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Inside a march by Adivasis of Karnataka's Nagarahole fighting for forest rights

The movement led by Adivasis in Nagarahole wants the forest department to recognise the rights of forest-dwelling communities, and trust them with the conservation of their homeland.



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Tribal leader JK Thimma at a protest in Nagarahole

Written by: Prajwal Bhat

Edited by: Iahnavi 

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The narrow trail that leads to the entrance of the Nagarahole Tiger Reserve in Kodagu district of Karnataka is a border that separates two worlds. On the left is a forested wilderness concealing a jumble of villages, streams and fields. On the right, a highway scythes its way into the core forest, enabling tourists to catch a glimpse of the animals inside.

Standing at this border, JA Shivu looks squarely at the police officers and forest guards sizing him up. A 27-year-old from the Jenu Kuruba Adivasi community, Shivu has seen the forest, his homeland, change irreversibly in his lifetime. Ancestral pastures used by his community were absorbed into national parklands, and authorities gradually enforced a policy of barring his community from using them.

Holding back his anguish, Shivu lets out a cry – “*Kaadina makkalu navene, kaadina rajaru navene*” (We are the children of the forest, we are the rulers of the forest). His call momentarily reverberates in the silent forest, before it is followed by a much louder cry, this time from scores of Adivasi residents and conservation activists standing behind Shivu.

Inside the Nagarahole Tiger Reserve, there’s a growing movement calling for an end to the displacement of Adivasis who consider themselves to be the forest’s original inhabitants. The movement is seeking community ownership of the forest land, so that Adivasis can continue to live in their forest home.



JA Shivu leading the march inside Nagarahole Tiger Reserve, Kodagu

'Chiefs of the forest'

Led by the Nagarahole Adivasi Jamma Pale Hakku Sthaapana Samiti (Nagarahole Adivasi Forest Rights Establishment Committee) – an organisation fighting for Adivasi rights in Nagarahole – a group of tribal residents and conservation activists participated in a week-long march inside the forest from March 15 to March 21. The group traversed the forest lands of Nagarahole, singing songs of resistance and holding discussions in villages inhabited by Adivasis about the need to better secure their rights. The march ended outside the Range Forest Office in Nagarahole, where the participants held an agitation demanding that the forest department authorities acknowledge Adivasis' right to live in the forest.

For the Jenu Kuruba, Betta Kuruba and Yerava Adivasi communities of Nagarahole, who have lived in the forest for generations, every feature of the wilderness has a spiritual significance. They rely on forest produce – seeds and roots for food and medicine, timber for firewood, and leaves and grasses

food and medicine, timber for firewood, and leaves and grasses for making ropes, mats, brooms and baskets – to sustain their lives. The word 'Jenu' – the Kannada word for honey – refers to the community's traditional occupation, and children as young as 10 join their elders in harvesting it.

Shivu, the young face of the movement inside Nagarahole, says that over the last 24 years since Nagarahole was declared a tiger reserve in 1999, hundreds of Adivasi residents have been displaced from the forests. "We have been evicted in the name of 'wildlife conservation'," says Shivu.

Watch: Inside a march by Adivasis in Nagarahole who are fighting for forest rights



Official figures provided by the forest department suggest that nearly a third of the 2,785 Adivasi families in Nagarahole were relocated over the last two decades. Forest department officials claim that the relocation is a 'voluntary' process, while admitting that they are keen to enforce environmental laws. "We tell the residents this is a tiger reserve and we invariably have to give importance to wildlife conservation," says Harshakumar Chikkanargund, the Deputy Conservator of Forests (DCF) in Nagarahole. "For those who want to leave, we are providing compensation and looking to build better facilities outside the forest," he says.

facilities outside the forest, he says.

However, community leaders and residents point out that a one-time compensation for the forest land is not enough, and insist that they need a lot more than money to survive. "We need the forests to be with us," says Shivu.

Residents like Shivu and JR Lakshmi, a 45-year-old gram panchayat member from Nalkeri village in Nagarahole, are proving to be a stumbling block to the government's push to relocate Adivasis from the forest land. The duo, along with many others, have been organising residents to file claims under the Scheduled Tribes And Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition Of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, which was introduced to rectify historical injustices against forest-dwelling communities. The Act recognises the relationship Adivasis have with the forest, and establishes a set of community and individual rights to access the forest and use its produce.

Sifting through documents, Lakshmi says that even as Adivasis were being displaced from Nagarahole, their applications to secure rights under the Forest Rights Act (FRA) were rejected by the Kodagu district administration. "We were forced to hunt for government documents from before 2005 to prove we cultivated or used the land we were staking claim to," Lakshmi says.



