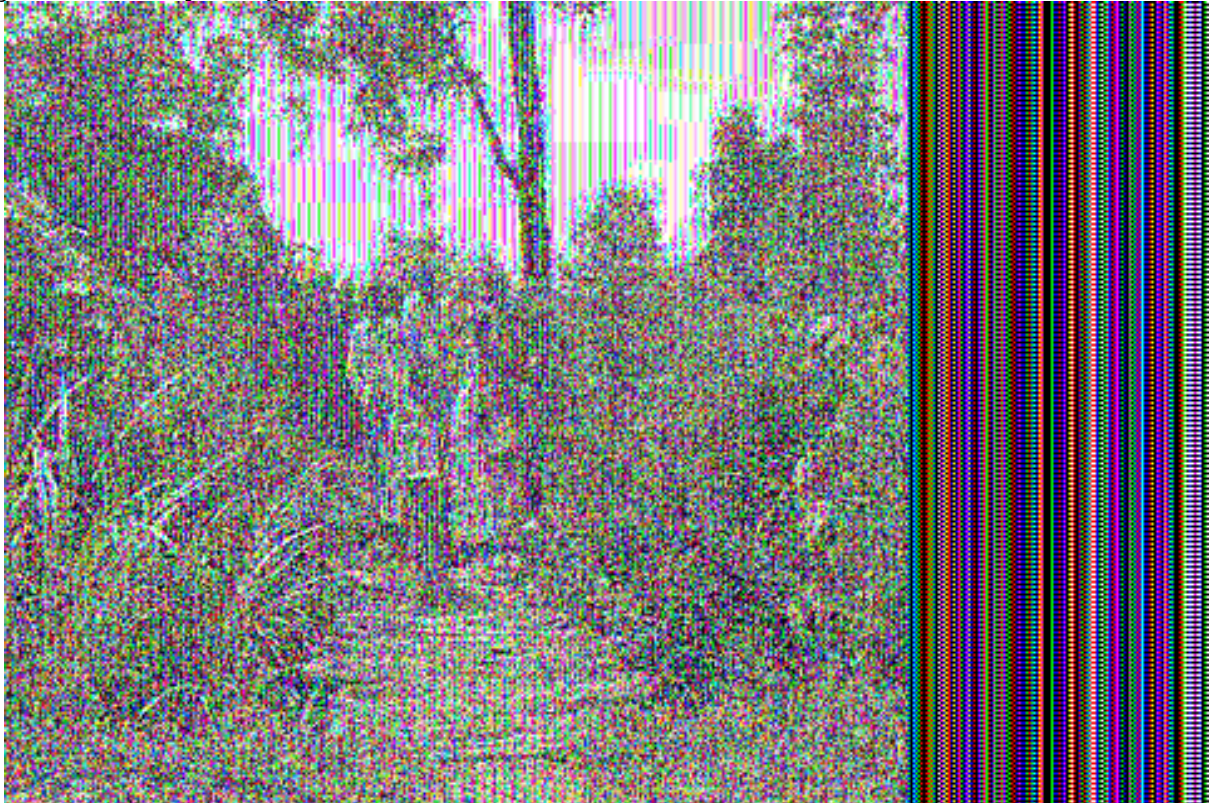


Forests

Situation in Nagarhole tense as evicted Jenu Kuruba tribals attempt to return to their land, reclaim forest rights

Forest Rights Act does not give us rights, but affirms that we already have the right to our forest land, say villagers

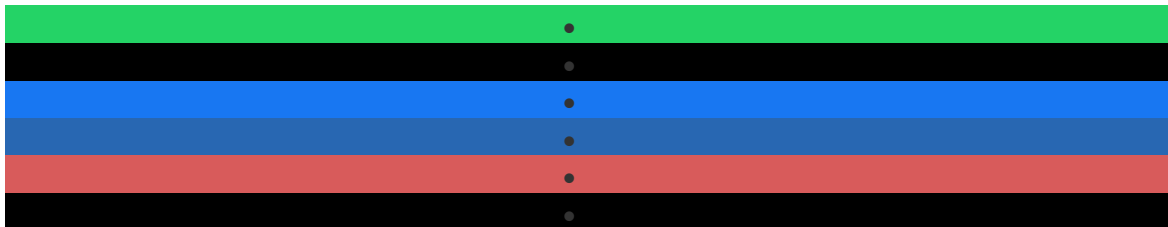


The adivasi community alleged that the forest department is deliberately denying them forest rightsSK Barkat

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The situation in Karadikallu Hattur Kollehaadi village in the Nagarhole reserve of Karnataka remains tense as 52 evicted families from the Jenu Kuruba tribal group clashed with the forest department May 5, 2025 during their attempt to return to their land and reclaim forest rights.

