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INDIA

Adivasis and the Indian State: Coffee plantations and reserved forests in Karnataka have stripped Jenu Kurubas of land, forest rights

Jenu Kurubas were listed as a primitive tribe by the state government. Now, they are listed as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG).

Greeshma Kuthar and Natesh Ullal | September 11, 2019 20:46:14 IST



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One after the other, rulers who controlled the forests of

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Mysuru and Coorg districts were responsible for the continuous displacement of Jenu Kurubas from their home-forests.

The displacement was two fold – firstly, to push them away from the forest lands to make way for estates, and secondly, to exploit them as a source for labour at the very same estates which displaced them.

Editor's Note: In this eighteen-part series, we will attempt to address the tropes associated with the communities in question from an adivasi perspective while also exploring the contemporary relationship of adivasi citizens with the Indian government. This is the twelfth article of the [series](#) on adivasi communities in peninsular India.

Muthamma JK begins her story by recounting the life of her father. While many from her community were residing in line houses constructed by plantation owners, her father didn't. He lived outside the plantations and continued to do so till the end of his life. The lessons he taught Muthamma, she says, were about why they, as adivasis, needed to hold on to forests. "Simply because they are ours," he would say.



Muthamma after eviction in 2016, at the shelter constructed outside the Diddahalli settlement. Greeshma Kuthar/Firstpost

Five decades later, she [led a struggle](#) against the eviction of 611 adivasi families from a settlement in Diddahalli in Kodagu district which they had formed for themselves over the years.

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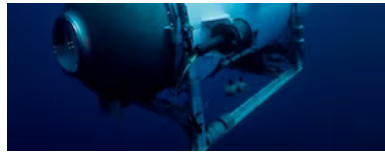
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What is the anti-conversion law that Karnataka is scrapping?



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Five hundred and forty families have been shifted more than 50 kilometres away, to two rehabilitation sites. Muthamma wasn't one of them. She stays on in Diddahalli.

Ironically, the entrance of Didahalli has a government signboard which reads:

“By: PWD, Ports and Inland Waterways Department

Concrete Road Construction to Didahalli Girijana Colony of Chennaiana Kote Panchayat

Work: Tribal Sub Project.

To be completed by 18.12.2015”



A board of the District Administration at Diddahalli. Greeshma Kuthar/Firstpost

This board is older than the protests that took place at Diddahalli. This board also acknowledges that the settlement is a tribal settlement and has used money from the tribal budget to build roads which connect Diddahalli to the rest of the district. These roads are being used by everybody in the panchayat, including the owners of the multiple plantations situated in the panchayat and the non-tribal population. Except that the money used for these roads came from the tribal budget and the tribals it was supposed

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Can the missing Titanic tourist sub be rescued? Is there hope for passengers?

While the US media reported that banging sounds have been heard in the area where the vessel disappeared on Tuesday, authorities say passengers will run out of oxygen early Thursday. Experts say options for rescue at the depth where the Titanic wreck rests remain extremely limited

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to cater to have been thrown out of their houses, pushed away to what seems like developed versions of line houses, complete with CCTVs, more than 50 kilometres away.

Muthamma's ancestors

Pointing to a river adjacent to her house, Muthamma mentions how there was a dense forest around the water body when she was younger.

Around the river Muthamma pointed to is also where her family dating back to her grandparents' era lived, she says. There were only six families then. These families started working in plantations just like many other Jenu Kuruba families, eventually moving into line houses constructed inside the plantations. Line houses are barracks built to accommodate workers employed at these plantations. Devoid of basic facilities, these houses measure 7 X 5 feet or less. The workers are completely under the control of the owners, and are unable to venture out most of the time. The situation, Muthamma says, has improved but there were days when the situation in the plantations was akin to slavery.



Chennaiana Kote Panchayat. Greeshma Kuthar/Firstpost

Muthamma's family didn't move into the line houses. They stayed put. "I remember trees which were taller than one can envision these days. Everything was cut down by the forest department. The thirst for timber destroyed this forest. Once they cleared this forest, they shifted many Gowda families from Titimati forest here. The minute this shift happened, our lands were gone."

