just three months, Bhunjiya women stepped onto playgrounds, entered courtrooms, spoke on public stages, and walked into district offices for the first time. What unfolded was not merely a project but a quiet revolution of dignity, agency, and resilience.

In the quiet villages of Gariyaband, tucked along the forested borders of Chhattisgarh and Odisha, the Bhunjiya community has lived for generations in near isolation. Women in particular carried the weight of both tradition and patriarchy. They rarely stepped out of their homes, their daily lives revolving around farming, forest gathering, and household chores. For years, access to government schemes, legal rights, and public platforms remained beyond their reach.

But in early 2025, something shifted.

Through the initiative “A Step Towards Rights and Self-Reliance of Tribal Women,” of *Lok Astha Sewa Sansthan (LASS)* with support from IPAS Fund, nearly a thousand women and their families began to rewrite their stories.

On March 6, 2025, Gariyaband town was buzzing with an unusual energy. For International Women’s Day, 293 participants gathered in Oxen Hall. Among them were women from the Bhunjiya tribe, sitting shoulder to shoulder with women from other communities. For many Bhunjiya women, it was their first time speaking into a microphone, their first time sharing their concerns in public.

Three judges from local courts addressed the gathering, explaining women’s legal rights. But the real turning point was when Bhunjiya women themselves walked up to the stage, sat on chairs alongside officials, and voiced their struggles: access to water, pensions, and basic entitlements. “We were afraid,” one participant later shared, “but once we spoke, we felt strength. We realized our voices matter.”

This moment was more than symbolic. It challenged entrenched norms that had silenced women for decades and opened doors to decision-making spaces previously closed to them.

Farming Knowledge, Growing Confidence

For generations, farming sustained the Bhunjia people, but modern agricultural inputs often deepened their economic vulnerability. Chemical fertilizers and pesticides were costly and harmful to soil health. Women, who bore the brunt of farm labor, were excluded from training or support services.

That began to change when 68 tribal women received hands-on training in organic and natural farming, supported by Krishi Vigyan Kendra in Gariyaband. They learned how to prepare low-cost organic fertilizers and herbal medicines for crops. This knowledge not only reduced dependence on external inputs but also reaffirmed traditional ecological wisdom.

Women emerged not just as cultivators, but as knowledge bearers and trainers for others. “Now we can prepare what we need ourselves,” one woman explained. “It saves money, keeps the soil alive, and gives us confidence.” In an era of climate uncertainty, such ecological farming practices are vital for resilience, proving that empowering Indigenous women farmers is also a step towards sustainability.



Training on Organic Farming | Courtesy: LASS

Few things captured the spirit of this initiative more vividly than the sight of Bhunjiya women running across a dusty field, their laughter echoing as they played Kabaddi. On April 18 and 20, sports and cultural events brought together women and adolescent girls in two villages. Supported by panchayat representatives, the events challenged long-held restrictions that confined women indoors.

The road to the playground was not easy. In one village, male elders canceled the women's sports a day before it was scheduled, declaring that their wives and daughters would not play Kabaddi. Rather than giving up, the organizers shifted the event to another village, this time ensuring the support of local leaders.

The sight of women competing, cheered on by their peers, was a powerful act of defiance against patriarchy. "We had never imagined ourselves on the field," one participant said with pride. "But once we played, we felt alive and strong." These events revealed how simple platforms such as games, gatherings, cultural performances can ignite leadership, build solidarity, and transform gender norms.

From Fear to Advocacy

Perhaps the most profound outcome of the initiative was not visible in fields or playgrounds but in the corridors of local governance. For the first time in living memory, Bhunjiya women walked into the district collector's office to submit applications. They came with demands for clean drinking water, community infrastructure, pensions, and ration cards.