The Jenu Kuruba have an intimate relationship with nature and their belief system is founded on this connection to the forest, wildlife and sylvan dieties.

Identified as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG), the members of the community possess great insight about their surrounding environment — they have 25 distinct names for the various parts of the forest. They gather medicine, honey, fruits, vegetables, tubers and the thatch and bamboo needed to build their houses. The name of the tribe means "honey collector".

The adivasi community alleged that the forest department is deliberately denying them forest rights. So, they decided to take matters in their own hand.

Rajan, member of the Community Networks Against Protected Areas (CNAPA), a national coalition of indigenous peoples and forest-dwelling communities, Gram Sabha / village council federations, activists, journalists and academics from across India, said that these villagers were evicted in 1985-86 when Nagarhole was declared a wildlife sanctuary. The tribals were forced to work in coffee plantations.

In 2006, the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 allowed them an opportunity to reclaim their forest rights and they applied for the same in 2009.

"For the past 16 years now, the forest dwellers are trying to return to their homes by claiming their forest rights after being forcefully evicted 35 years ago," Rajan shared.

He told *DTE* that every time the adivasi community tried to access their rights via FRA, their claims got rejected under the pretext that the villagers do not reside in their ancestral land anymore as per the provisions of FRA.

"This was misread by the forest department as the same FRA recognises that these forest dwellers did not voluntarily resettle outside the forest, but were forced to. The law also permits to show evidence on the basis of agricultural land, sacred spaces and water streams," Rajan explained.

In 2019, the Supreme Court passed an interim order asking all states on actions taken to evict rejected claimants of the forest rights. The order would impact 1.6 million tribal families across India. The decision was stayed by the court on February 28, 2019.

Taking cue from the order, the forest dwellers applied for their claims again to push their demand, after which a verification was conducted by a joint committee from the revenue and forest departments in September 2024. It was expected to be followed by formation of a map from the revenue officials.

"However, the officials have been delaying the process for months and hence the tribals decided to claim their rights," he said.

The forest dwellers on May 3 announced in a press conference that they would be claiming their rights by moving into their ancestral land on May 5. "A letter in this regard was submitted to the forest department officials informing the same," he said.

"It was explained that the FRA does not grant rights to the forest dwellers, but it came into existence to recognise the right and does not violate any law," the villagers said.

But on May 6, about 150 people from Jenu Kuruba tribe were being forcibly removed by the authorities terming it as violation of the law.

The Assistant Conservator of Forest on May 8 issued a letter to the villagers, claiming that a temporary injunction order has been issued. This prohibited any joint survey work or related activities concerning the recognition of rights under the Forest Rights Act within the Nagarhole Tiger Reserve. This injunction will remain in effect till July 23, 2025.

The letter in Kannada, translated into English, read: "In view of the above order, conducting any activities including joint surveys, sub-divisional level committee meetings, or divisional-level committee meetings related to the recognition of rights under the Forest Rights Act within the Nagarhole Tiger Reserve would constitute a violation of the High Court's directive. Accordingly, it is directed that all individuals of the Adivasi community, who have entered the Attur Bay in the Nagarhole Wildlife Zone as of May 5, 2025, must vacate the area immediately. All proceedings related to the recognition of rights under the Forest Rights Act will resume once the injunction issued by the Hon'ble High Court is lifted."

Pranab Doley, CNAPA leader and member of the Missing indigenous community of Kaziranga, Assam, said "National Tiger Conservation Authority has been violating the forest rights of all Adivasi or indigenous peoples across all forest regions of India and denying access to peoples' fundamental human rights, charging them with false cases and treating people who live within and outside forest regions without dignity in the name of tiger conservation."

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