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Homecoming As Resistance: In Karnataka, Adivasis Reclaim A Forest From Which They Were Evicted 40 Years Ago

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On 20 May, residents of the erstwhile Karadikallu Attur Kolli Haadi village held a gram sabha, a general body meeting of the village, at the site where their village once stood. Since 5 May, 52 families have lived in temporary structures on land from where they were forcibly evicted, without compensation, in the mid-1980s, just before Nagarhole was declared a national park/ SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

In an act of defiance, 52 families of the Jenu Kuruba Adivasi community marched back into the Nagarhole tiger reserve on 5 May 2025, returning to the forest from which they were evicted—by force and with no compensation—nearly four decades ago. Their return to the heart of a protected area embodies their rejection of a wildlife conservation model that they say is exclusionary, colonial in spirit, and in breach of many Indian laws.

Mysuru, Kodagu & Mumbai: On the morning of 5 May 2025, 52 families belonging to the Jenu Kuruba community, an indigenous tribe in Karnataka known for their skill as honey collectors, marched into a densely forested part of the Nagarhole tiger reserve where their homes once stood—nearly 40 years ago.

For residents of the erstwhile Karadikallu Attur Kolli Haadi village, this was in equal parts protest and homecoming.

Located in the Mysuru and Kodagu districts of southern Karnataka, the Nagarhole tiger reserve is barely 40 km north of the Kerala border in Wayanad. It is also part of the Nilgiri [‘biosphere reserve’](#), India’s first, declared under the UNESCO’s ‘man and biosphere’ programme that sought to protect natural

ecosystems along with their human communities.

Forcibly evicted in the mid-1980s, shortly before Nagarhole was declared a designated national park under the [Wildlife Protection Act, 1972](#), the 52 families of Karadikallu said they were asserting their ancestral right over the land as a means to counter what they described as multiple violations of the [Forest Rights Act \(FRA\), 2006](#), by the state's forest department and the tiger reserve authorities, to stymie or delay legal processes that would formally recognise their land rights.

As a wet and hot May dragged on, amid efforts by local forest officers to demolish their makeshift shelters, the Karadikallu protest became another milestone in the Jenu Kurubas' decades-long land rights struggle punctuated at intervals by violent state pushback.

Waves of forced displacement of Jenu Kuruba villages began at least as far back as the 1970s, when by many estimates [about 3,400 families](#) were forcibly evicted. At the time, thousands more Adivasis continued to live in dozens of hamlets within Nagarhole tiger reserve, their presence in the region dating back [centuries](#).

After [displacements](#) to make way for the Kabini reservoir and the Bandipur national park in the 1970s, thousands more were relocated, like Karadikallu's

people, upon the declaration of the area as a national park, tiger reserve, then a critical tiger habitat, etc. A sizable number of the displaced were Jenu Kurubas, who are counted among 75 Adivasi communities suffering grave disparities in development and amenities, the 'particularly vulnerable tribal groups' or PVTGs by official nomenclature.

The current protest hinges on obtaining recognition of their land rights under the FRA, short for the [Scheduled Tribes And Other Traditional Forest Dwellers \(Recognition Of Forest Rights\) Act](#), which was enacted with the express purpose of setting right historical injustices wrought upon forest-dwelling Adivasi communities during colonial and post-Independence consolidation of forests.

In 2021 and again in 2023, the 52 families of Karadikallu applied for recognition of their individual forest rights (IFR) under the FRA, referring to rights over land they used for habitation and cultivation. On 28 and 29 October 2024, officials of the state forest department, revenue department, local panchayat officials and others conducted a joint survey to verify and map GPS coordinates of the 52 IFR claims.

In January 2022, claims of 44 residents were rejected by the sub-division level committee (SDLC, the second

tier of the law-mandated claims verification process) on grounds of lack of evidence.