Muthamma's family was made to move to Modabail. This shifting game, as Muthamma calls it, has been at play since she remembers. They've used different excuses, she says, ranging from

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'Gaddar Divas': The fresh tension between Sena (UBT) and Shinde-led faction explained

The Uddhav Thackeray-led UBT has called for 20 June – the day last year that Eknath Shinde raised a banner of revolt – to be marked as 'Gaddar Divas' with Sanjay Raut even tweeting a letter to the United Nations demanding the same. Shinde in turn has accused Uddhav of being a traitor for 'betraying

environment to wildlife conservation. She says, “Do we need lessons to conserve the forest? Every other day, a wild animal walks in here, does some or the other damage. Do you see us killing them?” She further remarks, “The government never gave us documents or acknowledged our presence, till we started fighting for it. Maybe they thought if they give us titles, we might grow bigger than what they expect from for us. Why will they or the owners who have been living off our labour want that?”

Who are the Jenu Kurubas?

“Jenu Kurubas are the moolas of this forest,” says Muthamma. By moolas, what Muthamma implies is that the original inhabitants of the forests of Mysuru and Kodagu districts of Karnataka are the Jenu Kurubas. This tribe, which comprises primarily of hunter-gatherers, lives in HD Kote, Hunsur, Piriapatna taluks of Mysuru district, Nanjangudu and Gundlupete of Chamarajanagar district and Somvarpet, Virajpet and Madikeri of Kodagu district.

Their expertise at honey-gathering has earned them the name Jenu (which translates to honey) Kuruba. One among the 58 tribal communities of Karnataka, in 1986, they were listed as a primitive tribe by the state government. Now, they are listed as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG).

Other than honey gathering, they also collected minor forest produce, and practised shifting cultivation for sustenance. Historians have claimed that Jenu Kurubas took care of elephants for the Pallava and Chola kings. Their elephant taming capacity is well-known and they have worked as mahouts for the Maharaja of Mysore. Even to date, they are the ones who bring elephants for the Mysuru Dasara procession from the elephant camp in Dubare.

Many Jenu Kuruba leaders have blamed historians and researchers for spinning false narratives about the community. Government-backed studies, forest officials and the administration regularly refer to the Jenu Kurubas as ‘encroachers’ and ‘migrant tribes’. “These forests are ours; how can outsiders call us migrants?,” questions JD Jayappa, one of those who led the struggle against displacement of Jenu Kuruba families in 1984 at Ranipet.

Displacement

One after the other, rulers who controlled the forests of Mysuru and Coorg districts were responsible for the continuous displacement of Jenu Kurubas from their home-forests. The displacement was two fold – firstly, to push them away from the forest lands to make way for estates, and secondly, to exploit them

as a source for labour at the very same estates which displaced them.

Coffee and cardamom received patronage during the tenure of Mysuru and Kodagu kings. This patronage doubled with the coming of the British. The first European coffee plantation was opened in North Coorg in 1854. Anybody could file an application for a land grant to grow coffee. In less than half a century, close to 50,000 acres were planted with coffee. It reached its peak by the 1880s, by when the number doubled and coffee became synonymous with Coorg. Almost every (non tribal) family in Coorg had a small plantation.

For the British, the region was a primary source for timber. The Indian Forest Act of 1865 followed by Forest Act of 1878 gave the colonial government control over forests, and large swathes of land were declared as reserved forests. This declaration meant that everyday practices of adivasis were no longer allowed. All of their activities there became illegal — from simple acts such as lighting a fire to conversion of forest land for agriculture, cutting tree branches for everyday use and cattle grazing. Forest-dwelling adivasi communities who never believed in ownership of the forest helplessly watched the government becoming their master.

The colonial Coorg forest department put stringent restrictions on the use of resources in the reserved forests by forest dwellers and neighbouring villages. Timber extraction started with a selective felling approach and moved to clear felling with the establishment of teak and eucalyptus plantations (1888 to early 1900s).

Throughout, the labourers employed by the British were from the original indigenous tribes, the forest dwelling Jenu Kurubas and Yeravas.

