



https://assets.survivalinternational.org/documents/2151/Joint_Fact_Finding_Report-_Nagarhole_pdf_report.pdf

A FACT-FINDING REPORT ON FORCED EVICTIONS, REHABILITATION BETRAYALS AND FORTRESS CONSERVATION IN NAGARHOLE: 15-18 MAY 2022

A joint fact-finding by:

- Fridays for Future Karnataka
- Philip Kujur, Adivasi Activists' Forum for Indigenous Peoples, Jharkhand
- Subrat Sahu, Documentary Film Maker, New Delhi
- Sharanya Nayak, Rangmatipadar Commune, Odisha

WE CAN LIVE WITH THE TIGER, NOT THE FOREST DEPARTMENT !

A Fact-Finding Report on Forced Evictions, Rehabilitation Betrayals and Fortress Conservation in Nagarhole

Abstract: This fact-finding report attempts to bring to light the struggles and challenges of the Adivasi people living inside Nagarhole forests who have been defending their rights by resisting against the violations and violence by National Tiger Conservation Authority's (NTCA) Nagarhole Tiger Reserve (NTR) project. Nagarhole has been home since generations to Adivasi peoples like the Jenu Kurubas, Betta Kurubas and Yeravas.

For centuries ...

*We planted the trees in the forest,
We took care of the wildlife in the forest,
We grew up along with the forest,
Our history and our identity is with the forest,
Our ancestors and sacred deities live in the forest.*

Today, the forest department and so-called conservation organisations force us to take permissions to enter our homes ! Have Adivasis in Nagarhole really attained freedom?

Chowdamma, Jenu Kuruba, Nagarhole



Opening Introduction

This fact-finding report attempts to bring to light the struggles and challenges of the Adivasi people living inside Nagarhole forests who have been defending their rights by resisting against the violations and violence by National Tiger Conservation Authority's (NTCA) Nagarhole Tiger Reserve (NTR) project. Nagarhole has been home since generations to Adivasi peoples like the Jenu Kurubas, Betta Kurubas and Yeravas. Ever since Nagarhole was declared first a wildlife sanctuary in 1955 to when it became an independent critical tiger habitat in 2007, these communities have been criminalised for living inside Nagarhole and have fought against their forced eviction. But this resistance of the last 30 years to retain their homes and rights has been met with violent assaults, death threats, filing of false criminal cases and the destruction of their lands and crops by the forest department and its security forces like special tiger protection force (STPF). But Adivasis of Nagarhole have collectively fought back the Karnataka state forest department's attempts to evict them in the name of conservation through their organisation, the Budakattu Krishikara Sangha (BKS). The Jenu Kurubas have been the driving force in this long-standing resistance.

In the last three decades, these communities have faced a huge amount of harassment, aimed at silencing their leaders and stopping them from organising themselves for their rights. Some of the members and leaders of BKS have had to live with the spectre of long prison sentences hanging over them. Many community members we spoke to are still attending courts weekly or monthly for getting bail, which incurs a huge cost on the family and puts severe psychological pressure in even demanding their due rights. Despite these ongoing threats and risk to their own safety, community leaders and members have continued to speak out for the rights of the peoples of Nagarhole and beyond.

Forest People of Nagarhole

According to the Indian population census of 2001, 1730 families of tribals and other traditional forest dwellers stay in about 55 villages inside Nagarhole. However, as reported to the Lok Sabha on December 12, 2011, 45 villages (1353 families) live inside Nagarhole core area and 86 villages (16896 families) in the periphery of Nagarhole. Nagarhole is home to four tribal groups, Jenu Kurubas, Betta Kurubas, Yeravas and the Bedugas who were recently included under the Scheduled Tribe list). The Jenu Kurubas, a honey gathering tribe, have co-existed in adjoining or same villages with Betta Kurubas while the Yeravas mostly have their own separate settlements. Being one of the few tribes who have resisted occupation of their forest habitats by outsiders and the forest department in India, Jenu Kurubas are numerically the largest population in and around the national park. The Betta Kurubas are food gatherers and specialized in making utensils out of bamboo. The Yeravas are specialist fishers and also do agriculture.