The latest rejection came after the current protest began, when the SDLC and the district-level committee (the DLC, the third-tier of the claims verification process) hastily held meetings in Madikeri on 16 and 19 May, respectively. The SDLC met again on 22 May, and rejected all the FRA claims from Karadikallu Attur Kolli Haadi, stating that there was insufficient evidence to prove historical habitation or cultivation.

"The delays and the rejections are an attempt to delegitimise us," said J A Shivu, 27, among the leaders of the current struggle, and a resident of Karadikallu himself.

The displacement from their forest homes had led almost overnight to the near-enslavement of Nagarhole's Jenu Kurubas, he said.

They all went to earn a living in the coffee plantations of the Kodagu-Mysuru belt, located on the fringes of Nagarhole and producing more than **110,000 metric**

tonnes of coffee a year, more than a third of India's total annual production. At many of these plantations, debt-bondage, a form of bonded labour outlawed by a 1976 law, continues to be a common employment practice (see [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)).

More than a month into the re-occupation of their ancestral land, Karadikallu's people said they were determined to stay. "The forest department's contention that we cannot stay until our rights are granted is erroneous," said Shivu, asserting that the FRA is not a land-grant scheme. "We already have rights to this land and that's why the FRA was enacted —the law only formally recognises that right."

J C Shivamma, 40, among the womenfolk of the 52 families living in three makeshift structures of bamboo and tarpaulin sheets, appeared on a cellphone camera during a press conference addressed by activists, researchers and Karadikallu's residents on 2 June.

"India got freedom, but Adivasis remain serfs," she said in Kannada. "How else do you explain how we have everything here, our ancestors, our gods, our shrines,

our jamma (habitats demarcated among different clans), and yet we are prohibited from living here?" Shivamma said she would prefer to die on her ancestral land than leave again.

Failed By The Law

The Jenu Kurubas' current struggle is set against a wider struggle of an estimated 150 million forest-dwelling Indians, including at least [100 million](#) indigenous people. As many as [170,000 Indian villages](#) are located in proximity to forest areas.

In comparison, the number of land titles distributed under the FRA as of 28 February 2025, in the course of the 18 years that the law has been in force, is just over [2.5 million](#).

Through 'community forest rights' envisioned by the FRA, recognition of rights may be possible over "at least 40 million hectares of forest land" being managed by communities, according to a [2015 report](#) by the [Rights and Resource Initiative](#), a global coalition of more than 150 organisations.

A January 2025 [study](#) by Sharachchandra Lele of the Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment (ATREE), Bengaluru, and Geetanjoy Sahu of the School of Habitat Studies, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, found that even the best performing states in terms of recognising and formalising community forest rights under the FRA, Chhattisgarh and Maharashtra, had achieved only 36% and 24% respectively of the potential area on which forest resources are collectively conserved, managed and controlled by village *gram sabhas*.

However, that the FRA's core objectives remain out of reach is only one challenge for India's indigenous population.

In 2014, petitioners in a 2008 public interest litigation that challenged the constitutional validity of the FRA filed an interlocutory application, citing damage to forests from forest dwellers. Hearing this application, on 13 February 2019, the Supreme Court [ordered](#) states to evict all individuals whose claims for land titles under the law had been rejected. The SC termed them “[encroachers](#)” on forest land.

At the time, a little over 1.7 million claims had been rejected ([up to 1.8 million](#) in March 2025), rendering these tens of thousands of families in danger of being

forcibly evicted and dispossessed.

Following a furore among Adivasis nationwide, on 28 February 2019, the SC [stayed](#) its order, but directed states to submit a report on whether due process had been followed while rejecting claims.

*On the current protest, assistant conservator of forests (Nagarhole wildlife sub-division) Ananya Kumar told **Article 14** that the forest department, as an “aggrieved party”, filed an appeal with the SDLC. “With the help of satellite imagery from 1985 to 2025, this appeal clearly establishes that no human habitation or cultivation has ever taken place...” Kumar said, adding that the panchayat and Integrated Tribal Development Project (ITDP) officials at the SDLC meeting also contended that there was no record of ‘Attur Kolli Haadi’.*

He also said various documents that clearly identify other tribal hamlets within Nagarhole wildlife range do not make a mention of 'Attur Kolli Haadi'.