Things didn't drastically change post-Independence. While plantations reigned, the government initiated projects that further displaced the tribal population. Jenu Kurubas were made to leave their ancestral lands to facilitate the construction of the Kabini, Taraka and Nugu dams in the 1970s. These dam projects led to the submergence of large tracts of forest lands around Nagarahole and as many as 500 tribal families were displaced. Around the same time, the Wildlife Protection Act of 1972 came into force.



File image of Nagarhole Park. Wikimedia Commons

Nagarhole became a site of frenzied activity soon after. Nagarhole is located 90 kilometres from Mysuru, at the foothills of the Western Ghats, stretching up to the border with Kerala. These forests were the homes of Jenu and Betta Kurubas till the area was declared a wildlife sanctuary in 1955. Up until then, it was the exclusive hunting zone for the Mysore royals.

After the passing of the Wildlife Protection Act of 1972, the land set aside for the Nagarhole wildlife sanctuary **was increased to 643.39** square kilometres in 1975. This led to further displacement. About 3,400 families were relocated with a promise of rehabilitation outside the forest with agricultural land. This promise never materialised, like most other land-related promises made to the Jenu Kurubas.

Their woes were only beginning.

In 1983, Nagarhole was declared a national park, only to be declared a Project Tiger Reserve in 1999. Of the enumerated 1,703 families living within the boundaries of the tiger reserve, the official government records state that 630 tribal families voluntarily moved from Nagarhole and Kallhlla ranges to Nagapura (which is outside the boundary of the tiger reserve). The families say that they were pushed out of the reserve.

The history of the anti-eviction struggle of the Jenu Kurubas

The Jenu Kurubas started facing organised forceful eviction in the early seventies. Till then, it had been mostly been in phases, in smaller numbers. But starting from the 1970s, they were made to leave their homelands deep within the forest and instead forced to live outside, either in semi-rural spaces or in the plantations,

which they had to take to for survival. Up until then, they were habituated to agricultural and livestock rearing activities within the forest.

In the 1980s, when the Rajiv Gandhi National Park (also known as Nagarhole National Park) was announced, the campaign to force forest dwellers out of their homelands was accelerated. While all of Coorg has a tribal presence, Virajpet taluk in particular, which consists of Nagarhole and adjoining areas, is thickly populated by tribal communities.

What the tribal population called home was directly at threat. To resist this organised anti-tribal campaign of the State, the tribal communities living in the forests of Nagarhole and Kakanakote formed the Budakattu Krishigara Sangha (the Indigenous Peasants' Organisation).

The first struggle at Ranipet, Jayappa recounts, took place in 1984. From 1972, the forest department had been routinely meddling with the tribal settlements in the region, under the guise of the newly enacted Wildlife Protection Act. "In 1984, when the pressure grew to the extent that the government deployed forces to remove us, we organised. We came together and the struggle that followed was long. But eventually, we were displaced from our ancestral forests."

Following displacement, the families moved towards the edge of Ranipet. Since they shifted there, only 108 families have received land for self-cultivation. In fact, settlements where families have lived for more than two decades have as late as 2013 been marked as reserved forest land. "There is adequate proof to show that we've stayed there. Our agricultural activity, house structures, temples and borewells dug by the government — it is all there," says Jayappa. Despite this, the forest department issued notices asking them to move, he said.

This is the story that haunts the life of every displaced tribal family, says Jayappa.

The protests around Nagarhole National Park also met a similar fate. A **strong resistance** was managed by the State and eventually, the displaced families were moved to Nagpura, where they continue to struggle for what they were promised. Studies have established **that the economic status** of displaced tribals at Nagpura has worsened as compared to their earlier forest-based economic status.

"All this while planters have been given a free rein to do what they want," observes Jayappa. Forest areas around the national park

have been encroached by plantation owners growing agricultural and plantation crops.

While plantation owners being reprimanded for encroachment of the forests is unheard of, violence that the tribal communities face within the forest is normal.

