

# Australian Outlook

## In this section

<https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/deny-and-destroy-the-suppression-of-indigenous-languages-in-asia/>

## Deny and Destroy: The Suppression of Indigenous Languages in Asia

04 Jul 2024

By Dr Gerald Roche



Share



**Home to more than 2,300 languages, Asia is both the most populous and most linguistically diverse continent on earth. The region's Indigenous languages currently face a number of serious threats, as demonstrated by its two largest countries: India and China.**

In 2022, the International Decade of Indigenous Languages was formally launched by UNESCO to accelerate the protection and promotion of Indigenous languages around the world, in recognition of the grave threats that Indigenous communities face in their struggles to maintain and reclaim their languages. Although all Indigenous people experience similar threats emanating from continued colonial violence, communities in many parts of Asia face distinct problems, as can be seen in the two largest countries in the region, India and China.

In both nations, denial serves as the infrastructure that drives the destruction of linguistic diversity and maintains systems of oppression that prevent communities from pushing back against the status quo. This denial takes two forms.

First is denial of indigeneity. In both India and China, the official government stance, regardless of who happens to be in power at any time, is that indigeneity is only a product of European colonisation. This overlooks the fact that both countries have histories of colonial consolidation lying behind their contemporary territorial form: both are conquest empires dressed up as nation-states. Both India and China also maintain colonial relationships of domination over various subordinated peoples, most relevantly Adivasi (or Tribal) peoples in India and “minority nationalities” in China (such as Tibetans, Monguor, Uyghur, or Zhuang people). Both these groups have legitimate claims to make to indigeneity that are denied by their governments.

The second form of denial that both India and China engage in is denial of diversity. In both countries, a combination of informal policy and on-the-ground practice denies the diversity of languages that different communities lay claim to. This is a long-standing tactic of linguistic subordination seen from France to Australia: the dominant group has a “real” language (that is also beautiful, rational, useful, etc), while dominated groups have only dialects, jargon, patois, or babble. In India, census processes consolidate the number of languages that people claim to speak. For example, over 6,000 language names were reported in the 2001 census, which were then whittled down to 234 “mother tongues” and 122 “real” languages. In China, we have no formal record of what languages people claim to speak, so we have to rely on linguistic studies, which recognise over 300 languages in the country. Since the mid twentieth century, these have been crammed into an ethnic classification system that only recognizes 56 “nationalities,” each with a single language.

What does it mean to have your language and your indigeneity denied? In practice, it means that you can’t use your language in school, can’t hear it or see it on any form of media, and can’t use it with doctors, judges, police officers, government officials, or with your boss. Being linguistically locked out of these institutions and relationships makes people’s lives immeasurably more difficult and exposes them to greater risks of harm across their life. Beyond that, it also slowly pulls apart the fabric of the community as individuals and families give in to the relentless assimilatory pressure, and gradually defect to dominant groups. Furthermore, when these communities are cut off from their indigeneity, they are denied a bundle of specific rights, such as the right to “revitalize, use, develop and transmit” their language found in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People, while also being isolated from a worldwide community of Indigenous activists to support their struggles to have these rights respected.

On top of these infrastructural foundations of double denial—the denial of indigeneity and diversity—both China and India carry out widespread human rights abuses that limit the capacity of Indigenous activists to mobilise in defence of their rights. In China, the state’s authoritarian approach has long strangled civil society and systematically undercut people’s efforts to work collectively for their civil and political rights. This has been particularly pronounced since President Xi Jinping began his indefinite rule in 2013. In addition to this generally oppressive malaise, for minority nationalities, any pursuit of collective rights attracts additional accusations of separatism and terrorism and is dealt with as a security threat. Meanwhile, in India, Modi and the Bharatiya Janata Party have systematically assaulted civil society, restricting NGOs’ access to funding, modifying laws so that individual activists can be prosecuted as terrorists, and attacking academic freedom, while continuing to roll out a program of colonial violence aimed at dispossessing and assimilating Indigenous peoples.

So, despite the many enormous differences between India and China, these two super-states of Asia overlap significantly in how they suppress Indigenous people and stifle their efforts to maintain their languages.

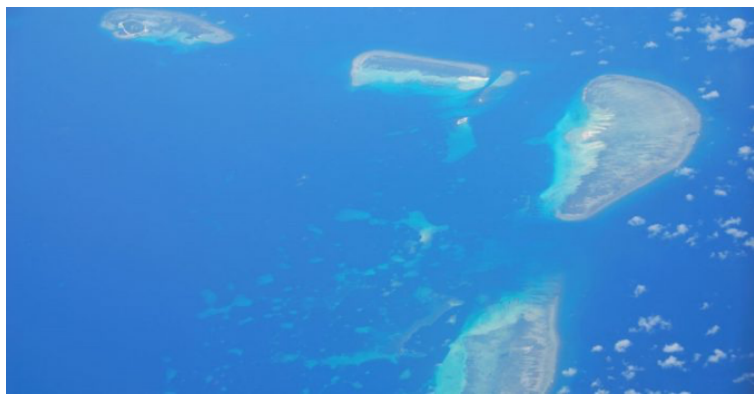
Between the two countries, this impacts around 220 million people: almost 9 times to the total population of Australia. The people who suffer from this oppression, and those who carry it out, are not fictional figures or inhabitants of a distant planet. Nor are they simply residents of our largest trading partners, inhabitants of major actors in regional security, or even regional neighbors. Since India and China are the largest sources of migration to Australia, the situation I have described here directly impacts and implicates people here too: our neighbours, colleagues, friends, and lovers. Us.

Therefore, the human rights violations and denials of diversity and indigeneity I have outlined here are also issues of concern for Australian lawmakers, civil society organisations, social movements, and individual citizens. The International Decade of Indigenous Languages still has more than eight years to go, and hopefully within this time, these diverse actors in Australia will help to dismantle the denialist infrastructure that currently underpins the human rights abuses and linguistic assimilation that Indigenous people in India and China face today.

*Dr Gerald Roche is a political anthropologist and is currently Associate Professor of Politics at La Trobe University. His research focuses on state violence and social movements in Asia. Gerald's academic publications have previously appeared in Annual Review of Anthropology, State Crime Journal, Patterns of Prejudice, Australian Journal of International Affairs and others, and he has also written for The Nation, Meanjian, Red Pepper and other venues. His new book, The Politics of Language Oppression in Tibet will be published by Cornell University Press in November 2024.*

*This article is published under a Creative Commons License and may be republished with attribution.*

## **Related Articles**



### **Does America's Brave Talk Support Vietnam on the Paracels?**

By Professor Yoichiro Sato

14 April 2020

A collision between a Vietnamese fishing boat and a Chinese coast guard patrol boat near the Paracel Islands, which resulted in sinking of the former, has added yet another incident to the history of the South China Sea disputes. A usual blaming of the other happened, like in many international maritime incidents.