The Lost Roots

On 22 April, a few hundred Jenu Kurubas arrived in Gonigadde, 13 km north of Kutta, one of the southernmost towns of Karnataka before the Kerala border. They came on foot, in shared mini-vans and on bikes.

Located within the core area of Nagarhole, at the centre of Gonigadde is a raised clearing in the forest, soft underfoot, old trees rising at its edges. Simple shrines sit at the base of some trees—small stone or wood markers adorned with fresh flowers, fruit and smears of vermilion.



At Gonigadde, in the south-western part of the Nagarhole tiger reserve, is a cluster of tribal shrines to animistic deities. For the past couple of years, several hundred Jenu Kuruba Adivasis from a handful of villages gather here once a year to conduct rituals and prayer services to their ancestral gods/ KAVITHA IYER



A ritual offering of a fowl underway during the three-day festival of Jenu Kurubas in Gonigadde, Nagarhole/ RAJAN

At this cluster of tribal shrines, a three-day festival of prayers and rituals unfolded, an annual event for the last few years.

Young and old, everyone spoke lucidly about their

struggle against a model of conservation that they called exclusionary, that viewed their traditional use of forest resources as inimical to wildlife or nature but welcomed, however, the integration of the forest into a market economy where a forest administration works to maximise revenue and profits from forestry operations.

J K Putti—most Jenu Kurubas use the initials J K or J C before their names—was there with her daughter, grand-daughter and one of her two great grand-daughters. They came from Nanachi Gaddehaadi, a camp located 8 km away, where some of Karadikallu’s residents have lived for the last two years.

Putti was born, married and raised five children in Karadikallu. Her great-grandchildren, Samita and Sanvita, aged 6 and 10 respectively, having never lived as forest-dependent people, lack a clear sense of their ancestral heritage, the family conceded.

Putti’s daughter Gowri said she gave birth to her daughter, Manjula, in a ‘line-*mane*’, one of the rows and rows of oppressively small single-room structures built on the edge of coffee plantations, homes for Adivasi and other plantation workers. Her son J R Abhi, like many Jenu Kurubas in their twenties and thirties, looked for casual employment outside the forest and

now works at a small store in Gonikoppa, a town located about 20 km north-west.



Four generations of an Adivasi family were at the Gonigadde festival in April 2025. (From right) J K Putti, her daughter Gowri, her granddaughter Manjula, and great-granddaughter Samita. Putti said she was born and raised five children in Karadikallu Attur Kolli Haadi, but her grandchildren and great grandchildren have missed the lived experience of indigenous customs, prayers and rituals/ KAVITHA IYER

"I've come to speak to our deity and share this suffering," said Putti, "of being cut off from our gods, from our ancestors buried here, from whatever forces tied us to this land."

Shivu also grew up in a line-*mane*. His father's family was among those evicted from the forest in the mid-

1980s.

For a period, the displaced Jenu Kurubas continued in the 1980s and early 1990s to conduct religious rituals, customs, burial practices in the forest, and also continued to gather and use forest produce, but the erosion of their traditional lifestyles and forest-dependent livelihoods was rapid, said Shivu.

“Gradually, even our access to religious sites and spiritual activities became restricted,” he told **Article 14**.

A History Of Rights Denied

Shivu, one of the founding members of the Community Network Against Protected Areas (CNAPA), does not introduce himself as belonging to a tiger reserve. “The reserves were illegally declared protected areas, without the consent of the people who have lived here for centuries,” he said.

In fact, an explanation appended to section **38 (V)** of the Wildlife Protection Act says core areas of tiger reserves may be inviolate, “without affecting the rights of the scheduled tribes or such other forest dwellers”. It says in the course of “voluntary relocation on mutually agreed terms and conditions”, the State must make sure no scheduled tribes or other forest dwellers are resettled or have their rights adversely affected for the purpose of creating inviolate areas unless the process

of recognition and determination of rights or forest rights of the scheduled tribes is complete.