In July 2003, three adivasi youths went to the Kallahala forest range to collect honey. When they were returning home, forest guards opened fire, killing one person on the spot. The other two escaped with injuries. The person killed was Ravi, a Jenu Kuruba living close to the Kallahala forest.

Fast forward to the struggle Muthamma led at Diddahalli

Muthamma reached a crossroads of sorts in 2016. Diddahalli had become a place of solace for adivasi families who no longer wanted to reside in the deplorable line houses within plantations. Or be pushed around, from one corner to the other. These were not just Jenu Kurba families but were also from the Betta Kuraba, Yerava, Paniya and Soliga communities. Families started moving out and were supported by Muthamma and others who had already made Diddahalli their home. By November of 2016, more than 600 families had moved to Diddahalli.

But on 7 December, 2016, JCBs accompanied by the Karnataka Police and CRPF entered the settlement on the orders of the forest department and gutted down the settlement. This happened without prior notice or communication. During the process of razing the houses down, many were injured. Trenches were dug around the settlement to prevent the families from re-entering. The families refused to leave and used the remnants of their destroyed houses to rebuild sheds alongside their now-destroyed houses.



When the houses were being gutted, Muthamma and others from the community stripped down in protest. Forest officials assaulted them and arrested them. In the absence of Muthamma, newer and younger leaders emerged. One of them was Anitha. The actions of the government attracted widespread disdain and protests erupted across the state under the banner of 'Bhumi Mattu Vasathi Hakku Vanchithara Horata Samiti'. The demands from the families were unanimous. They wanted their settlement in Diddahalli to be restored to what it was before it was destroyed. They wanted land for self-cultivation, as guaranteed under the Forest Rights Act.

Anitha explains why land for self-cultivation was a primary demand during the protest. “We weren’t asking for anything new. For decades, we’ve been growing trees and cultivating the same crops grown within the walls of these plantations where we toiled. But on cue, the forest department arrives and destroys them every time we sow anything. People from the department dig trenches at places where we attempt to cultivate. It is time we had documents with our names on it.”



Anitha at the protest. Image courtesy: Pedepics Youtube channel

On 23 December, the Minister of Social Welfare, H Anjaneya, under pressure, promised measures to build a settlement for affected families and handed over a cheque of Rs 1 crore. By then, Muthamma was released. While the story until here has reached most news outlets, everybody lost interest in the story of what happened after, says Muthamma.

Two sites were identified 50 kilometres away at Basavanhalli and Byadagotta, both in Somwarpet taluk. While Muthamma refused to

leave Diddahalli, many other families were forced into trucks and taken to these sites. For weeks, they didn't have a roof above their heads. Eventually, the district administration built box-like tarpaulin sheds using the Rs 1 crore set aside by former minister H Anjaneya.

