

People v tigers: evicted Indian tribe camp in reserve to reclaim ancient lands

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The Jenu Kuruba reoccupied ancestral homes decades after they were forced out of Nagarhole to make way for tigers

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The Indigenous Jenu Kuruba people protesting in the Nagarhole forest in 2021 to demand that the authorities recognise their rights to the land. Photograph: Courtesy of Survival International

On a rainy weekend in the forests of southern **India**, dozens of Jenu Kuruba people stand under umbrellas at the entrance to the Nagarhole tiger reserve to meet tourists with a message: you are entering our home.

Their goal? To stop the safari tours that promise tourists sightings of the tigers of Nagarhole but which the Jenu Kuruba believe have commercialised the ancestral homes that they were evicted from in the name of conservation.

The Jenu Kuruba, one of **India's "scheduled tribes"**, or *Adivasis*, known for gathering forest honey, were forced out of Nagarhole during the 1980s when it was declared a tiger reserve. They say the move stripped them of their homes and religious sites, giving them few other options except for low-paid jobs on nearby coffee plantations.

■ ■ We were overnight dispossessed of our ancestral lands and pushed into slavery
JA Shivu, activist

After decades of failed legal battles, dozens of families decided to take matters into their own hands: setting up camps on the land they claim as their own and picketing the day-trippers.

"How are tourists taken into the forests while we are forcefully evicted and our rights arbitrarily rejected?" asks

JA Shivu, a Jenu Kuruba activist involved in the protests.

"This isn't conservation - it is money-making under the mask of conservation," adds Shivu, who is a member of the Community Network Against Protected Areas (CNAPA), a coalition of **Indigenous peoples** challenging conventional conservation models.



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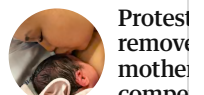
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📷 Tourist vehicles queue up to view a tiger in Nagarhole national park in Karnataka. Photograph: Alf Jacob Nilsen/Alamy

Shivu was born into a life of long hours and low pay on a coffee plantation after his family was displaced from the village of Karadikallu Atturu Kolli 45 years ago.

In May, he was among about 150 people from the tribe who decided they would return and build shelters, regardless of the forest reserve officials' response. Shivu and his fellow Jenu Kuruba campaigners have now been camped out in the forest for three months.

**“Our land is being stolen and we are being named as encroachers. This is the biggest lie of conservation
JA Shivu**

“The forest is an organism and we are an extension of it,” says 29-year-old Shivu. “It lives within us and we live with it.”

Shivu says his people always lived in harmony with wildlife, with a religious system based on deities that include tigers, bears and elephants. Their traditional practices, including ceremonies to mark births and deaths, are rooted in the forest environment, where he says they are often denied access by the authorities.

The Jenu Kuruba's legal claim to land in the Nagarhole reserve is based on [India's 2006 Forest Rights Act](#), which recognises that Indigenous groups in the country have a right to live in and manage forest land and resources denied to them by previous conservation projects.



📷 JA Shivu, a community leader, with children and elders in the forest. Photograph: Courtesy of Survival International

But they say that as attempts to claim these rights legally have failed they decided they had to take matters into their own hands and return.

“The forest department tells us that we are encroachers but who are the real encroachers? Those who stole our land and set up resorts. They are conducting tiger safaris on our lands,” says Shivu.

“People come from different cities, different countries, to see the tigers here and they set up the infrastructure for them. So our land is being stolen and we are being named as encroachers. This is the biggest lie of

conservation,” he says.

Like Shivu, many displaced Jenu Kuruba were pushed towards labouring on coffee plantations around the forest.

“We were overnight dispossessed of our ancestral lands and we were pushed into slavery,” says Shivu, who was born on a coffee plantation. “In every family, every single member - the children, the father, the mother, the grandparents - will work on the coffee plantation.

“We have to go to work early in morning till 10pm, even on Sundays. Even if someone is ill they are forced to work.

“Now we have come out of suffering from coffee plantations and we have returned to our ancestral lands, ,” he says. “We are not moving out of here, and we want our rights to be recognised.”

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📍 Families march towards the village of Karadikallu Atturu Kolli, from which they were displaced in the 1980s. Most families ended up picking coffee beans. Photograph: Survival International

The **authorities, opposed to any settlement in the Nagarhole** conservation zone, went into the reserve and **tore down six of the shelters** on 18 June, about a month after the camp was established.

AS Ponnanna, a local representative in the Karnataka state parliament, says they were removed because they were built after an agreement was reached between the villagers and the authorities for no more structures to be set up.

“I support the right of the tribals under due rights of the Forest Rights Act but to put up more structures in a core wildlife zone is not advisable. I have been trying to persuade them to follow the due process,” says Ponnanna.

The families on the site are now going through an appeals process and the state’s high court has said that until a final decision is made the community should not be evicted but should also not build more shelters.

■ ■ Indigenous villages across India have been annihilated ... Before, it was the British, then the coffee landlords, now it's for national parks
Rajan

Ananya Kumar, an official at the Nagarhole tiger reserve, says several investigations were carried out but claims that the Adivasis’ village existed on that site had been rejected.

“[The Forest Rights Act] is not a land grant act and should not be used to grant India’s ecologically sensitive forests to landless people,” he says. “You cannot recognise forest rights of people who have never lived in that patch of forest before.”

Kumar added that eco-tourism schemes in the forest were limited to certain areas and there were controls over the number of vehicles that could enter the forest, with revenues going towards conservation efforts.



📍 Jenu Kuruba activists confronted by state police and paramilitaries of the Karnataka forest department in Karadikallu Atturu Kolli. Photograph: Courtesy of Survival International

The Jenu Kuruba, however, say they have satellite imagery from 1965 that shows clearings in the forest where their homes and shrines were before the land became overgrown by trees after their eviction.

They have sent the authorities documents that they say prove the village had previously been recognised by the state, including death certificates, school records, ration cards and permits obtained from authorities to collect honey from the forest.

Also supporting their case is [a 2014 report commissioned by Karnataka state](#) describing the Jenu Kuruba as “major victims” of displacement in Nagarhole. The report also highlighted that there were “vanished” villages, which were not recorded by name at the time because of their small populations and remote locations.

Rajan, an activist with CNAPA, says the forest department has consistently not engaged with the Jenu Kuruba or other Indigenous groups who have tried to claim their right to return to their land under the Forest Rights Act.

“The forest department does not want to recognise this is Indigenous land; it wants to act like it’s land under their possession and they can turn it into a tiger reserve or national park or a safari landscape,” says Rajan.

“The Jenu Kuruba’s return to their land is a historical event because there are Indigenous villages across India that have been annihilated from their roots from the British rule until now. Before it was the British, then the coffee landlords, now it is for national parks.”