At first, they trembled. The government office was unfamiliar territory. But with encouragement, they presented their petitions. To their surprise, the collector received them warmly, listened to their concerns, and ordered immediate action. Within three days, digging began for a new drinking water system. Word spread quickly. "If one woman can go, we can all go," became the refrain. Soon, 127 applications were submitted at the panchayat, block, and district levels. Women who once feared stepping outside their villages were now walking into government offices, asserting their rights, and holding officials accountable. The transition from fear to advocacy was nothing short of transformative.

The impact of the initiative rippled beyond individuals. By mobilizing women into public spaces, connecting them with government schemes, and building their legal literacy, the program supported the realization of constitutional rights and public policies designed to protect marginalized communities.

Bhunjiya women, long invisible in state processes, are now participating in decision-making spaces. Their applications and advocacy efforts are reshaping the relationship between Indigenous women and government institutions, ensuring that schemes designed for them do not remain on paper but reach their villages.

The initiative also strengthened community-based organizations and women's collectives, creating a foundation for long-term advocacy. In collaboration with Sangwari Mahila Manch and other networks, women leaders are emerging who can carry forward these gains into the future.

Lessons in Resilience

The journey was not without challenges. Patriarchal resistance was fierce. Sports events were canceled, women were initially barred from attending meetings, and fear gripped them at every step. Yet, persistence and collective encouragement proved stronger than barriers.

Bhunjiya women, long invisible in state processes, are now participating in decision-making spaces.

The key lesson they learned was that, when Indigenous women are given opportunities, they rise. When they see others like them stepping out, they follow. Change may be gradual, but it is irreversible.

The next steps include building women's leadership at the village level, strengthening adolescent girls' confidence, and ensuring access to schemes that bring immediate benefits. More importantly, the initiative seeks to dismantle age-old practices of exclusion and move towards gender equality rooted in Indigenous culture.

This short but powerful project has shown what is possible. Women who once ate only food prepared within the sacred "red bungalow" of their village temple are now sitting on public stages, filing applications, and making farming decisions. They are not abandoning culture; they are redefining it on their own terms, balancing respect for tradition with the assertion of rights.

The Bhunjiya women's journey is a reminder that systemic change begins with dignity, agency, and resilience. **When Indigenous women are trusted with knowledge, platforms, and support, they do not just transform their own lives. They reshape entire communities.**



Indigenous Women from Chepang Community | Courtesy: NCWA

NEPAL - WOMEN LED GRANT

DRIVING SOCIAL CHANGE IN SUPPORT OF THE CHEPANG INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

The Chepang peoples of Nepal, known for their resilience and deep connection to the land, live across the rugged hills of Chitwan, Makwanpur, Dhading, and Gorkha districts. Although they are legally recognized as Indigenous Peoples under Nepal's constitution, alongside the Bote and Tharu, they remain among the country's most marginalized. Poverty, landlessness, and repeated displacement have weighed heavily on their lives, yet the Chepang continue to stand firm in their determination to live with dignity.

In early 2025, with support from the Indigenous Peoples of Asia Solidarity (IPAS) Fund, the *Nepal Chepang Women's Association (NCWA)* led a remarkable initiative that put women at the center of social change. Through capacity-building workshops, dialogues with authorities, and community-driven monitoring, Chepang women and their allies opened new spaces for their voices to be heard. This effort was not just about survival—it was about reclaiming dignity, nurturing leadership, and building a future where women and men together safeguard their people's rights and traditions.

At the heart of this initiative was a three-day capacity building training where participants openly discussed the daily struggles of the Chepang peoples. More than a classroom, it was a safe space where women and men, elders and youth, shared their experiences and envisioned change.

One painful reality that surfaced was the trauma of evictions and displacement. Many Chepang families were uprooted in the past when protected areas were created under the National Park and Wildlife Conservation Act (NPWCA) of 1997. While conservation goals were cited, the policy severely restricted Indigenous access to forests, rivers, and farmlands—resources that sustained their food, livelihoods, and culture for generations. Conflicts with park authorities, sometimes militarized, left scars on communities. Families relocated from their ancestral lands to buffer zones were given no guarantees of secure tenure and remain at constant risk of being displaced again.