The Soligas, living in adjoining regions outside Nagarhole but dependent partly on Nagarhole forests, apart from also being a tribe of hunter and food gatherers, also traditionally do a form of shifting agriculture in upland forest areas and herd goats.

The Jenu Kurubas are known to collect and conserve over 33 varieties of produces from the forest as collection of minor forest produce is a major source of food and livelihood of the Adivasis. They do not depend much on cultivation. They used to practice a system of agriculture called '*kittane bittane*' where crops are cultivated between the trees until the 1970s. But harassment by the forest department with attacks on their crops by elephants, wild boars and birds, forced them to give up this form of cultivation. Apart from this basic sustenance need, the forest peoples of Nagarhole also see the forest as a source of their cultural, spiritual and social identity. Some among the Adivasis are also excellent mahouts who can train elephants for multiple purposes. Historically the forest peoples of Nagarhole enjoyed a huge freedom inside Nagarhole as their relationship with the king of Mysore was cordial and the feudal rulers did not interfere or harass the Adivasis or try and evict them. But their troubles began with the creation and advent of the forest department.



With the forest department evicting them from inside Nagarhole to villages very far from any forest areas, the Adivasis fell prey to the practice of bonded labour in order to survive. Estate owners and landlords not only forcefully bonded them, but took away their ration cards, voter IDs and other important documents on the pretext of keeping them safe. However, the ration is

collected by the landlords who then portion this out to the labourers as free food supply. Wages are low and not given in a timely manner or not paid at all as they are adjusted against loans taken.

Nagarhole Tiger Reserve

Nagarhole Tiger Reserve has a long history since 1955, before it attained the present-day status of tiger reserve under the Wild Life (Protection) Act, 1972. In 1955, around 285 sqkm of forest under then Coorg state was declared as Wildlife Sanctuary. The government upgraded the sanctuary into a national park by extending its coverage over an area of 571.55 sqkm in 1983.

In 1986, Nagarhole national park along with Bandipur tiger reserve was included as a part of the 'Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve'. Nagarhole national park was also included under 'Project Elephant' in 2000 and it was constituted as part of the 'Mysore Elephant Reserve'. In 2003, an area of 71.84 sqkm was added to make it as 643.392 sqkm area national park.



In 2003, Nagarhole national park became a tiger reserve by including Nagarhole under 'Project Tiger', making it an extension of the Bandipur Tiger Reserve. Later in 2007, Nagarhole was declared an independent tiger reserve by notifying around 643.392 sqkm area as core/critical tiger habitat. Finally, in 2012, the government of Karnataka notified an area of 204.589 sqkm as buffer zone (notified forests) of Nagarhole tiger reserve expanding the total area of the reserve to its present 847.981 sqkm.

History of People's Resistances

The Adivasis of Nagarhole and their struggles against the forest department came to light when in 1985, the Jenu Kuruba, Betta Kuruba and Yerava Adivasis, under BKS leadership, stopped the Taj Hotel Group from building a so-called eco-tourism resort in the core area of the National Tiger Reserve (NTR). JK Thimma (52 years), one of the leaders of the Jenu Kuruba community, argued that their eviction from the forest was irreconcilable with allowing the Taj Group and hordes of tourists into the forest and started a peaceful protest, blocking the hotel development. This led to multiple Adivasis, including Thimma, being arrested and slapped with cases.

Thimma, along with others, filed a Public Interest Litigation against the Ministry of Environment and Forests, the Forest Department and Taj Group. He explained, "In February 1997, we won a significant battle when the Karnataka High Court struck down an agreement between the Taj Group of Hotels and the Karnataka Government for setting up a three-star resort in the middle of the sanctuary under the garb of eco-tourism." This ruling, when challenged by the Taj Group, was then backed by India's Supreme Court. This was a huge victory for the Nagarhole peoples. The abandoned structure of the Taj hotel remains in the forest as a testament to the tenacity and bravery with which the Adivasi communities in Nagarhole fought to protect their ways of life and the forest they worship.

