

# Bahrain Conference of Indigenous Communities

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***Representatives of about 20 indigenous peoples of mountainous regions discuss challenges, opportunities, and strategies at the Conference of Indigenous Community in Bahrain Swat, Pakistan***

The adoption of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples on the 13th of September 2007 was a major step towards addressing the human rights violations against 400 million Indigenous peoples in over 70 countries.

The Declaration is the most comprehensive instrument which affirms justice for Indigenous peoples, the enjoyment of inherent of political, economic, social, cultural, spiritual rights; protection of their distinct institutions, traditions, customs, cultural heritage, lands, territories and resources, conservation of environment; cross-border contacts and cooperation and their right to an effective legal remedy.

Under the Declaration member states are required to ensure survival, dignity, and well-being of indigenous peoples and

establish effective mechanisms to resolve issues relating to lands, territories and resources or other property of which Indigenous peoples have been dispossessed.

Ironically despite the adoption of the declaration, experiences show that Indigenous peoples in every region of the world face transgression of their fundamental rights, dispossession from their land, resources, colonization and discrimination and marginalization.

In this backdrop, a conference of Indigenous communities of the mountainous regions of north Pakistan, the upper Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Gilgit-Baltistan, was held recently.

The participants sought recognition as Indigenous people as per the UN Declaration and protection of their land,

resources, cultures, languages, and traditions.

The conference was organized by Idara Baraye Taleem-o-Taraqi (IBT), a non-profit organisation working for promotion of education and development, in collaboration with Australia's The University of Sydney at the picturesque Bahrain valley of Swat on May 2.

Representatives from 20 indigenous communities — Balti, Bateri, Burushaski, Dameli, Gawar, Gawri, Gojri, Kalkoti, Kalasha, Kashmiri, Kandol Shahi, Khowar, Kohistani, Mankiyali, Oshojo, Palula, Shina, Torwali, Wakhi, Yidgha — from upper Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Gilgit-Baltistan discussed the challenges to their territories, livelihood, land, resources, culture and ecology from

globalization, climate change unplanned extraction of resources and opportunities for them.

They discussed social, anthropological, political, linguistic and economic problems these communities face; the potential and opportunities in all tangible, intangible and human forms, strategies to address the problems and challenges.

The participants including academics, writers, artists, and social and cultural activists issued a communique after the conference on “Challenges, opportunities, and way forward” for indigenous communities.



The communique committee: Photo by IBT

## The communique

The participants thanked members of IBT and The University of Sydney for organizing the conference and providing the indigenous communities the opportunities to sit together and discuss their problems and issues.

1. “The conference pledges to work for obtaining the status of Indigenous peoples for the inhabitants of Pakistan’s

mountainous regions under the UN Declaration on the Rights of the Indigenous Peoples as well as to ensure the protection of the rights and interests of the indigenous communities at national and local levels through legislation and policy making.”

2. “We affirm our resolve to work for creating a sense of pride among the Indigenous people about their cultures, languages, and identities.
3. “We affirm our resolve to work for the promotion of peace, harmony, tolerance, respect, and cooperation among and links with Indigenous communities, living outside the national borders.
4. “We call upon governments at national and local levels to take steps for enabling and empowering the Indigenous communities to use

their resources judiciously for their own well-being and development of the country.

5. “We call upon the governments to provide opportunities for Indigenous people and encourage them to promote their cultures through cultural tourism”.
- The participants felt the need for launching a quality research journal for conducting and publishing research-based articles on indigenous cultures, languages, and history.
  - They also called for using print, electronic and social media platforms efficiently to highlight these issues and achieve these goals.
  - They also called for efforts to restore historical and traditional

names of places, sites, and buildings.

*It was also decided to form a permanent forum 'the Mountain Communities Collective (MCC)' for pursuing and achieving these goals.*

*Initially, a core committee with representation from all indigenous communities was formed to work towards the formation of the permanent forum with: Professor Mumtaz Hussain as its patron, and Zubair Torwali its convener.*

The members of the committee are: Farid Ahmad Raza (Khowar), Aziz Ali Dad (Shina), Mutabar Shah (Indus Kohistani), Luke Rahmat (Kalasha), Zaman Sagar (Gawri), Abdullah (Gawarbati), Doulat Wali Beg (Wakhi), Abdul Baqi (Bateri), Hayat Muhamamd Khan (Dameli), Qazi

Israruddin (Palula), Rahmat Ali (Yadgha), Aftab Ahmad, (Torwali), Ihsan Danish (Balti), and Javed (Burushaski).

## **Strong culture, strong community**

Prof Jakelin Tory of The University of Sydney in her keynote presentation on 'Strong language, strong culture, strong community: The Australian experience' presented her work on the aboriginals of Australia, the experience how they were enabled to become 'sustainable communities' with their languages alive, culture revitalised and colonialism pushed back

Professor Tory who is the Director, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research, said that she and her university were keen to create opportunities for people doing language

work in north Pakistan to engage, share ideas, experiences and aspirations with communities in Australia.

For the professor, the event is the beginning of a formal collaboration between her peoples and the indigenous communities of northern Pakistan through IBT. As for empowerment, she said, we have a long way to go.