Women spoke of the consequences vividly: malnutrition in children, the struggle to collect food and firewood, and the anxiety of living without land rights. Climate change has deepened these vulnerabilities, as floods, droughts, and unpredictable weather make survival even harder.

At the same time, limestone mining and extraction in Dhading, Chitwan, and Makwanpur has brought crusher plants dangerously close to forests, rivers, cultural sites, and villages. For women, who often manage household food supplies and water collection, these environmental disruptions cut directly into their responsibilities and wellbeing.

Building Knowledge, Building Confidence

The training sessions equipped participants with both legal and cultural tools to address these challenges. Women and men studied the Constitution of Nepal 2015, the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), and ILO Convention 169. They learned about land tenure security, the impacts of conservation policies, and how international legal frameworks can support their local struggles.

For many women, this was their first opportunity to explore these global instruments. “Now I know we have rights written in law, not just in our hearts,” one participant shared. This realization sparked confidence and awareness that the laws could be used to engage authorities with dignity and assertiveness.

The training also encouraged community-led monitoring, where participants prepared to document violations, present evidence-based narratives, and incorporate traditional knowledge. Women, often excluded from formal meetings, found their voices valued and their perspectives acknowledged. By learning how to build alliances and strengthen advocacy with data, women leaders stepped forward with renewed courage.

One of the highlights of the initiative was a direct dialogue with the chief warden of Chitwan National Park. For years, communication between Indigenous communities and park authorities had been strained, often adversarial. But during this meeting, 35 representatives—including Chepang, Bote, and Tharu leaders, with many women present—sat face-to-face with the warden to share their concerns.

They spoke about food insecurity, the loss of traditional occupations, and the need for tenure rights within park management frameworks. For the women, this dialogue was particularly powerful: it was a chance to speak on equal footing with an authority figure, challenging old patterns of silence. The atmosphere shifted from confrontation to cautious understanding. While challenges remain, this exchange opened the door to more inclusive, rights-based conservation practices.

Women as Custodians of Resilience

Throughout the initiative, the leadership of Chepang women shone brightly. From speaking in workshops to drafting monitoring plans, women were not simply participants—they were drivers of change.

Their role as custodians of cultural knowledge added depth to the advocacy. Women highlighted how traditional practices such as foraging techniques, seed saving, and herbal medicine are not only part of Chepang identity but also solutions for food security and resilience. Protecting these practices, they argued, is as important as securing land rights.

At the validation workshop, women raised the pressing needs of displaced families from Kusumkhola, now resettled in Parvikhola. They emphasized that the most urgent concerns were clean water, safe shelter, and food security. Many of these families once sustained themselves through farming; eviction had stripped them of their livelihoods, leaving them at risk of hunger. By voicing these realities, women reframed technical discussions into human stories of survival and hope.



Validation workshop to Discuss Support for Displaced Indigenous Chepang Peoples | Courtesy: NCWA

Partnerships, Collective Efforts and Gains to Build On

The initiative encouraged collaboration with broader Indigenous networks. The Nepal Indigenous Women's Federation (NIWF) engaged local authorities in Madi Municipality and Bharatpur Metropolitan City, advocating for support to displaced Chepang families. At the provincial level, NIWF urged the Bagmati Provincial Assembly to respond to livelihood needs, ensuring that community voices reached beyond the district.

The National Foundation for Development of Indigenous Nationalities (NFDIN) committed to document Chepang traditional knowledge to guide future programs. This recognition validated what Chepang women had long known: that their wisdom, resilience, and practices hold solutions for the community's survival.

This initiative marks a new chapter of empowerment for the Chepang peoples by grounding action in women's leadership that nurtured confidence, fostered collective action, and equipped communities with practical tools to advocate for their rights.

It also highlighted that change happens not only in big policy shifts but in small moments when a woman stands to speak in a room where she was once silent; when a chief warden listens to Indigenous testimony; or when displaced families share their needs without fear. Each of these moments contributes to a larger transformation and the building of dignity and self-determination.