Since this victory, the Adivasis have continued to struggle against evictions from Nagarhole and for recognition of their forest rights. This has resulted in numerous false cases being filed against them at various instances.

In 2013 forest officials filed a legal case against JK Thimma for building a thatched house in his village. It took five years to come to court. In 2018 the judge threw out the case, recognizing his right to build a house in the forest; acquitting him of violations of wildlife laws and acknowledging that it was likely that the charges against him were false and in retaliation for his resistance to evictions.

In March 2021, the Jenu Kurubas along with other forest communities, held a massive protest, where hundreds of Jenu Kurubas and other members in support gathered at the edge of the Nagarhole national park to demand that the authorities stop trying to evict them, and recognize their community forest rights to live in, manage and protect the forest.

They also went further than this, challenging the very existence of the national park and tiger reserve. They made it clear that there had never been a Gram Sabha resolution agreeing to the activities of the NTCA or forest department and therefore demanded, that the tiger reserve should be closed and denotified. Thimma explained, "We want the tiger reserve to close and for the forest to be handed back to us. We can take care of the tigers and the forest better."

The planning of the protest was a testament to the communities' connection, their pride, identity and above all their sacred and spiritual connection with the lands and their scared deities which are part of those lands including the tiger. The Jenu Kuruba believe the tiger to be a sacred being and ancestor. Unitedly many different communities, including those who had been evicted and those still living in the forest, organised the protest on a rotation basis, with different villages taking part on different days, which enabled the protest to sustain for weeks.

Once again, the leaders of the protests were harassed by the forest department and had more false cases filed against them. They were accused of 'assaulting and using criminal force' against forest officials. "They have filed cases against us to silence us and put us in jail so that no other voices speak out from the villages. It is to create fear amongst the tribal people in the forests", added JA Shivu (26 years), a Jenu Kuruba community leader.

Since 2010 several Jenu Kuruba families who were illegally evicted from their forest villages have made several attempts to go back to Nagarhole but have been mercilessly beaten and harassed whenever they attempted such a comeback. The evicted communities have been demanding through several protests in front of the forest department offices and NTR entrance gates their right to go back into Nagarhole, end all evictions and hand back the management of the tiger reserve to the Jenu Kurubas.

Of Evictions and Relocations

This fact finding was necessitated with two major sit-in protests by Jenu Kurubas of Nagarhole reiterating the above demands in January and May 2022. Most of the families that the find finding team met in the resettlement colonies were determined to return to their original villages inside Nagarhole forests. Basava Raju, a Jenu Kuruba elder from Machhukurerehaadi inside Nagarhole, whose entire village of 28 families were forcibly evicted in January 2014 to resettle some 100 kms away in Hebbala resettlement centre, said, "these are not resettlement camps, these are camps to kill us, kill our roots in the forest, kill our culture and kill our scared deities." JK Thimma, who is also a Jenu Kuruba tammadi or shaman, and lives in Gaddehaadi, a village sitting steadfast inside Nagarhole, says, "We ask the forest department, since we worship tigers, snakes, peacocks and spirits in the forest, who do you think will take care of the forest better? Us, who worship the animals, or you, who see the animals as wild and are frightened of them?"

The fact-finding team visited Jenu Kuruba peoples holding a protest at Adugundi entrance gate to Nagarhole, two resettlement centres in Shethalli and Hebbala, two villages inside Nagarhole, Gaddehaadi and Balekova. The team also attempted to visit Bogepura and Machhukurerehaadi, two original villages inside Nagarhole but were refused entry by the forest department. We visited these variety of locations in order to understand the entirety of the difficulties and trauma faced by the Jenu Kurubas - both those who have been evicted and those who continue to resist evictions.