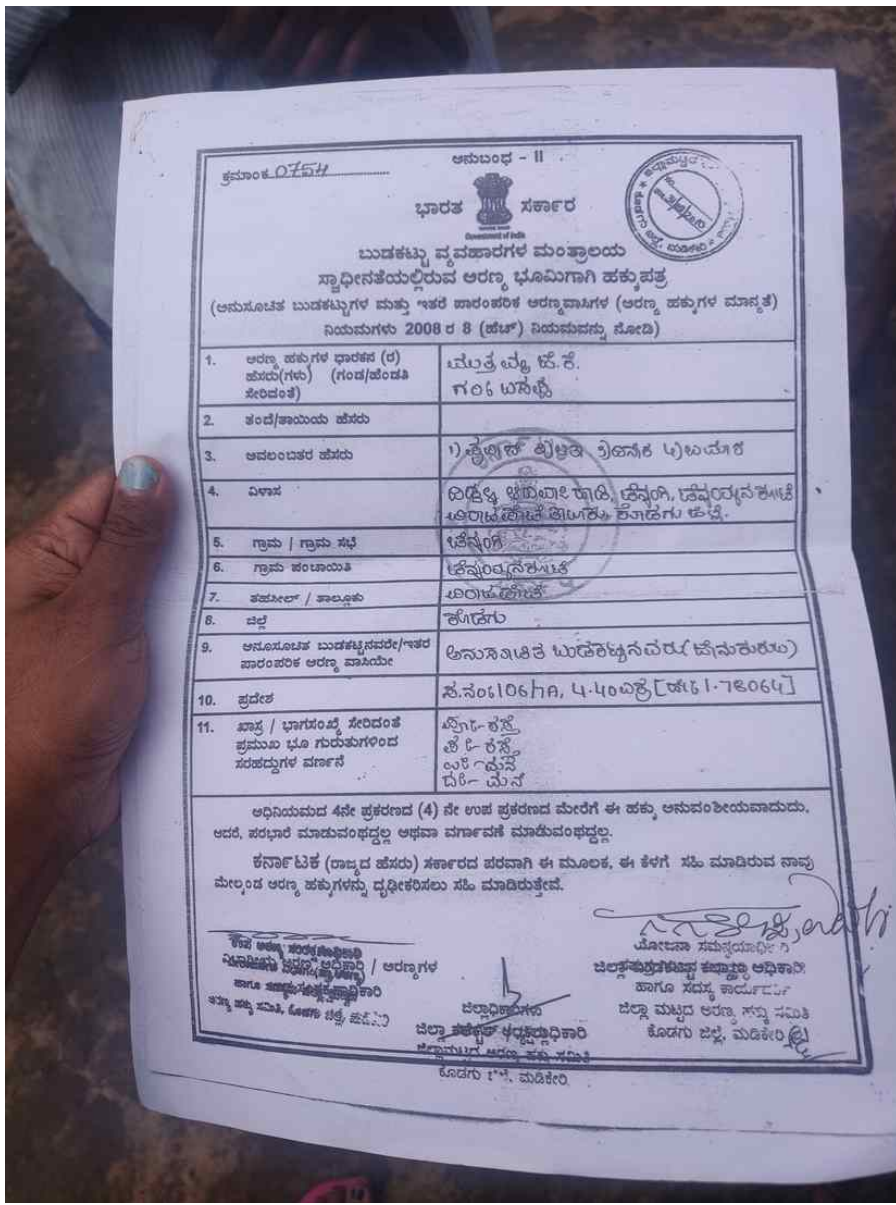
As on June 2019, 540 families were moved into houses at both these sites.

The question of land for self-cultivation, which was the primary demand of the Diddahalli struggle, remains unresolved. The families which stayed back at Diddahalli, like Muthamma's, tried to claim this land using the provisions of the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006.

The strange case of Muthamma's haku patra

The language of the Forest Rights Act is curious. Section 3 is the part which sets out the 'Forest Rights' of forest-dwelling Scheduled Tribes and other traditional forest dwellers. We will not go into the confusion arising out of the term 'other traditional forest dwellers', and will stick to the situation of Muthamma and the Jenu Kurubas. Section 3 defines "forest rights" as including claims of land for habitation and self-cultivation, but it doesn't further specify the nature of this claim for land. What happens once the claim is processed? Will the forest department "overlook" how the land is cultivated or used? This doubt is yet to be cleared in Mysuru and Kodagu districts, as most of the claims filed by Jenu Kurubas are stuck in administrative jargon. The Act specifies that forest land, when claimed, will be converted to revenue land, to facilitate issuance of titles.

After 2006, many displaced Jenu Kurubas filed claims under the Act, including the ones who were part of the Nagerhole and Ranigate struggle, most of whom were still landless or have been issued hakku patras which mean nothing. An example is Muthamma's case.



Muthamma's Haku Patra. Greeshma Kuthar/Firstpost

Muthamma filed a claim under the FRA in 2010. She was issued a hakku patra on 31 August, 2010. The survey number mentioned is 106/7A (4.40 acres).

The 'certificate of title' of the year 2013-14 for the land in question classifies it as 'forest paisari' i.e land declared as the property of the government but not notified as protected or reserved forest. But in 2017, within a few months after the protests, its status changed to 'reserved forest' on the 'certificate of title'.

Land records pertaining to the status of Muthamma's hakku patra

In July this year, the land document underwent mutation again with 12 names added as rights holders. Muthamma's name doesn't figure anywhere. The status of Muthamma's hakku or 'right' is still unclear.