Throughout the initiative, the leadership of Chepang women shone brightly. From speaking in workshops to drafting monitoring plans, women were not simply participants—they were drivers of change.

For IPAS and its partners, this initiative is just the beginning of sustained support for the Chepang. For the communities themselves, it is a step forward in reclaiming their rightful place in decision-making and shaping the future of their lands and culture.

The Chepang peoples' journey is far from over. Evictions, mining pressures, and climate change continue to challenge their survival. But this initiative showed the unshakable pride and resilience of the community, especially of its women. By placing women at the center, the project underscored that they are not merely victims of marginalization, but are leaders, advocates, and vision-keepers. Their courage to speak, organize, and engage with authorities is transforming the narrative of the Chepang from one of vulnerability to one of dignity and strength.

In the hills and valleys of Nepal, where women gather to share stories, plant seeds, and raise their children, the spirit of resistance continues. **The Chepang women remind us that social change does not come from outside. It rises from within communities, nurtured by solidarity, memory, and hope.** The future of the Chepang will be written not by those who displace them, but by the women and men who rise together, with pride, to defend their rights and traditions.

WHEN THE STORMS COME

Indigenous Communities Rebuild with Relief and Resilience

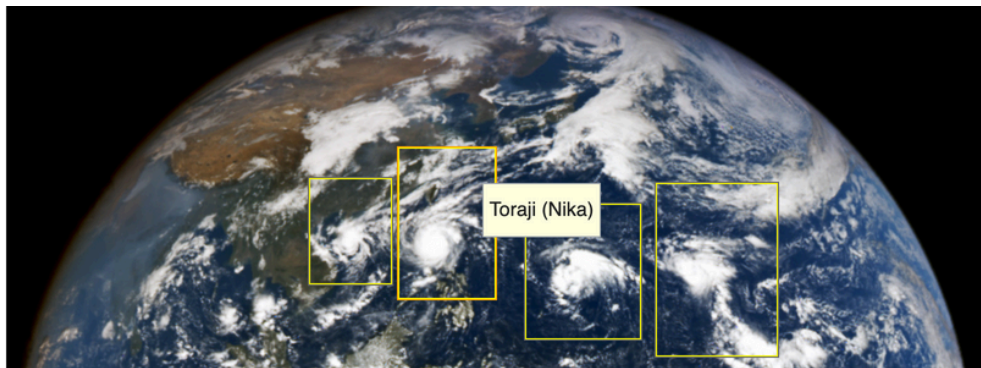
When the typhoons swept across the Philippines in late 2024, their destruction was swift and unforgiving. Rice fields lay submerged, homes crumbled, and mountain paths turned into landslides. For many Filipinos, emergency aid eventually arrived through government convoys and large NGOs. But in the upland villages of the Dumagat, Remontado, Aggay, Ati, Igorot, and Moro peoples, help was slow to come, if it came at all.

“We waited for trucks with relief goods, but they never reached our community,” shared a Dumagat elder from Norzagaray. “So, we survived on whatever root crops we could dig up.”

Into this gap stepped *KATRIBU Kalipunan ng Katutubong Mamamayan ng Pilipinas*, with the support of the Indigenous Peoples of Asia Solidarity Fund (IPAS). Between November and December, their teams trekked remote trails, navigated broken roads, and partnered with local Indigenous groups to bring emergency relief directly to the overlooked.

In total, 375 Indigenous and farmer households with about 2,250 individuals received food assistance. Families were prioritized not by numbers alone but by urgency as listed by KATRIBU: Dumagat and Remontado families in Tanay, Rizal; Dumagat in Norzagaray, Bulacan; Ati and Moro in Montalban; and the Aggay farmers in Cagayan Valley.

Relief packs contained rice, dried fish, and basic supplies. In Bulacan, where typhoons had torn roofs from homes, communities requested corrugated sheets instead and KATRIBU adapted. “What we needed was not just food, but a way to cover our children at night,” explained a young Dumagat mother.



