

DIGITAL EXCLUSIVE

Tribal group in Nagarahole fights for forest land

The Jena Kuruba fight to settle inside a tiger reserve while conservationists dismiss it as a romantic notion.

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Two Jenu Kuruba elders in Karadi Kallu hamlet. More than 150 Jenu Kurubas have reoccupied Nagarahole National Park, invoking the Forest Rights Act. Their action raises deep questions about the limits of conservation, delayed justice, and tribal autonomy in protected areas. | Photo Credit: Vikhar Ahmed Sayeed

The monsoon rain hammered the black tarpaulin canopy where 40 Jenu Kuruba, a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group who are historically honey gatherers (*jenu* means honey in Kannada), huddled against the chill in their newly formed hamlet in the



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foothills of the Western Ghats. When *Frontline* visited them in late May, it was exactly 24 days after the group had set up camp just inside the boundary of Nagarahole National Park, a 643 sq. km. tiger reserve that spans Mysuru and Kodagu districts of Karnataka.

This year, the rains had arrived early, turning the forest into a medley of greens. Beneath the canopy, smoke from a smouldering fire curled into the damp air, lulling children into drowsiness as they sprawled on their mothers' laps or traced the rainwater's path downhill to a pond that lay in the way to the dense forest beyond.

As his fellow tribespeople dozed, Shivu Jenukuruba Appu sat upright, his ponytail framing an intense face. The 29-year-old extracted documents from triple-wrapped plastic bags, scrutinising each page in the fading light before passing them to me with explanations. The hamlet—two canopies and some scattered huts—might be just weeks old, but perusing the paper trail and listening to the oral accounts of the people made it clear that they believed that the ties binding them to this patch of forest land that they had “reclaimed” were ancient.

Their address, according to Shivu's documents, reads as Karadi Kallu Attur Kolli Haadi (Karadi Kallu translates to Bear Rock), located in K. Baadaga panchayat (village council area) of Ponnampet taluk (administrative subdivision) in Kodagu district. The *haadi* or hamlet is located a few kilometres from the forest check-post of Nagarahole, where the road weaves its way to the town of Kutta. To reach the hamlet, visitors must shuffle across a narrow plank

that bridges a deep Elephant Proof Trench, meant to prevent elephants from leaving the reserve.

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It was on May 5, after offering prayers to their supreme deity, Baraguru Raashe Jaadala Devaru, and receiving ancestral signs, that 150 Jenu Kuruba entered the forest. As they erected bamboo stakes to hold up their tarpaulin sheets, Karnataka Forest Department (KFD) officials descended on them. “The operation continued till May 6, when the Tahsildar (revenue official), the police, and KFD guards attempted to forcefully evict us, destroying two shelters. Journalists and lawyers were barred from the hamlet that day,” Shivu said.

According to Shivu, years of delay in granting access under the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006—a legislation that recognises tribal land claims—had forced the community to occupy the land they claim as theirs. On May 12, the matter was escalated to the local MLA (Member of Legislative Assembly), A.S. Ponnanna, and after a meeting attended by the Jenu Kuruba and district officials, a delicate détente emerged, and despite KFD eviction notices, the Jenu Kuruba remain encamped.

Thimma J.K., president of the Nagarahole Adivasi Jemma Paale Hakku Sthaapana Samithi (Organization for the Land Rights of Adivasis in Nagarahole), and an elder among the 1,000-odd families still residing within the national park, recalls a moment in the 1970s when the Wildlife Protection Act (WPA) had just been passed. “There was a Range Forest Officer called K. M. Chinnappa in Nagarahole in those days who violently ejected us from our *haadis* inside the forests. Elephants were brought in to batter down our huts. With that, we lost the links to our land (*jemma*) and were orphaned. When I recall that cruel period, tears come to my eyes.”

This harsh portrait of Chinnappa is in stark contrast to his legendary status within Karnataka’s conservation community. The forest official, who died last year, is celebrated for protecting Nagarahole’s diverse fauna as it transitioned from sanctuary to national park to tiger reserve. And in his contrasting status lies the crux of the issue.

History of evictions

The **evictions** that began in the 1970s continued for two decades. Shivu’s family was forced from Karadi Kallu in 1985-86. Sushila, an elderly Jenu Kuruba, said she was born in the hamlet and was evicted decades ago. No alternative housing or rehabilitation followed their displacement, a fact confirmed by the 2014 Karnataka High Court committee report headed by Professor Muzaffar Assadi, which found that settlement attempts began only in 1999, leaving a “majority of tribes... out in the lurch or wilderness”. The Assadi report documented 3,418 families displaced from the national park. Besides Jenu

Kuruba, other tribal groups—Betta Kuruba, Yerava, Paniya, and Soliga (also known as Iruligar)—were also ousted.