[A] Adugundi sit-in protest



About 50 Jenu Kuruba women and men, along with their children, have been sitting on an indefinite protest right in front of Adugundi Nagarhole gate since 9th May 2022. Jenu Kurubas from resettlement centres like Mastigudi, Hebbala, Shethalli and Nagapura have also joined this protest. Ganguamma from Mastigudi (50 years), whose original village is Adugundi, shared that they

were evicted from their village in 2018. Within a year they lost all the money they had got from the rehabilitation package and began working as daily wage labourers in nearby farms and coffee estates. But life was getting harder with

diseases and hunger becoming a permanent reality in their lives. So, they decided that they would return to their original village as they would soon perish if they continued to live in the resettlement centres. They informed many of their Jenu Kuruba people living in other resettlement centres and with their support and solidarity they came to Adugundi. But they were stopped at the entrance gate by the forest officials and STPF so they decided to camp at the gate till they are allowed to go back. She says, "This is our only demand. Let us go back. We do not need anything from you. We all can live on our own inside the forest as we have been doing for generations. Tigers and elephants do not attack us as they are our own family. We were happier and healthier and enjoyed well-being inside Nagarhole."

JD Jeyappa (45 years), a Jenu Kuruba community leader from Rani Gatehaadi, shares with anger, "The forest department has been lying to the people and the government consistently. They have never taken the consent of the Gram Sabhas of any of the villages they have forcefully evicted. All our people have been coerced and threatened to sign the declarations that they are flashing to the world as letters of consent. Most of those who were evicted were pushed into buses and vans at night, some even while they were having dinner, and brought to the resettlement centres. These consent papers that the forest department is showing tells you that Jenu Kurubas are giving up their rights to live inside Nagarhole because they are troubled by the destruction of their houses and crops by wild animals and hence want to move out. This is a lie. We have grown up inside the forests and shared the forests with wild animals so neither are we afraid of them nor do they destroy our crops. It is these forest department people we are afraid of and it is they who destroy our crops."

Jenu Kurubas sitting at the protest site shared with the fact-finding team that in none of their original villages have any district officials like revenue department or integrated tribal development agency authorities, forest department staff or members of conservation organisations like LIFT (Living Inspiration for Tribals) and Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), who advocate for creating critical tiger habitats, made any efforts at creating awareness or sharing information about the rights of forest peoples under the Forest Rights Act (FRA) 2006. The authorities have been blatantly violating the FRA and other laws that protect forest dwellers. They have neither enabled formation of Forest Rights Committees (FRCs) nor conducted the mandatory Gram Sabhas to take consent of people before making any attempts to evict and resettle them. The forest department and others have simply told the Jenu Kurubas that they cannot live inside the forests as Nagarhole has been declared a critical tiger habitat under the law (the people say they were never told under which law this was happening!) and forcefully evicted them in the name of tiger conservation.

[B] Shethalli Resettlement Centre

This resettlement centre has about 130 families though 150 houses have been built in the centre. Below is a list of the villages the families originated from :

- Murkal – 42 families
- Maladahaadi – 7 families
- Madenuru – 9 families
- Kollahaadi – 8 families
- Bogepura – 44 families
- Kodengehaadi – 15 families
- Nagarhole (Gaddehaadi) – 5 families

Out of 44 families from Bogepura who were evicted and resettled at Shethalli, 42 families have got compensation and two families have not been given any kind of rehabilitation support, not even houses. They were promised a compensation of INR 10 lakhs (approximately US\$ 13,000) each but they said they were cheated out of almost everything. Once the families were resettled in Shethalli, they were told that INR 3 lakhs (approximately US\$4000) was deposited (as fixed deposits) in the name of one member of each family and the remaining INR 7 lakhs (approximately US\$9,000) they said was utilized to build their houses in the resettled colonies, roads and the 3 acres of farm land provided to them. So basically, they got only INR 3 lakh as fixed deposits. Even the fixed deposits can only be withdrawn after five years and they are now living off the interest accrued from these fixed deposits which comes to about INR 2233 per month (less than one dollar a day).