It says consultation with independent experts must conclude that other reasonable options of co-existence (of humans and wildlife) are not available.

Other laws, including the FRA and the [Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act, 2013](#), also expressly state that the livelihoods of forest-dependent communities must be secured before any relocation.

Shivu's—and the Karadikallu residents'—vehemence stems from a close reading of the law books, but also from Nagarhole's history of resistance to State-led coercive action and private market forces.

Besides sit-in protests and a days-long *padyatra* (march) through forest villages in recent years, in 1997, the Jenu Kurubas, Betta Kurubas and Yeravas of Nagarhole [won a litigation](#) in the Karnataka high court against a proposed Taj group eco-tourism resort in the core area of the tiger reserve that was to be developed through a lease deed with the state government.

The petitioners were led by the Nagarhole Budakattu Hakku Sthapana Samithi (the Nagarhole Adivasi Rights Restoration Forum), a group that remains active in the

current struggle. The court ruled in the Adivasis' favour, but not before many were arrested and slapped with cases.

The Fortress Conservation Model

At the very core of the Jenu Kurubas' struggle lies a model of conservation that has always been “colonial and extractive”, said Madhusudan Katti, an evolutionary ecologist and [associate professor](#) at the North Carolina State University.

The Indian Forest Service (IFS), having emerged from the Imperial Forest Service, continued to view forests primarily as resources to be extracted, he said, while neither model had paid heed to the original inhabitants of the lands now owned by the IFS. Wildlife conservation was simply grafted on to this same model that separated humans and nature into separate categories and declared that people had to be removed from protected areas.

This led to a fundamental contradiction, exemplified by the forcible displacement of indigenous and other local people suddenly deemed to be encroachers on protected area lands, said Katti. “How can laws and policies rooted in the colonial crime of theft of land and resources now treat the original inhabitants of that very stolen land as criminals?”

Citing the ‘land back’ movement in North America that calls for the return of government-owned ancestral lands including national parks to their indigenous stewards who can manage them according to traditional practices that centre relationships between humans and wildlife, Katti, editor-in-chief of *The Bulletin of The Ecological Society of America*, said India needs to reimagine its conservation model.

*“We need a plurality of models that address the challenges of specific contexts and communities and histories, based on the fundamental democratic principle of giving local communities power,” he told **Article 14.***

‘Theft Of Land & Knowledge’

Mirroring that argument was a statement of support to Karadikallu’s people, from several organisations including the Nagarhole Adivasi Jammapale Hakku Sthapana Samiti (literally translated as Nagarhole Adivasis’ land rights establishment committee), the National Adivasi Alliance, the Community Network Against Protected Areas and the People’s Union for

Civil Liberties (Mysuru chapter).

Dated 19 May, the statement said these groups' support to the Jenu Kurubas' struggle was "...rooted in the belief that...any conservation effort that does not acknowledge the historical role of Adivasi / indigenous communities in safeguarding these ecosystems is a theft of land and knowledge systems".

Meanwhile, the bureaucracy has kept up the pressure to relocate Adivasi hamlets located inside core or critical tiger habitats.

According to the [National Tiger Conservation Authority](#) (NTCA), as of May 2024, as many as 25,007 families had been relocated from the 'core tiger habitats' of 53 tiger reserves. A June 2024 [letter](#) from the NTCA to chief wildlife wardens of various states said 591 villages and 64,801 families were still residing within core areas of tiger reserves. "The progress of village relocation is very slow and it poses grave concern in light of tiger conservation," it said, urging that the subject of relocation be taken up on "priority basis".

Core areas of tiger reserves were meant to be kept "inviolable" for the purposes of tiger conservation, it reiterated.