Prof. Jakelin Tory of The University of Sydney presents her keynote presentation: Photo by IBT

Prof Tory, who belongs to a Ngarigu Aboriginal community of the snowy mountains in south-eastern Australia, said: “We are still the only Indigenous

peoples who have never had our sovereignty recognised. And of our 400+ languages, only 13 are really strong.”

Her research interests are currently focused on documenting, describing and reviving indigenous languages. She also focuses on the Indigenous languages of Pakistan, including Saraiki in southern Punjab and Torwali of Swat.

## **Voicing subalternity**

In the second keynote speech on ‘Voicing Subalternity,’ Aziz Ali Dad, a Gilgit-based social scientist, and columnist, said: “The formal education system, that is inspired by internal and external colonialism, manufactures a mind that is invested with imagery of nation and divested of collective cultural imaginaire.”



Social scientist and notable writer Aziz Ali Dad delivers his keynote lecture. Photo by IBT

Aziz, who has done his MSc in the philosophy of social sciences from London School of Economics and Political Science, UK, says the breakdown of the transmission chain of indigenous knowledge and the rupture created by modern education and knowledge system is one of the reasons for cultural and epistemic marginalisation of the indigenous communities. The indigenous knowledge and literature of northern Pakistan were oral, he argues.

“Modernity is a product of written and printed word. With the help of modern schooling and print media, the written word has penetrated into every part of the region. Since the written word enables one to progress educationally, economically and socially, it has been pursued at the cost of oral literacy. So written word has become a major source to define self and society. With it, the indigenous knowledge disappeared within one generation. On the other hand, the absence of modern research institutions in the region resulted in the absence of indigenous people in the production of knowledge about their society. Due to the dearth of knowledge production, the indigenous peoples have to rely on the knowledge produced by exogenous entities and centres, he argues.

“When society in the modern age cannot produce knowledge about itself, lacks cultural industry, remains politically disenfranchised and mentally alienated from itself, it becomes schizophrenic as it faces two realities in one gaze.”

Such a situation, according to Aziz, robs the society to negotiate diversity because it faces diversity without the bedrock of its own identity. This precariousness position creates a mindset that tries to internalise the master’s image or narrative to establish itself as a master of its own destiny.

To avoid repercussions emanating from the lost and divided self, there is a dire need to intervene in every site and source through which the centre has succeeded to establish its hegemony, he suggests.

Aziz Ali Dad, who has written extensively about philosophy, and literature in general and history and culture of Gilgit Baltistan in particular, proposes that the indigenous communities need a collective action to address these challenges on every front: epistemologically, socially, culturally and politically.

### **‘View from the Valleys vs views from the mountains’**

Zubair Torwali, a noted language and culture activist, and author said the indigenous communities in the world particularly in the mountainous regions of Pakistan have always been defined and described by others.

Most of the research on these communities has been done by people from outside who have imposed their own biased views and identities on the

indigenous peoples without looking deeper into their social, cultural, linguistic and political issues.

The outsiders have always deemed themselves true representatives of these people. This approach we refer to as 'view from the valleys' lacks understanding of the local people and their woes.

“The conference was an attempt to present a view from the mountains, enabling the people to do research on their languages, histories, cultures and present themselves instead of relying on others to define them;” Zubair said.

The conference aimed at deliberation on some action points which these indigenous communities can collectively undertake in order to dive deeper into the social, cultural, linguistic, economic and

political discrimination, exploitation and marginalisation they have been facing for centuries to break the shackles they have been bounded to consciously or unconsciously, he noted.

The conference was the complementary approach of IBT which has been striving for the integration and cohesion of indigenous communities for the larger goal of human development, dignity, and prosperity, Zubair said.

A similar conference was first held by IBT back in Feb 2011 in Islamabad, he added.

Delegates who presented their insights regarding the theme of the conference include: Prof. Mumtaz Hussain (historian, teacher), Iman Habib (anthropologist), Muhammad Zaman Sagar (linguist and educationist), Fakhruddin Akhundzada (Executive Director Forum for Language

Initiatives, researcher), Dr. Hazrat Bilal (author), Dawlat Wali Baig (musician and researcher), Ehsan Ali Danish (poet and author), Abdullah Gawar (language activist and researcher), Sadaf Habib (researcher in indigenous music), Fazal Hadi Torwali (researcher), Qazi Israruddin (activist), Hafeez Rahman (education activist), Mim Shin Rashid (researcher), Gul Muhammad (social entrepreneur and researcher), Hayat Muhammad Khan (media man), Mir Afzal (sitarist), Hayat Kalami (activist and journalist), Muhammad Suleman (language activist and teacher), Farid Ahmad Raza (researcher and writer), Amir Haider (trainer and researcher), Luke Rahmat (activist and human rights defender), Ali Qurban Mughanni (poet and activist), Rahmat Ali (lawyer and activist), Atta Hussain Athar (writer), Javid Iqbal Javid

(editor), Abdul Baqi (teacher and activist), Sifatullah (community leader and activist) et al.



Prof. Mumtaz Hussain presents the communique.

Photo: IBT

IBT's co-founder Aftab Ahmad moderated the conference main sessions.



Participants of Conference of Indigenous Communities: Photo by IBT