Most of the families were also promised cattle or cattle loans upon resettlement. All the youth above 18 years of age were promised separate package of INR 10 lakhs. But none of the youth got this and had even written letters to the Regional Forest Officer (RFO) and Divisional Forest Officer (DFO) in 2016 regarding the separate package for youths but got no response. Some 14 families wanted to access loan for purchasing cattle and this loan was granted to them against their fixed deposit of INR 3 lakhs. Chowdamma (38 years), a Jenu Kuruba woman from the centre told us that she realized that by doing this the authorities were consciously pushing the Jenu Kurubas into debt as repaying the cattle loan might be difficult. Even after five years most of them have not been able to withdraw any amount from their fixed deposits. The rest who did not avail cattle loans have also not been able to withdraw their money and it is still lying in the Karnataka Gramina Bank.

Most of the Jenu Kurubas have not got the 3 acres land they were promised. Those who got some land say that the area is between 2 and 2.5 acres. Most of these lands are uncultivable and full of rocks and stones. One of the families showed us the land allotted to them which was by the sides of a river that flows nearby. How is agriculture possible there since it is prone to flooding? The land pattas or tile

deeds given to them has written on it – ‘the land will return to the government after the person holding the title deed to the land dies.’ Chowdamma exclaims, “How can this be? How can they do this? What will our children do after we die? How will they survive?”

Masti, a Jenu Kuruba (52 years) living in the centre, explains, “During these years from 2010, since the time we came to Shethalli, many people from our village have died, nearly 8-10 were between 28 to 45 years old. Some people had paralytic attacks and died due to depression, trauma, alcoholism and such diseases we had never known before. Our gods are angry with us. We did not listen to them. We did not fight and stay in our ancestral villages. They would have never wanted us to leave our lands.”

He adds, “In 2021, some five to six months ago, we have protested at the community center they built saying we want to return to our village, since you (forest department) have not given us what you promised. We told the authorities that many people in the village have died and we did not see it as a good sign and even now many of the men and women here are afflicted with several diseases. But the forest department did not respond. We even submitted letters to them but got no response.”

So on 11th December 2021 the Jenu Kurubas of Bogepura decided to go back to where they had come from. Before leaving they even wrote letters to the forest department informing them of their decision to return and that they would be conducting rituals and ceremonies there to appease their angry gods and ancestors. Twenty families decided to go back to Bogepura.

Chelva (35 years) and Kumara (25 years), two Jenu Kuruba youths of the centre tell us, “When we went there (Bogepura) we saw that our houses were not there! So we conducted all our rituals and ceremonies and began rebuilding our homes. Our gods wanted us to stay there but the forest officials forcefully pushed us out again. After conducting the ceremonies, we started staying there itself in the shade of big trees. Since we had taken some utensils with us, we also started cooking there. We managed to collect our children’s school leaving certificate and transfer certificate from the school inside the forest. We then started staging protests there, saying we won’t return to Shethalli colony. We were feeling so peaceful and happy there. We just did not want to leave. We decided we will sit here, protest and start living again. Come what may, we decided would not leave again or abandon our gods and ancestors.

Each day the forest department officials used to come to try to convince us to get back to Shethalli. But we did not heed to them like they did not heed to us earlier. We told them, we have our voter list here, so we will stay here. Our voter ids have address of our village, not of Shethalli, so we belong here. But after about a month

some officers from the panchayat department, revenue department along with forest officials came and asked us to leave. We told them that we are not ready to leave our lands and forest again. We told them this is our ancestral land, our gods reside here, we cannot leave this. We will die here by committing suicide, but we will not go back.

On 18th January 2022, many forest department officers and STPF personnel came early in the morning at around 4:30 am. They kicked us, broke all our water pots, cooking utensils and forcefully started pushing us towards a bus parked nearby. We tried resisting and talking to them but they did not listen. They forcefully started searching our bags and boxes and tore up all our documents like voter ID cards, documents that had Bogepura as our address, letters, petitions, etc, they tore them into pieces. They even did not spare our children's school certificates. They even tore the voter list which we had brought with us to show them that we belonged to this village. They even stole money from our bags.