J A Shivu, the leader of the current protest, is a founder-member of the Community Network Against Protected Areas, a network of researchers and activists seeking an alternative model of wildlife conservation. Shivu grew up in a 'line-manee', one of the tiny houses, built in rows, allotted to coffee plantation workers. On the left is J C Thimma, one of the leaders of Jenu Kurubas' land rights struggle who was arrested and faced a case when he and others opposed a proposed eco-tourism resort in the forest in the 1990s/ KAVITHA IYER

At the 5 June virtual press conference where speakers joined from Karadikallu, Kaziranga (Assam), Bengaluru and Mumbai, Shivu bluntly said he would not condole the **death** of Valmik Thapar, the conservationist and member of the '**tiger task force**' set up by the government of India to map out tiger conservation strategies after the disappearance of tigers from Rajasthan's Sariska in 2005.

Others who spoke from Karadikallu cited multiple examples of wildlife conservationists' "condescending disregard" for Adivasis' knowledge.

Resettled, But Dispossessed

A week after the Karadikallu protest began, on 12 May, Michal Balcerzak, chair of the [Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination](#) (CERD), a body of independent experts, [wrote](#) to India's ambassador and permanent representative at the United Nations, expressing concern about the June 2024 NTCA missive and “the reported lack of effective and meaningful consultation with the tribal and forest-dwelling indigenous peoples to obtain their free, prior and informed consent” to eviction.

The CERD is part of the UN's ‘human rights treaty bodies’, committees that monitor implementation of core international human rights treaties.

Balcerzak's note said that allegations of relocation of tribals without completing the process to recognise their land rights, if verified, would infringe rights guaranteed under the [International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination](#) (ICERD).

The NTCA letter expressly referred to “voluntary relocation” of the 591 villages remaining in tiger reserves' core areas, and to the compensation “package” that accompanied this relocation.

In Nagarhole, meanwhile, Karadikallu's people were not alone in announcing that their relocation was far from voluntary, and that they desired to return to their original homes. At least three other villages were mulling a similar reoccupation, said locals.

Karadikallu's protest was also not the first of its kind.

In 2010-11, Choudamma and her family were 'resettled', moved from their hamlet of Bogepura to Shettehalli village. (Choudamma's family members use a single name, with no initials.)

"They told us we were destroying the forest, that they would not let anybody live in the forest," said Mara, Choudamma's brother-in-law.



Mara, a former resident of Bogepura, has lived in the Shettehalli resettlement colony for 15 years. He said not a single family that was relocated had been able to adopt an agriculturist's life successfully/
KAVITHA IYER

Bogepura was located in the Kakanakote forest, which gives its name to the southern safari gate into Nagarhole. Bogepura's 45 homes were all translocated under the NTCA resettlement scheme, of which 40 families moved to Shettehalli, about 80 km north of their village. Of the five that remained, three were removed by force in later years, said residents. They were not certain what became of the remaining two households.

A private organisation was entrusted the work of coaxing the villagers to consent. The erstwhile Bogepura's residents recounted being told that staying back in the forest while wildlife conservation activities

gained ground would mean “total destruction” of their lives and livelihoods. Consenting to be relocated would entail some amenities, they were told.

Each of the 40 families signed a blank sheet of paper, according to Choudamma, who understood then that she was being promised a house, 3 acres of agricultural land in each family's name, electricity, one borewell for every five families, and cash compensation, among other things.

She was told it would be Rs 15 lakh, but after deductions for house and road construction, transportation of their belongings, land preparation and other costs, most were left with approximately Rs 3 lakh—in fixed deposits that they cannot break without a written sign-off from government officials.

The private organisations that assisted their relocation also helped bring in farmers from Kerala who till the oustees' newly allotted agricultural land on lease rents ranging from Rs 75,000 to Rs 1 lakh a year.

On an April afternoon when **Article 14** visited, the colony was bathed in blinding sunlight, the wide cement concrete roads incomplete at the far edges of the colony, a handful of young trees offering a modicum of shade. A few homes were visibly better off than the rest—others said the occupants of these were ‘informers’ who worked on contract for the forest department.