Four storms over the Western Pacific Ocean in November 2024 | Courtesy: NASA Earth Observatory via Wikimedia Commons

Stories Shared by Firelight

The relief distribution did not end when the packs were handed out. As dusk fell in many villages, families gathered around kerosene lamps and small fires to share stories of survival. Facilitators turned these informal conversations into storytelling sessions where Indigenous men, women, and youth spoke candidly about their experiences. An Aggay farmer recounted how rising floodwaters swept away months of harvest. A Dumagat youth described the fear of thunderclaps shaking their mountain homes. Women talked about rationing rice to keep children fed.

But the dialogues also reached deeper, probing the roots of disaster. Communities linked their suffering to the clearing of forests, the construction of dams, and large-scale mining on ancestral lands. “The storm was natural, but what made it deadly is the destruction of our mountains,” said one farmer.

What set this initiative apart was its fusion of emergency response with climate justice education. In handing out food, KATRIBU also handed communities the space to connect their lived experiences with systemic issues. This approach turned relief into a form of resistance. By speaking in their own languages, participants not only processed trauma but also strengthened cultural identity. Youth were encouraged to share in Dumagat, Aggay, and Ati tongues, ensuring traditions lived on even in crisis. “In our language, we speak with courage,” said a Dumagat teenager.

Building Alliances in the Storm’s Aftermath

Not all relief plans unfolded smoothly. Roads to Cagayan Valley were blocked by landslides, forcing KATRIBU to entrust operations to Punganay, a local Indigenous organization. In the Bicol region, aid was deferred because larger groups had already saturated the area, allowing resources to be redirected to less visible communities.

These decisions, while difficult, revealed the value of alliances and flexibility. Relief was no longer a linear delivery but a network of solidarity, weaving together Indigenous groups, volunteers, rights defenders, and faith-based advocates. Unexpectedly, these activities also attracted new supporters. Solidarity gatherings and cultural events held alongside the distributions inspired environmentalists and human rights workers to join campaigns against destructive projects. The emergency had widened the circle of advocacy.

Despite the devastation, resilience was visible everywhere. Dumagat mothers carried food packs up steep mountain paths, balancing children on their hips. Aggay farmers pooled their relief rice to cook communal meals. Moro elders led prayers of gratitude, blessing both the donors and the forests that sustained them. “We do not want to always be victims,” said a Dumagat youth during one discussion. “We want to be defenders — of our land, of our people, of the future.”

For KATRIBU, the relief effort was never meant to stop at survival. The sessions on climate resilience opened doors to policy conversations and advocacy. Communities identified the gaps in disaster aid, the dangers of land grabbing, and the urgency of environmental protection. These insights are now feeding into grassroots campaigns for climate justice and land rights. As one organizer put it: “When we bring rice and dried fish, we also bring knowledge. And knowledge is what empowers Indigenous Peoples to claim justice.”

Lessons for the Future

Several takeaways emerged from this emergency response. One is, solidarity is survival when relief that comes with moral support and storytelling strengthens communities beyond material aid. Two, alliances widen impact such as working with partners like Punganay which ensured coverage of otherwise inaccessible communities. Three, culture is resilience by using Indigenous languages in dialogue that helped preserve traditions while fostering pride. And lastly, adaptability is essential such as prioritizing roofs in Bulacan and skipping Bicol which showed that flexibility maximizes impact.

Looking forward, KATRIBU plans to train Indigenous leaders in disaster preparedness and advocacy, ensuring that communities themselves shape policies and responses that affect their lives.

For the hundreds of families who received relief, this initiative meant survival. But its significance goes further in that it showed that emergency response can be justice-centered. **By linking food aid with climate justice education, the initiative reframed disaster relief not as charity, but as a step toward empowerment and long-term resilience.**

As one Aggay farmer summarized, “The typhoon destroyed our fields, but not our spirit. We will rebuild, and we will fight for our land. Because protecting our mountains is the best defense against the storms to come.”