They pushed us like dead bodies into the buses. They did not just see the difference between women, old people and children. They hit us and pushed us forcefully dragging us into the bus. Some women tried to jump out of the moving bus, but they hit them and pulled them back inside. We kept shouting that we did not want to return to the colony. People and children were crying throughout the bus ride.

They took us early in the morning, through the jungle route and not from the main highway. They did this early in the morning, so that no other villagers get to know what was happening.

After taking us back to the colony, they locked all of us in the community center in Shethalli for nearly a day and half without food and water. It felt like they were punishing us. The forest staff and few other people who were guarding us there were laughing and making fun of us all the time. They kept lying to us that they will make us meet the district collector. But no officials turned up. We were left the next day morning with warnings of severe consequences if we tried to go back again."

[C] Hebbala Resettlement Centre

This resettlement centre has about 130 families who have come here from 7 villages. Below is a list of the villages the families originated from :

- Machhukurerehaadi – 28 families
- Machhuruhaadi – 22 families
- Kolengerehaadi – 8 families
- Gonigadde – 32 families
- Nagarhole – 22 families
- Sainehadlu – 11 families
- Jangalhaadi – 7 families

Basava Raju (60 years) of Machhukurerehaadi, one of the few remaining Jenu Kuruba elders, relates a story of betrayals and trauma that his people faced post the evictions of January 2014. In 2011-2012 NTCA authorities, forest department officials and staff from LIFT, an NGO formed by ex-forest ranger Chinappa soon after the compensation for people displaced due to the formation of the tiger reserve was announced, came to our village and began to convince us to leave the forest and relocate to a resettlement centre. We kept saying we will not leave Nagarhole. But soon, by 2013 they began to threaten us and warned of dire consequences if we did not leave. Out of fear initially 20 families agreed to take the compensation of INR 10 lakhs and move to Hebbala. They were even taken by LIFT members to see Hebbala and were also shown a vast patch of rocky lands which they said would be given to them for farming after fertilising the soil and providing borewell water facilities within one year. Another 20 families refused to take any compensation or move out of Nagarhole. So initially, 20 families came to Hebbala but were literally dumped here and left to fend for themselves. Those of us who stayed back continued to face threats and warmings.”

Sitei (50 years), goes on to tell that, two months after they came to Hebbala, few staff from LIFT told them that they will have to pay INR 48,000 (approximately US\$600) for clearing and levelling the 3 acres of farm land they will be given. The families paid INR 48,000 each to LIFT and some forest department officials but soon they realised that the latter had taken away their money and they had to now clear the land themselves. They were shocked with this betrayal but soon got together and cleaned the lands for farming. However not knowing how to grow vegetables in such rocky and infertile lands outside the forests, they could not manage much agriculture. After this LIFT members told them that they would regenerate their soils and dig borewells on their lands and got them to sign land lease agreements with local non-Adivasi farmers at an annual lease of INR 1,60,000 (approximately US\$2000). Sitei and others at Hebbala allege that the LIFT members took away this money after giving each Jenu Kuruba family INR 5000 (approximately US\$65)saying that they would use the remaining amount to dig borewells on their farm lands.

Kamamma (45 years), a Jenu Kuruba from Hebbala, said, “the LIFT fellows dug borewells on our lands but the non-Adivasi cultivated ginger using the water from these borewells for one year and put a lot of chemicals and poison on our lands during that time. When they gave us the land after one year, it was in a bad shape. And they did not even pay the electricity bills of the borewells they ran for that one year. We are still paying the electricity bills of these now defunct borewells. I do not know how they call this rehabilitation and regeneration of sustainable livelihoods when most of the borewells are either defunct or the water levels have fallen so low that no water comes out from these borewells. How will water come from these borewells when there is no water beneath the earth? These people dug 42 borewells within an area of 126 acres so how will there be any water? So we are now leasing out our lands to those non-Adivasi farmers who are growing corn, millets, ginger and tobacco on our lands. We are working on our own lands as daily wage farm labourers. Some of us are going to nearby coffee estates as wage labourers. The estate owners pay men INR 300 per day (approximately US\$4) to men and INR 250 (approximately US\$3) to women. They send a vehicle at 8 am to pick us up and drop us back home at 6 pm after the day’s work.”