The houses were like matchboxes, the residents complained. Choudamma’s house, three tiny rooms with cemented floors and a courtyard, began to crumble after two monsoons. The plaster began to fall off, moisture seeped in through the walls, and the house flooded after a heavy downpour.



Choudamma inside her house at the resettlement colony. The roof and walls began to show signs of seepage during the second monsoon after their arrival, she said. Her family lives in a more traditional structure they

In comparison, their homes in the forest were, Choudamma said, “*devaru mane*”, the home of the gods.

Eventually, the family built a more traditional home at the edge of the agricultural land they received. Not everyone received cultivable land, residents said. At least one family received agricultural land that was inundated by a river every monsoon, and some said their plots were actually former fresh water ponds.

To these new homes and lives, the people of Bogepura had carried an entire world—rituals, food habits, work practices, leisure activities, faith systems—that proved difficult to abandon, and yet was ill-suited to their new circumstances.

Asked if at least one family from Bogepura had successfully adopted an agricultural livelihood, Mara said, “Not even one.”

A Violent Return

Four years before the Karadikallu resistance, Bogepura’s families took the same route, hoping to reclaim their original village in the lush Kakanakote forest.

Mara remembered it as the time he had suffered an inexplicable near-paralysis of the legs. “Actually everyone was sick with something or other,” he said.



(Left to right) Residents of the erstwhile Bogepura, Choudamma, her sister-in-law, neighbour Kalavati and Choudamma's mother Maare. On the extreme left is Malavika, Choudamma's grand-daughter, who also has a more traditional name given at her ritualistic christening, but on her Aadhaar and other official documents, she uses the modern name the family picked. She was born several years after the evictees from Bogepura arrived at Shettehalli/ KAVITHA IYER

Choudamma's neighbour Kalavati said a couple of children had died suddenly. She herself had been suffering from very poor menstrual health, said Kalavati, who lives with her sister in the Shettehalli colony—she didn't have the right paperwork at the time of relocation and was denied a house.

Around the same time, Maare, Choudamma's mother, now in her seventies, suffered a uterine prolapse. At a

nearby clinic, she received a pessary to support the organ, but eventually the costs were prohibitive and she gave up the treatment.

From having a shaman for each village, the regrouped villagers in the resettlement colony were sharing one shaman for about five villages, and residents said this shaman simply did not have the spiritual adhikaram (right) to intercede with their deities for them. "There was a sense of fear here," said Maare, currently suffering from a painful skin infection on her back.

It felt like a "spiritual breakdown" of an entire village, said Choudamma, who was among those who led the villagers back to Bogepura in December 2020.

"Everybody felt we had lost our gods," she told **Article 14**, seated in the mud-plastered verandah of her home.

"Back in Bogepura, our deities looked after us. So we decided to go back to our *jamma*."

Thirty families made the journey, taking the bare essentials. A week later, they invoked their gods, they said, and recounted how their overall health improved dramatically—Mara began to walk; others' respiratory complaints reduced; they began to use medicinal plants and tubers; people stopped taking their 'English' (allopathic) medicines.

On two or three occasions, forest guards, rangers and other government officials visited, instructing them to leave. On one occasion, forest guards seized their household utensils, hoping to compel them to leave.

Then, early on 17 January 2021, around 3 am, forest guards and policemen forcibly cleared the camp in the pitch black of a winter night in the forest. "Food was kicked, children and old people, even my mother, were dragged and pushed into a vehicle, cellphones were snatched," said Choudamma. "There were five men for each one of us."

It was quick, effective. By 4 am, the temporary structures were demolished and all residents bundled into a police van.

Some recalled trying to jump off, others said they demanded that they be taken to a police station or jail instead of being brought back to the resettlement colony.

It was still morning when they were all herded into the Shettehalli colony's community hall, where they remained locked up, including senior citizens, women and children, for nearly 24 hours. "Nobody even used the toilet," said Kalavati.