Land owning in Coorg

This brings us back to the central question of land redistribution, which has been the central demand of every movement organised by the Jenu Kurubas. Why are they facing such difficulties in being bestowed land, under recognised legal provisions?

There were more than **14 types of land tenures** granted to various local communities of Kodagu and Mysuru district. Jamma land constitutes the most important system of land tenure. Jamma lands were allocated during the regimes of Rajas and the British administration, to individuals from various local communities who served in the military and other royal services. Most Jamma holders were to render free services in lieu of land granted to them. They did not have the right to partition and mortgage the land without approval of the government as per the Coorg Land and Revenue Regulation Act (CLRRA) of 1899. However, an amendment was made to the Coorg Land and Revenue Act (CLRA) of 1964. The new Act paved the way for holders to claim absolute ownership rights

over Jamma lands, which enabled the holder to alienate the land without permission of the government. But interestingly, Jamma landholders rejected this Act by expressing doubts over alienation of their property. Another reason behind refusal to accept this Act was that they would lose privileges of exemption from the Indian Arms Act (IAA) which enables them to own guns without a license.

These Jamma lands are the largest sites of the plantations where Jenu Kurubas have worked for decades now. Clearly, land grants aren't new to Madikeri. But efficient redistribution of land to Jenu Kurubas has not taken place.

At the Byadagotta resettlement site



The Byadagotta resettlement site. Greeshma Kuthar/Firstpost

While Anitha walks us through the resettlement, she explains the struggle life has become. There is hardly any work around the settlement. Or medical facilities, schools or even regular transportation facilities. The houses, hardly a couple of months old, are showing cracks and leaks. Most of these houses were finished in haste, she says, pointing to shelves that don't serve any purpose and toilets which are dysfunctional. "The government claims they've spent crores on this. The state of the houses doesn't reflect these 'crores'. Where is the cost break up?"



Cracks and leaks at the resettlement site. Greeshma Kuthar/Firstpost

Anitha mentions that the only work available is at a few plantations, a few kilometres away. “We didn’t lead this struggle for us to return to the same plantations we walked out of. But the government moved us out of our home in Diddahalli and brought us here. What other option do we have here?”

It is pertinent to note here that the Jenu Kuruba families displaced from Nagarahole National Park to a resettlement block in Nagapura in 1997 **are yet to receive what they were promised** – be it allotment of land, schools for their children to study or the compensation for their crops which were razed down.

Under the new FRA regime, tribal groups are allowed to collect minor forest produces for sustenance. But the collection of major produces like bamboo, timber and cane continue to be tendered to contractors. “These are the same groups which have usurped our rights over forest produce”, explains Anitha. Explaining further she says, “We are the ones who have been breaking our backs collecting this produce, and for whom? At Diddahalli, we said we won’t. We said we will take these tenders, we will do everything that we should’ve till now. Look where that has left us.”

Anitha and the resettled people have identified land around the settlement which is unoccupied. But the question Anitha poses is whether the government will allot the land to them as promised. “If they don’t, there is no other way for us to survive. We will be pushed back into the hands of the plantation owners. Why do they

just not want to give us the land that belongs to us?”

Anitha questions, “Why has the Jenu Kuruba community historically been kept away from its right to own and cultivate its home-forests?”

A statement of the Divisional Conservator of Forest, Coorg from 1893 will perhaps provide some context: - “I do not think that sufficient importance has been attached to the absolute necessity of doing everything in our power to conciliate the jungle denizens of our forests; all of whom, more especially the Kurubars, can use their axes most effectively, thoroughly know the jungles, and are not afraid of elephants and other wild animals. In South Coorg, such men are invaluable and without their aid, we could not properly work the forests.”

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Gita Press is a non-profit publishing house which sells religious Hindu books at a low cost. Established in 1923 by Ghanshyam Das Goenka and Hanuman Prasad Poddar at Kolkata, it moved to Gorakhpur in 1927 with the assistance of businessman Jayadayal Goyandka