“The typhoon destroyed our fields, but not our spirit. We will rebuild, and we will fight for our land. Because protecting our mountains is the best defense against the storms to come.”

FROM FOREST TO FUTURE: Adivasi Communities Secure Land and Dignity in Andhra Pradesh

In the hilly interiors of Alluri Seetarama Raju District, India, the winding paths are not easy to navigate. There are no proper roads; motorcycles stall on uneven tracks, and many villages can only be reached by foot. For generations, Indigenous Adivasi families cultivated these forest lands without formal rights, vulnerable to eviction and exploitation.

Today, however, change is taking root. With the support of the Integrated *Adivasi Technology Development Society (IATDS)* and IPAS, thousands of Indigenous cultivators are securing legal land titles and learning sustainable ways to improve their livelihoods.

Forest lands were once held communally by Adivasi groups, but colonial and post-independence policies disrupted these practices. Efforts to individualize rights were inconsistent, leaving many families without secure titles to the lands they farmed for decades. This lack of legal recognition made them vulnerable to exploitation and displacement.

To address this injustice, India enacted the Recognition of Forest Rights (RoFR) Act, 2007, aimed at granting land rights to those with genuine claims. Yet the process remained riddled with procedural barriers, bureaucratic indifference, and lack of awareness among Indigenous communities, particularly among Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs).

Grassroots Advocacy for Land Rights

Over the past four months, IATDS has been traveling across some of the most inaccessible hamlets, engaging directly with Adivasi cultivators. The organization has trained 2,290 Indigenous people, including 1,290 women, on the RoFR Act and the documentation needed to secure land rights.

Community meetings, pamphlets, and even YouTube videos in local dialects helped demystify the process. Volunteers, many of them educated Indigenous youth, assisted families in filing claims and following up on rejected applications. The impact is visible with 87% of the targeted 2,690 families having now initiated or secured land rights processes.

“Land is more than just soil; it’s our life and our identity,” said one PVTG farmer. “For the first time, we feel we can stand without fear.”



Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups in Andhra Pradesh |
Courtesy: Newsmeter.in

Legal land rights are only part of the story. IATDS also focuses on improving agricultural practices and discouraging unsustainable methods like shifting cultivation (Podu vyavasayam), which depletes soil fertility. Through capacity-building workshops and partnerships with the Adivasi Agricultural Development Society, farmers are learning modern farming techniques such as using improved seed varieties, practicing fixed-plot farming instead of slash-and-burn, adopting organic composting, and integrating sustainable soil and water management methods. These practices help boost yields while preserving forests and biodiversity that are vital to Adivasi livelihoods.

The initiative also places strong emphasis on women's participation. Of the total beneficiaries, over half are women, many of whom now lead community discussions and self-help groups. Tailored programs address their unique needs from income-generating opportunities to hygiene and reproductive health awareness. "Earlier, we were silent observers," said a woman participant. "Now we speak in meetings and know how to claim what is rightfully ours."

The program also actively involves Indigenous youth, training them as paralegals and community educators. Their role is crucial in bridging literacy gaps and ensuring that elders understand legal requirements. Some youth are also being trained as community health champions, helping address the lack of basic healthcare in remote villages.

The initiative includes 41 Indigenous persons with disabilities who were directly engaged and informed about land rights and welfare schemes. This inclusive approach strengthens the entire community's resilience.

Unexpected Victories: Roads and Visibility

One of the most remarkable, unintended outcomes came after awareness meetings in particularly remote hamlets. As IATDS shared stories of villagers' struggles with local media and on YouTube, district authorities took notice. Nearly Rs. 4 crores (approx. USD 4.7 million) was allocated to build rural roads in two of the most isolated communities. For residents who previously walked treacherous hillside paths to access markets and healthcare, this development is transformative. "We never thought the government would listen," said an elder. "Now, our children may have an easier life."