Raju (22 years), a Jenu Kuruba youth from this centre, who also works as a labourer on an estate, adds that, “sometimes we go for halting in these estates (season migration for a few weeks). When I have to do this, it breaks me and brings tears to my eyes because we are having to suffer this life of grief and drudgery as against a life of plenty and happiness when we were inside Nagarhole. I dread to think of what will happen to my generation and our future generations. I feel we have deeply lost our way.” He adds that his trauma comes from the fact that in the first five years of coming to Hebbala about 18 Jenu Kurubas died and most of them are now spending almost INR 3000 (US\$40) a month on medical expenses and there is growing alcoholism among the youth and men in Hebbala.

Many Jenu Kuruba women we spoke to at Hebbala shared that when they resisted being evicted and asserted that they would not leave the forests, the forest department officials like forest ranger Satheesh, threatened that they would leave wild elephants and tigers in villages. The forest department officials even brought tractors and destroyed their standing ginger crops, a main source of their earning. They also destroyed all the lands which they were cultivating and stopped access to water sources. The women also alleged that before 2008, when the compensation for being displaced was INR 1 lakh per family (US\$1200), LIFT members had got a commission of INR 10000 (US\$128) for every family they ‘resettled’. This was deducted from the compensation amount paid to the family. The women say that today LIFT gets even more commission as the package amount has increased.

[D] Bogepura and Machhurukerehaadi

The Jenu Kuruba people of Bogepura and Machhurukerehaadi (some ten families) had to conduct a ritual inside Nagarhole forest at their sacred site which is close their ancestral village. The Kuruba's have long worshipped their sacred deity "Doddamma thai" and 'Kureche wodeya' inside the forests. After getting forcefully relocated, and because of the deaths, grief and hardships they have been facing at the resettlement centres, the elders of the community advised them to offer prayers to their ancestors and sacred deities in order to heal the trauma and overcome the difficulties.

On 19th May, 2022, around ten families from Hebbala and Shetthalli centres decided to offer their prayer and conduct rituals to their sacred deities inside the Nagarhole forests. Around fifteen people travelled about 100 kms in the afternoon to offer their prayers inside the forests which comes under DB Kuppe range of Nagarhole. The Jenu Kurubas were stopped at the DB Kuppe check gate by the forest department guards and officials.



The forest officials did not allow the Jenu Kurubas to enter the forests demanding they take permissions from the forest range officer to enter or conduct any sacred ritual inside the forests. The Jenu Kuruba people called the range officer several times but he did not answer their calls and so they tried through several means to convince the guards at DB Kuppe explaining how it was really important for their community to visit their sacred spaces inside the forests in order to seek their advice regarding problems they were facing. But the forest officials stopped them at the check gate unconstitutionally and violating the rights of Adivasi peoples. One of the elders who had accompanied them told the forest officials, "We have been offering prayers to our gods since centuries, even before the forest department was here, how can you not allow us to enter our own forests, our own lands? We are not demanding to offer prayers inside your homes, to your gods. We are wanting to enter our homes to offer prayers to our gods?"

As the argument started heating up between the Jenu Kurubas and forest officials, a few other people from nearby villages (outside the check post area) and a few more forest officials joined. JA Shivu asked the forest officials, "It's a violation of our right to religious practice, you cannot do this to us." The Forest official in charge of the gate replied arrogantly, "Don't speak all this to us, you all have to get permission to go. That's it. Leave now."

Choudamma, with tears in her eyes, walking back from the gate said to the forest officials, "You all promised us you would not deny our entry into the forests, to worship our deities. Today our ancestors, Gods, our trees and animals have been left alone. You have forcefully separated them from us. We can't live without them. You – the forest department – have forcefully separated our families. We are struggling to get back and offer our prayers and meet our kins. You are killing us slowly."