Sushila, an elderly Jenu Kuruba woman in Karadi Kallu, remembers being evicted from this *haadi* a few decades ago. | Photo Credit: Vikhar Ahmed Sayeed

Shivu’s family found work on the coffee plantations along Nagarahole’s boundary with Kodagu district. Shivu and his friends grew up in line houses, accommodation blocks built for estate labourers. The Jenu Kuruba described this work as “exploitative”, some even using the phrase “bonded labour”.

In 1997, when Shivu was an infant, Nagarahole’s tribal groups successfully agitated against a five-star

resort planned by the Taj Hotels group in the heart of the park.

The next year, the government launched rehabilitation packages, offering up to Rs 1 lakh per family that chose to exit the forest. The incentive rose to Rs 10 lakh in 2007-08, then to Rs 15 lakh in 2021. But most of the displacements preceded these packages, leaving historically displaced families like Shivu's without any benefits.



Tourists and wildlife enthusiasts go on a jungle safari with the Forest Department at Nagarhole National Park. | Photo Credit: MURALI KUMAR K/The Hindu

As a child, Shivu would visit Karadi Kallu's vacant site on festival days, praying in the open holy space that adjoined their current hamlet. When the Forest Rights Act (FRA) was passed, awareness of the claims of tribal communities to ancestral forest lands trickled down to the Jenu Kuruba.

In 2010, the Karadi Kallu group filed its first FRA application—44 individual applications plus community forest rights claims. Individual rights grant up to four acres per family for habitation or cultivation; community rights allow Minor Forest Produce collection, such as gathering honey, herbs, and other forest produce for livelihood. FRA sections

also circumvent the Wildlife Protection Act, allowing facilities like schools and electricity inside protected forest land.

Because of low awareness levels, no copies of their first application survive. Shivu recalled that a 2013 joint survey for land identification was stymied by the Forest Department. Multiple departments—Forest, Tribal Welfare, Revenue, and Panchayat Raj (local governance)—must jointly facilitate FRA applications, creating a multi-departmental morass.

It was in 2016 that Shivu grasped the FRA's significance: "The FRA gives us rights which address the historical injustices done to forest tribals, and I began to think why I should labour for others when I have this Constitutional guarantee." The group reapplied. "A survey was done at the time, but no intimation was given to us, so when the officials came, there was no one here," Shivu said.

A Forest Rights Committee was constituted in Karadi Kallu in 2021, and the gram sabha (village assembly) proceedings reiterated the demands for individual and community forest rights. In January 2022, a Sub-Divisional Level Committee (SDLC) meeting re-verified and rejected their applications, stating that they lacked evidence of historic ties, despite "witness statements from community elders, village markers, information about cemetery and temple sites, and the Assadi report", said Shivu. The Assadi report was crucial because it recommended "effective implementation" of the FRA due to the "development deficit" among the displaced tribal people.

Protesting for rights

In 2023, the group protested for 13 days at the Nagarahole Range Forest Office and went on a padayatra. This meant being absent from their coffee estate jobs, and it led to their dismissal. The community at that time lived in the neighbouring Naanachi Gadde hamlet.



The Jenu Kurubas of Karadi Kallu strike a defiant pose under the leadership of 29-year-old Shivu (in white shirt). Years after eviction and with forest rights applications repeatedly denied, tribal communities are taking back what they consider theirs, raising legal, ecological, and ethical challenges for the state. | Photo Credit: Vikhar Ahmed Sayeed

An October 2024 joint survey to reverify their applications—52 total, including eight new ones—proved unsuccessful. “How many days can we live in someone else’s hamlet? We waited for two years, hoping that we would be granted access to our land and when this did not happen, we reclaimed Karadi Kallu on May 5 this year after intimating the DLC [District Level Committee] and SDLC officials,” Shivu declared.

The Karnataka Forest Department challenges their narrative. A May 17 “factual status report” by the Assistant Conservator of Forests (ACF) has deemed

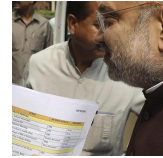
the occupation “illegal,” making two key points: that the claims were “previously rejected in 2011 by DLC and again in 2022 by SDLC,” and that “Attur Kolli Tribal Hamlet does not exist on the ground; it has been created solely on records for illegitimately claiming forest rights.”

The report contradicts the Jenu Kuruba narrative on several points: Karadi Kallu lies “inside a private coffee estate,” not forest area; no records exist “of habitation, cultivation, and eviction of any tribal people from Attur Kolli forest area,” as supported by satellite imagery between 1985 and 2025 and decades-old government records; and the Supreme Court ordered Karnataka to maintain status quo regarding critical tiger reserve areas until July 23, 2025, in the B. K. Singh writ petition filed by a former Principal Chief Conservator of Forests.