Reaching these villages is not for the faint-hearted. The terrain is rugged, and some journeys require cycling or walking for hours. Many residents battle poor health, and intoxication is a persistent issue among adults. Communication is challenging due to illiteracy and multiple local dialects.

Despite these obstacles, IATDS volunteers pressed on. Their efforts highlight the power of empathy and positive communication. Volunteers trained in local language and culture played a key role in calming tense situations, sharing life-improving tips, and encouraging healthier practices.

The initiative underscored several critical lessons such as, adaptability is essential as shown by multiple modes of transport and the flexible planning which allowed outreach to the most remote areas. Another lesson is, community ownership works by engaging local volunteers to ensure culturally relevant communication and trust. Also, women and youth leadership is transformative by empowering these groups to create ripple effects across entire communities.

Looking ahead, IATDS has laid out plans to expand its “Land Rights Fellows” program for youth to assist in documentation; to strengthen women-led self-help groups and microfinance initiatives; to train more youth as health workers to address hygiene and nutrition; and to partner with district authorities to improve infrastructure and welfare scheme access.

Why It Matters

Securing legal land rights for Indigenous communities is not just a legal victory but a foundation for dignity, food security, and cultural survival. For the Adivasi of Andhra Pradesh, this initiative represents a reclaiming of their future on their own terms.

As one PVTG woman put it during a training session, “We are no longer invisible. We have land, knowledge, and hope. That is our strength.”

“We are no longer invisible. We have land, knowledge, and hope. That is our strength.”

THE FIGHT FOR LANGUAGE RIGHTS IN GANDAKI PROVINCE

In the cool air of Nepal's Gandaki Province, the sound of many tongues fills the valleys: Gurung, Magar, Tamang, Newar, and more. But in government offices, courtrooms, or provincial assemblies, Nepali dominates. For the Gurung and Magar peoples whose languages are among the most widely spoken in the province, this exclusion has long wounded them.

Something changed at the end of 2024. With support from the Indigenous Peoples of Asia Solidarity Fund (IPAS), the *Indigenous Peoples Forum (IPF) Nepal*, alongside the Nepal Magar Sangh and the Tamu Hyula Chhoja Dhin Gurung National Council, launched an advocacy campaign unlike any before.

Their goal which was both ambitious and clear was to ensure that Gurung and Magar languages would be recognized as official working languages of Gandaki Province.

It began with consultations. In October and November 2024, linguists, sociologists, and Indigenous leaders met to debate not just language but scripts. The Gurung called for the Khema script; the Magar pressed for the Akkha script. Both wanted their mother tongues to be protected in written law. Participants also proposed a Language Council and the appointment of official translators. The discussions were lively, with respected scholars like Dr. Tek Gurung and Dr. Bishnu Sinjali Magar guiding the sessions.



Gurung community honored Chief Minister Hon. Surendra Raj Pandey in the context of unanimously passing the bill 2082 Gandaki Province Assembly regarding the language of government work to Gurung and Magar language. Courtesy: IPF

From the start, the campaign carried a message of inclusion. While Gurung and Magar were central, leaders acknowledged that other languages in the province also needed recognition. This wasn't just about two peoples, and it was setting a precedent for linguistic justice.

Taking the Case to Power

On October 28, delegations marched into the offices of Gandaki's most powerful leaders. First, the Chief Minister, Hon. Surendra Raj Pandey assured them that a language bill would move forward. Then the Finance Minister, Dr. Takraj Gurung echoed that commitment. Later, the Social Development Minister, Hon. Vindu Kumar Thapa, gave the same promise. For the Indigenous leaders like Resham Gurung, Jagat Baram, Mohan Chhantyal, and Gyanendra Pun, these meetings were milestones. For once, the ears of the government were open to the words of their people.