The community hall at the Shettehalli resettlement colony for residents of some villages inside the Nagarhole tiger reserve. Top wildlife conservationists' names are inscribed on a commemorative plaque outside the community hall where, in 2021, women, children and senior citizens were among those kept locked up for a day, without access to a toilet, upon being forcibly sent back from Bogepura where they tried to re-occupy their ancestral land, unable to adjust to life outside the forest/
KAVITHA IYER

Eventually, after activists and an elected representative intervened, the hall was unlocked and people returned to their homes in the resettlement colony.

Silence descended on Choudamma's verandah as the story of their failed return to Bogepura wound down. A few minutes later, she said, "We must go back. They are

murdering us by keeping us here.”

Adivasi To Labourer

The losses from relocation were numerous.

Choudamma said they'd not had a primary health centre in or near Bogepura, but it was in Shettehalli that sickness and death surrounded them. Addictions, to the now easily available tobacco, cigarettes and *paan masala*, had suddenly assailed their youth. Not only medicinal plants, but gourds, tubers and wild mushrooms they could easily forage were no longer accessible, a lost source of nutritional supplementation.

The Jenu Kurubas are known to be expert honey gatherers, but nobody in Shettehalli was able to pursue this any longer.

Bogepura's experience was consistent with the [2014 findings](#) of a three-member Karnataka high court-appointed committee that said the majority of tribal families displaced from Nagarhole national park had become landless agricultural labourers. Families had not been able to obtain formal credit for agriculture, forcing the tribals to fall back on private money-lenders, the report said.

Independent Bengaluru-based researcher Nitin D Rai,

who has for over a decade worked with Soliga Adivasis of the Biligiri Rangaswamy Temple (BRT) tiger reserve in Karnataka to understand the impact of wildlife conservation on communities, said there was evidence that from 1985 to 2015, household incomes suffered a dramatic decrease in earnings from forest resources.

“People who had a 65% income from collecting honey, amla (Indian gooseberry), etc were now working in plantations, sunflower farms, stone quarries in Madurai—all because they no longer had access to the forest,” Rai said.

The share of wage labour in household incomes went from 9% to 70% over this period, a shift from forest-dependent livelihoods to menial labour. “It was a class transformation of a people who previously had a *jamma* (clan habitat).”

Ecological Changes From Conservation

Patches of swampy and low-lying land covered with tall swamp grass as well as a tree canopy are a distinctive feature of the Nagarhole core area’s landscape. Called

hadlus, these swamps have a unique ecosystem, sweet water just below the surface of the land almost year-round, with ungulates and herbivores, including elephants, gaurs and *chital* deer visiting frequently.

In March 2025, former principal chief conservator of forests B K Singh [wrote](#) to Karnataka chief minister Siddaramaiah urging him to halt any move to recognise Adivasis' land rights on Nagarhole's *hadlus*. Habitat loss on account of damage to the *hadlus* could cause greater man-animal conflict in surrounding areas, he said.

Seated in a clearing in the forest just across a *hadlu*, J C Thimma, 55, a *tammadi* or shaman, and spiritual head of Gaddehaadi, another village in the core area of Nagarhole tiger reserve, pointed in the direction from where forest wagtails and parakeets were calling out. The grass there was probably a thousand years old, he said; a rock edict nearby that they worshipped was found to date back to the 12th Century.



A hadlu in Nagarhole tiger reserve. A swampy and low-lying area covered with swamp grass with a tree canopy nearby, the hadlu has sweet water just below the surface of the land almost year-round / KAVITHA IYER

“Was there a forest department in the 12th Century?” Thimma asked. “Our forefathers grew these forests and protected them, and now these people are saying we are encroachers and we should run away from here?”

The Jenu Kuruba and Betta Kuruba visitors to the Gonigadde shrine were unanimous that the practice of modern forest and wildlife conservation is

overwhelmingly exclusionary, ignorant of local knowledge and practice systems.