Subhash K. Malkhede, Principal Chief Conservator of Forests (Wildlife) and Chief Wildlife Warden—Karnataka’s top forest official—told *Frontline*: “The rules of the FRA are clear; the situation on the day [December 13] in 2005 when the Act came into effect would be implemented. Were they [the Jenu Kuruba of Karadi Kallu] cultivating land? There are no records to prove this. This is an illegal occupation and not correct. Forest-dwelling tribal people are innocent people, and someone is instigating them.” Police complaints were filed on May 7 against five persons “for instigating the tribal people and disrupting peace”.

Beyond the bureaucratic minutiae surrounding Karadi Kallu’s unresolved status lies a fundamental question: Is there an inherent contradiction

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The Jenu Kuruba talk of an ancient symbiosis between themselves and the forest, their existence deriving meaning from the profound connections with their *haadis*, which they say are as old as the hills. Each tree and locale within the *jemma* (traditional territory) carries sacred connotations. One said: “We know each tree on which bees construct hives. We know the movement of elephants and tigers. A few days ago, a lone *makhna* [tuskless male elephant] came to Karadi Kallu. He stood in front of our deity, raised his trunk, and then sauntered away. No harm came to any of us even though man-animal conflict rages on the periphery of Nagarahole. We can lead a proper life here; we feel out of place outside the forest.”



The “reclaimed” hamlet of Karadi Kallu in Nagarahole National Park.
| Photo Credit: Vikhar Ahmed Sayeed

The FRA sanctifies this relationship, although activists point to Karnataka’s shoddy implementation of the Act. Ministry of Tribal Affairs

data shows only 5 per cent of individual forest rights applications granted in Karnataka as of April 1, which is 14,981 of 2,88,549 applications. Activists also show international research with arguments contending that “deforestation rates are significantly lower where indigenous communities had secure land rights”. Organisations such as Community Networks Against Protected Areas and Survival International have supported the Karadi Kallu Jenu Kurubas’ struggle.

Sreekant S., Director of Development Through Education (DEED), a Hunsur-based NGO working among Nagarahole tribal people since 1980, is an assertive advocate of this position. He demands that the forested area at the Karnataka-Kerala-Tamil Nadu trijunction be declared a Fifth Scheduled Area under Constitutional Articles 244(1) and 371 to protect tribal interests. Fifth Schedule Areas receive special constitutional protection for tribal self-governance.

“What is now known as the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve was once upon a time known by the tribal people as Kaatu Naadu [forest country] and all the land belonged to the tribals. There is no Fifth Schedule Area in southern India, and there are 1,500 tribal villages spread across nine districts, so why can’t this area be declared a Scheduled Area so that we can have self-governance through the PESA [Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act]? But we face opposition from all the lobbies at work here: the forest department, the wildlife conservationists, the estate owners, large farmers, and the tourism industry. The forest department in India is only 160 years old, whereas the tribal people

have lived in the forests for thousands of years. They know how to live by utilising the resources of the forests without destroying them.”

Pitted against this romantic sentiment is a legion of conservationists and wildlife scientists who argue that forest conservation requires pristine conditions with minimal human interference to prevent habitat fragmentation. **K. Ullas Karanth**, a wildlife science doyen, who has regularly visited Nagarahole since 1967 and conducted extensive fieldwork in the tiger reserve there, said: “The FRA is an unwise Act because it contradicts the WPA. Tribals and wildlife conservation cannot work in the same place at the same time. The total area especially reserved for wildlife is only 3 per cent of India’s land. Even this was protected because of the WPA; otherwise, all the animals would have disappeared.”

According to Karanth, in the 1990s, he and Chinnappa met many Nagarahole tribal people and advised the Karnataka government to relocate all those wanting to move. Since then, around 800 families have voluntarily relocated just outside Nagarahole using government incentive packages.

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Karanth added: “Many families moved out, but a section of them wanted no intervention and said that they would protect the forest. That is a naïve, unrealistic idea. Are they [the tribal people of Nagarahole] living in the middle of the Amazon forest or on Sentinel Island? Can they live in the forest without education or electricity and without extracting resources from the forest? Are they okay

being attacked by elephants and tigers? Even the Jenu Kurubas sell their honey outside.”

Karanth dismissed the idea that people can live in a frozen state of time inside forests. “Even tribal people who live inside the forest aspire for a better life, schooling, and amenities. If all this is built, it would lead to the destruction of even this 3 per cent of forest land.”

The two widely divergent viewpoints reveal that the rights of forest-dwellers as envisaged by the FRA and the concerns of wildlife conservationists about wildlife and habitat are still far from settled.

Back in Karadi Kallu, the difference shows up vividly on two panels displayed outside the hamlet: a new Forest Department board tersely designates the Jenu Kuruba as “trespassers”, while a newer board boldly proclaims, “Our forests, our lands, our rule”.

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