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## The mythical fortress and tribal realities: The long shadow of colonial ideas in the conservation of Indian forests

Who does the forest belong to? Who has the monopoly over its well-being? It is urgent, now more than ever, to redefine these social relationships of nature and its interdependent species. A substantial body of scientific evidence and literature continues to highlight the negative impact of this top-down approach to conservation strategies.



Gana Kedlaya

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Fifty-two Jenu Kuruba families have returned to their ancestral land in Karnataka's Nagarahole Tiger Reserve, decades after being evicted under the Wildlife

Protection Act of 1972.

**Synopsis:** *Fortress conservation believes biodiversity can flourish only if ecosystems are devoid of humans is not a new concept. But has nature ever persisted without human footprints? Several Protected Areas (PAs) were prior hunting zones. So, whose social construction of nature should we embrace? The one presented to tourists, where nature is often seen as a picturesque backdrop, or the one denied to forest dwellers, where nature is a source of sustenance and spiritual connection?*

Demanding their land rights, fifty-two Jenu Kuruba Adivasi families occupied their ancestral land within the Nagarahole Tiger Reserve in SouthWest Karnataka on 5 May.

On 18 June, over 200 security personnel attempted to forcefully evict the families yet again, demolishing several temporary huts in the process.

Adivasis across India have been protesting against such evictions following the 2019 Apex Court order. The history and circumstances that led to this exclusionary decision have recently gained coverage.

When we forcefully remove tribals from their land, we are not just taking away their homes. We are also denying them their social, cultural, and spiritual well-being, which is deeply connected to the land and the ecosystems.

It is not only unjust but, as history has shown, ecologically counterproductive.

**Also Read: [In Karnataka's Nagarhole Tiger Reserve, indigenous Jenu Kurubas fight to reclaim ancestral land](#)**

## **Fences of dispossession**

At an online press conference held on 2 June, a Jenu Kuruba community elder shared his experiences of interacting with scientists several decades ago.

He discussed how researchers, during a visit to a forest, attempted to test the ecological knowledge of a tribe member, "probably to disprove the enduring opinion, 'the tribals know better,' or to validate their own belief that they do so themselves."

The fact that Adivasis, who have coexisted with non-human species for eons and possess invaluable insights into the nature of the forests (a landscape, most often, mapped and named by their ancestors centuries prior) are required to provide 'proof of life' is a testament to one facet of conservation science – one that has historically wreaked havoc with its obsession with a mythical pristine wilderness – the fortress conservation – is a remnant of a destructive colonial forest policy.

The fact that Adivasis – who have coexisted with non-human species for eons and possess invaluable insights into the nature of the forests, landscapes often mapped and named by their ancestors centuries ago – are still required to provide 'proof of life' is a telling reflection of a particular strand of conservation science.

This strand, historically fixated on the idea of a mythical pristine wilderness, has wreaked havoc through its adherence to 'fortress conservation' – a legacy of destructive colonial policies.

It's a conservation practice that believes biodiversity can flourish only if ecosystems are devoid of humans.

Fortress conservation has a long history. But has nature ever persisted without human footprints? Several Protected Areas (PAs) were prior hunting zones.

So, whose social construction of nature should we embrace?

The one presented to tourists, where nature is often seen as a picturesque backdrop, or the one denied to forest dwellers, where nature is a source of sustenance and spiritual connection?

Who does the forest belong to? Who has the monopoly over its well-being? It is urgent, now more than ever, to redefine these social relationships of nature and its interdependent species.

A substantial body of scientific evidence and literature continues to highlight the negative impact of this top-down approach to conservation strategies.

We ignore the irreversible impact of capital accumulation and overconsumption that is devastating forests globally, instead terming the consumption patterns of a minority of forest dwellers "commercial exploitation".

This false narrative has been debated for decades.

"Adivasis, the original inhabitants of our country, have their own laws and they manage their areas

better than the mainstream democracy,” DR BR Ambedkar had said when demanding their autonomy and rights over forest resources.

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### **Time for re-evaluation?**

While we dismiss traditional oral histories of Indigenous peoples as unscientific or narratives of marginal identity, who takes responsibility for the failing of the fortress conservation model? Who decides tribal communities do not have answers to forest recovery?

While visiting a district in Karnataka facing intense human-elephant interactions, one of the locals, Babu T, said, “The fences or what we assumed as the only home of wild animals like tigers and elephants have moved, and keep moving further away from tiger reserves. Forests are not where many wild animals are; they are on our farmlands.”

The soon-to-be-launched ‘Tigers Outside Tiger Reserves Project’ plans to address growing interactions that occur because, today, around 30 percent of the country’s tigers persist outside of reserves.

As threats from invasive species and climate change loom, impacting even inviolate spaces equally, how will this model of conservation alone help solve evolving challenges with its one-fits-all solution to a multi-faceted problem?