By December, the movement shifted from demands to drafting with teams of experts and leaders huddled together to craft the language bill. Among them were Dr. Tek Bahadur Gurung, Dr. Bishnu Sinjali Magar, Dr. Lok Bahadur Lopchan, and activist Pratima Gurung, who deliberated on the details late into the evening. They were determined that this draft would not just exist on paper but carry the weight of community needs.

Soon after, consultations with stakeholders broadened the base. On December 9, seventy-two people came together, representing twelve ethnic groups. Women, youth, and customary leaders all took part. For many, it was the first time they had been invited into such a process. "Our voices matter, not just in homes, but in the halls of law," one young Gurung woman said.

The draft bill was shared widely, analyzed, and refined. On February 21, another round of consultation pushed the dialogue further. By then, the initiative had built momentum that was impossible to ignore.

Facing Parliament

The first formal interaction with Gandaki's parliamentarians was held on December 10. Seventy-five participants filled the hall, among them the Chief Minister, a former Chief Minister, the Language Commission of Nepal, political leaders, and six ministers. Rarely had so many powerful figures sat face-to-face with Indigenous leaders to discuss language rights. One participant called it "a milestone program, a bridge between the people and their lawmakers." For the Gurung and Magar delegates, it was proof that their struggle was not just a whisper in the margins but a matter of provincial importance.

Yet challenges loomed when in March 2025, Gandaki Province published its own draft bill. While it recognized Gurung and Magar languages, it omitted critical provisions particularly the scripts and mechanisms that the communities had demanded. Although disappointment was running deep, the campaign grew sharper and went on a higher gear.

On March 24, a new round of interactions was held with parliamentarians. Leaders voiced their discontent and by the evening, Indigenous representatives had rallied support for an amendment proposal. The next day, a committee of MPs had been formed to push those amendments.

Building Consensus and Unexpected Gains

A cross-party coalition emerged with MPs from the ruling UML, the Nepali Congress, and even the Maoist Center signed onto the amendment. A total of nineteen MPs pledged their support sending a clear message: when it came to language rights, party lines could blur in favor of justice. For Indigenous leaders who had spent decades fighting for recognition, this level of political backing was unprecedented.

There were other outcomes. Administrative officials from the provincial ministries joined consultations, offering feedback that helped refine the bill. Local media broadcast the interactions live, spreading awareness to households across Gandaki. For communities often left out of mainstream coverage, seeing their concerns on TV was itself an act of validation.

The campaign also opened doors for the future. One participant noted that while Gurung and Magar were the focus, this act could pave the way for other Indigenous languages in Gandaki to follow.

At its core, the campaign was never just about scripts or grammar. It was about self-determination by pushing their mother tongues into the official framework of governance. Gurung and Magar communities asserted that their identities mattered in schools, in courts, in government offices. As one leader put it: "Our languages carry our ancestors' wisdom. When we see them in law, we know our future is secure."



Dialogue on the formulation of an official language law/act for Gurung-Tamu Kyuui and Magar Dhut in Gandaki Province, Nepal. The discussion brought together representatives from the Language Commission, IPAS Fund, and Indigenous Gurung and Magar community leaders and experts. Courtesy: IPF

Looking Ahead

Now amended and awaiting final approval, the bill has already changed the political landscape and demonstrated that Indigenous communities can influence lawmaking, that unity across parties is possible, and that cultural rights can be framed as political necessities.

The next steps will involve monitoring implementation, ensuring appointment of translators, and pushing for a Language Council. Gurung and Magar leaders are also calling for future provisions that respect other minority languages in Gandaki Province.

In a country where Indigenous languages have often been dismissed as secondary, the Gandaki initiative shows what is possible when communities organize, advocate, and persist. It is a reminder that policy begins with people with their stories, demands, and collective action. For Gandaki's Gurung and Magar communities, this is more than a legislative victory. **It is the beginning of a future where children will hear their mother tongue not only in their homes but also in the offices of government.**

“Our languages carry our ancestors’ wisdom. When we see them in law, we know our future is secure.”

*Indigenous Peoples from North East India
Courtesy: Karbi Human Rights Watch*



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