JR Lakshmi, Gram Panchayat member, Nalkeri, Kodagu

However, the office of the Integrated Tribal Development Project (ITDP) in Kodagu, which plays a key decision-making role in granting forest rights to Adivasi residents, contended that only 20% of the applications filed by Adivasi residents for land rights have been rejected. This is in contrast to statewide figures as of November 2022, which reportedly indicated that nearly 84% of claims filed under the FRA had been rejected in Karnataka.

“Some of the claims were rejected because there wasn’t enough paperwork to prove that they were using the land,” says Honne Gowda, the ITDP officer in Kodagu. “We are following the process and there is no claim for land or forest rights currently pending with our department,” he adds.



Adivasi residents and conservation activists at Bommadu Hadi, a village in the forests of Nagarahole

A turbulent relationship with the forest department

In Nagarahole, residents express mistrust of the claims made by the district administration. “Our people can point to a parcel of land they have used for years based on forest identifiers, but they do not always have the documents to prove it,” says JR Lakshmi.

The claims for land and forest rights were a topic of discussion in all the villages visited during the march, with both residents and conservationists calling to halt the relocation process until the claims were re-examined.

Living and travelling together for seven days, the participants of the march moved as a caravan through tranquil forests and remote villages, halting on the roadside and mountainside, crossing rivers and streams, and sharing their experiences of walking the trail.

On March 19, they were joined by a few Adivasi residents who were resettled in camps outside the forest area. The camp residents allege that they are often prohibited from re-entering the forest. “If we had known that this would be the case, we would not have left the forest,” says Kamala, a 34-year-old resident of a resettlement camp. “We wish to return often – to visit relatives and our sacred groves, and to collect produce in the forest – but we can only do so if the forest department personnel do not stop us,” says Kamala.



Kamala (Right) resides in the resettlement camp in Hebbala, Mysuru

The stand-off between the residents and forest guards underscores the strained relationship between Adivasis and the forest department in Nagarahole. Among other differences, many residents are critical of the department’s attempts to prevent animals from moving freely in the forest, using metal rails, trenches, and electric fences. “We are not a threat to the animals here. We can sense them when they are around us, and they can sense us. We know how to stay out of their way,” says JK Thimma, a 53-year-old tribal leader in Nagarahole.

The friction with the forest department has allegedly claimed many Adivasis' lives. Several Adivasi residents have been shot dead by forest department officials, alleges Thimma. "We know of at least seven of our people whom forest guards have shot down and killed over the last ten years," he says. Refuting official reasons cited for the deaths, residents allege that some of the victims were killed for fighting against harassment by forest department authorities.



JK Thimma (centre) speaking at a meeting in Kodangi Haadi in Nagarahole

Rethinking conservation

Over 25 years ago, Nagarahole witnessed a successful agitation for land rights of Adivasis, with Thimma and others managing to thwart an eco-tourism project by the Taj Hotels group inside the core forest area in the late 1990s. The Budakattu Krishikara Sangha (BKS), an organisation formed in 1982, was instrumental in this agitation and is one of the supporters of the movement for Adivasi rights in Nagarahole today.

The recent march was joined by conservation activists from different states in India who are living in tiger reserves and resisting the relocation of Adivasis. The activists echoed Thimma's words about the need for Adivasi communities to continue living in the forest. "The forest needs them too. The way Adivasis in Nagarahole are already coexisting with the forests must be recognised by the state as 'conservation,'" says Anjali D, an activist from Maharashtra who was part of the march.

"One of the songs sung during the march had the words 'We swing with the forest and the forest swings with us'. This shows the dynamic relationship Adivasis have with the forest, which is in contrast to the popular idea of 'conservation', which indicates attempts to keep the forests in a pristine and sanitised state," says Anjali.



The risk of cultural appropriation

During the march, the participants visited the sacred groves of the Adivasi community deep inside the forests of Nagarahole. Each of these designated groves is associated with a different ancestral or nature spirit. "Durgamuni Deeba is a spirit in the forest

ancestral or nature spirit. “Baraguru Kashe is a spirit in the form of a tiger, Ammale is in the form of an elephant, Karadikallu Dore is in the form of a bear,” says JK Thimma. “These are distinct from the gods of Hinduism,” he says.

But in recent years, Thimma says he has found Hindu motifs in their sacred groves with increasing regularity. “Trishuls (tridents) and saffron flags are now seen in the places where we pray. We know it is not a part of our culture but we also do not want to offend the beliefs of those who have placed them there,” he says.

Through their movement for forest rights, Shivu and Thimma aim to oppose such attempts to appropriate their beliefs. “We cannot fall prey to communal elements because it will ultimately result in the erasure of our Adivasi identity... If the identity of the Adivasi community is to be preserved, we have to maintain our bond with the forest,” Shivu says. “If we leave the forest, all the knowledge of living and coexisting with its trees, birds and animals, is uprooted,” he adds.

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