A Conclusion That Cannot End

The Jenu Kurubas and other forest peoples have been persistent in the fight for their rights and against the anti-Adivasi model of 'fortress conservation' that destroys not only their lives but also the forest that is meant to protect life on earth. Unfortunately, their struggle is hardly known and their voices are often drowned by the dominant anti-people conservation narratives in Karnataka and elsewhere.

The Adivasi communities have fought bravely for decades, and without this strong and active resistance inside Nagarhole forest, the Nagarhole Tiger Reserve would most likely be empty of people, lacking in biodiversity and only a playground for rich tourists to gaze at wild animals in big safari vehicles. The Adivasi communities of Nagarhole say they have lived for years and centuries along with the forest animals whom they consider sacred beings and have co-existed and grown with them in the same forests which they are now being uprooted from.

This short report is an add up, amongst many, to the resistances against colonial conservation model and efforts to challenge the eviction of Adivasis across India at the hands of the forest department and conservation organisations. Dismantling and denotifying the tiger reserve and all similar projects would not only benefit thousands of Jenu Kuruba, but also millions of other Adivasis across India. It is vital that the voices of Adivasi people in Nagarhole are heard across media, academic and policy circles so that their demands are met and also the challenge to anti-people fortress conservation model is strengthened. The fact-finding team realises that a huge violation of rights and violence on Adivasi forest dwellers of Nagarhole is happening which needs urgent national attention and action.

- The most important action required is around recognition of the community rights over forests and habitat rights of Jenu Kuruba, Betta Kuruba and Yerava communities.
- This requires first a complete halt to any further attempts at evicting forest people from inside Nagarhole and getting agencies like Integrated Tribal Development Project (ITDP) enable formation of FRCs, filing of community forest rights and habitat rights claims under FRA and provide all support to Gram Sabhas in ensuring recognition of these rights.

- The committees scrutinising the claims at the sub-divisional and district level must not block joint verification and recognition of these rights as they are doing now.
- As none of provisions of FRA and Wildlife Protection Act (WPA) have been followed while evicting the Adivasi villages from Nagarhole, those willing to come back to their original villages should not be prevented as this is now a constitutional right.
- Following this, the district authorities and forest department must enable the implementation of all provisions of FRA and WPA.
- The Adivasi people's rights to their sacred spaces and their right to observe their cultural and social traditions is being deliberately obstructed by the tiger project authorities and the forest department and this must stop immediately. The Adivasi communities have constitutional rights to these practices, whether they live inside or outside any forested area, just like people from other religions have constitutional rights to practice and propagate their own religions.
- The NTCA officials, whom the Jenu Kurubas claim have never visited any of their villages, have been using their powers, while sitting in New Delhi, to forcibly evict and resettle the forest peoples through the STPF and forest guards. Hence as per FRA, the NTCA officials must conduct Gram Sabhas before making any decisions and plans regarding Nagarhole as a tiger reserve and evicting the people from inside Nagarhole.
- The forest department must immediately withdraw all the false cases slapped on members of Adivasi communities of Nagarhole. These cases have been registered as a deliberate strategy to intimidate and threaten the forest communities so that they accept the 'voluntary' relocation packages. As was evident during the fact finding, this 'voluntary' relocation is a **big lie**.

As Thimma says, without the Jenu Kuruba, the forest and the wildlife that live in it, will not survive – they, who worship the forest and the tiger, can look after them much better than the forest department. The Jenu Kuruba are living to protect the forest not just for themselves but for all of humanity.



References

1. On the Brink, the Tragedy of Forest Governance - A status report of forest governance and tourism in Nagarhole, Bandipur, Mudumalai and Wayanad forest areas of South India by All India Forum for Forest Movements and Equations
2. Forest Governance and Forest Rights Act in Nagarhole, South India by Ananda Siddhartha
3. Relocation from protected areas as a violent process in the recent history of biodiversity conservation in India by Eleonora Fanari
4. NGOs, Agencies and Donors in Participatory Conservation Tales from Nagarhole by Sanghamitra Mahanty