“Do the coffee plantations belong to Jenu Kurubas?” asked B C Kaala, a Betta Kuruba from Balekovvu, adding that the marshy land of the *hadlus*, and the water beneath, were both revered by the tribals as deities—damaging them, for cultivation, or for any other purpose, was unthinkable.

Others said Nagarhole’s *hadlus* were unique, for they were not present in adjoining Kabini or Bandipur.

The *hadlus* were once deep enough that locals feared going into them, Thimma said. Over the course of decades, teak plantations absorbed much of this water, he believed. “It was first the Britishers and teak plantations, then the expansion of coffee plantations, that have led to these ecological changes in our lands.”

The Jenu Kurubas’ agricultural practice, called *kittane bettane* (literally translated as close together-sowing) also skirted around trees and other shrubs, they said. Women said they mostly grew *ragi* (finger millet), entirely for use at home—cultivation for the market was negligible, for nobody had any substantial land holding.

The Legal Wrangle

In a written memo on 8 May, the assistant conservator of forests (Nagarhole subdivision) instructed the 52 families to vacate the core forest area immediately, citing a “temporary injunction order” from the Karnataka high court that presumably prohibited joint surveys or other FRA-related processes within the Nagarhole tiger reserve.

The memo said even conducting a meeting of the SDLC or DLC during the period of the injunction (till 23 July 2025) would constitute a violation of the high court’s directive. Proceedings related to claims filed under the FRA and recognition of these claims would resume once the injunction was lifted, it said.

In fact, the SDLC and the DLC did eventually hold meetings in the following weeks, after the forest department itself filed an appeal with the SDLC as an “aggrieved party”. This appeal was based on satellite imagery—listed as ‘secondary’ evidence under the FRA—that, the department said, showed no habitation or cultivation in this area of the forest; and on previous survey reports making no mention of a hamlet by this name.

On 14 May, forest department staff erected a sign board on the fringe of the protest area where 52 families of Karadikallu Attur Kolli Haadi were living, declaring

that under [section 27](#) (restrictions on entry into a sanctuary) of the Wildlife Protection Act, their presence in the core area of the tiger reserve was an offence.

On 15 May, having received a representation from Survival International, a UK-based non-profit that works on the rights of indigenous people in various parts of the world, an under-secretary in the union ministry of tribal affairs (MoTA) wrote to Karnataka's tribal welfare department, advising the state-level monitoring committee, constituted mandatorily under the FRA, to resolve "such field-level problems".

The MoTA referred to [section 4\(5\)](#) of the FRA, which prohibits Adivasis or other traditional forest dwellers from being evicted or removed from forest land under their occupation until the recognition and verification of their claims under FRA is complete.

On 20 May, the 52 families of Karadikallu conducted a gram sabha, a general body meeting of all adult village residents, to assert their ancestral rights to lands they had lived on or cultivated.

The *gram sabha* was attended by over 100 people, from Karadikallu and from nearby villages such as Tattedkere, Balekovvu, Nagarhole Gaddehaadi and Nanachi Gadde Haadi, as well as leaders of the Nagarhole Adivasi

Jammapale Hakku Sthapana Samiti, Rajyamoola Adivasi Vedike, and Budakattu Krishikara Sangha, all organisations working with indigenous groups' land rights struggles.

A little before their gram sabha, villagers erected their own sign board, in Kannada, alongside the forest department's board that warned them off the land. It said the forest department's signboard violated various sections of the Wildlife Protection Act, the FRA as well as Articles 14 (right to equality before the law), 19(1) (g) (freedom of speech, freedom to practise any profession), 21 (protection of life and liberty) and 300 A (right to not be deprived by property except by the authority of law) of the Constitution of India.

The declaration of their land as a tiger reserve was itself illegal without following due process, the board contended.

"You are now entering Jenu Kuruba land," it said. "Friends of Adivasis may enter."

(Kavitha Iyer is a senior editor with Article 14 and the author of 'Landscapes of Loss', a book on India's farm crisis.)