Some conservationists have long advocated for relocating tribals. However, a majority of studies and reports have demonstrated its lack of success.

There is a big push by the Indian Government to monetise tiger reserves. Let us not forget the growing impacts of the forest departments’ afforestation initiatives and the tourism industry.

Are PAs safe from the influence of unchecked development, government, and corporate interests, as well as the agendas of state and forestry officials?

It is not uncommon for proponents of such policies to have, in the past, dismissed Adivasis’ coexistence practices as merely performative – practices that need rescuing – and then, years later, to engage with them as a conservation strategy.

During the 2 June press conference, one of the speakers, a local tribal leader, questioned the ethical reasoning behind celebrating individuals like conservationist Valmik Thapar, whose recommended policies, he insists, have displaced hundreds in the country.

“We do know of a few scientists, NGOs and state institutions that benefit personally in the name of conservation. Is there any truth behind the objectivity of many researchers whose theories continue to be built on indigenous cultural misrepresentations?” he asks.

**Also Read: [Tooth pain in the wild? Here’s how Gudalur’s adivasis heal without a single drill](#)**

### **The science we refuse to heed**

A few years ago, when I was at an event to watch a few Soliga tribal women perform their traditional songs, one of the women chided, “How do you people live with all this noise? How can you hear what the earth is trying to tell you if your existence alone is this loud?”

That evening, the women sang in solidarity, with love and concern for all species.

Their subtle dance movements brought to life stories of forests, their wild inhabitants, and the relationships between humans and these forests over generations.

They held hands and made music about critical observations in the wild, interspecies dependencies,

warnings of extinction, a changing climate, and more.

Every folklore was heterogeneous, challenging the underpinning of scientific monoculture and human exceptionalism.

The experience left me with the question: What will the future climate historians share if the original storytellers are dispossessed and erased?

There is ample evidence of the unique role of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKSs) in addressing issues ranging from sustainable resource management to providing solutions to modern-day ecological crises.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, tribes in Arunachal Pradesh revived their traditional quarantine practices, reducing the spread of the virus.

From taking cues on fire and coastal management from Australian Aboriginals, to forest restoration from Amazonian tribes, to exploring better disaster risk reduction practices from tribals in Nepal, to folklores full of environmental cues about the past, present and future of life on earth – in India alone, there is ample evidence of the effectiveness of institutional memory in Indigenous communities and its applications.

Globally, some of the growing resistance movements calling for the protection of ecosystems are today dominated by Indigenous communities, many of which are pushing for a meaningful dialogue between law and the sciences.

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## **Decolonising conservation**

It is crucial to recognise that history itself has continually evolved, shedding light on new perspectives, revising past narratives, and challenging established beliefs.

It is no longer surprising that many academicians, practitioners, and policymakers globally are united in questioning the past (colonial) impacts of their disciplines, the theories, and their historical context.

One such drive even demands the scrapping of species names that honoured dictators and enslavers

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Growing human-wildlife interactions is one of the biggest challenges India is facing today. Now, more than ever, we need a more equitable and effective approach to conservation that would further long-term solutions.

When will we reach out, unlearn, and look to these communities to collectively reimagine and reconstruct a sustainable, interdependent, and interconnected ecologically resilient future – one that seems far-reaching under our current sterile ideology of fortress conservation?

*(The writer is an independent environment reporter. Edited by Dese Gowda)*

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**'Fight for land is fight for identity', say Devanahalli**

# farmers as CM Siddaramaiah agrees to meet them

The farmers have been protesting for the past 1,178 days against the acquisition of 1,300 acres at Channarayanaapatna Hobli, and the KIADB's plan to take over an additional 1,777 acres of farmland spread over 13 villages in Devanahalli.



Gouri Nambissan

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The protesters took a vow to protect the land at any cost.

**Synopsis:** *Farmers in and around Devanahalli have been protesting against the KIADB's move to acquire their fertile farmlands to develop an aerospace park. Losing land, the protesters said, is akin to erasing their identity.*

Karnataka Chief Minister Siddaramaiah has called for a meeting with farmers from Devanahalli, who have been protesting against a Karnataka Industrial Areas Development Board (KIADB) move to acquire their lands for an aerospace park.

A protester said Siddaramaiah called for the meeting even as the farmers, on Wednesday, 25 June, vowed to protect their properties at the cost of their lives. The meeting will be held at the chief minister's official residence, Kaveri, at 11 am on 4 July.

On Wednesday, hundreds of farmers converged near the taluk office at Devanahalli, a Bengaluru suburb, and issued a 24-hour ultimatum to the government to de-notify the land and drop the acquisition plan. The protesters said they would intensify their stir if the government failed to heed their demand.

The farmers have been protesting for the past 1,178 days against the acquisition of 1,300 acres at Channarayanaapatna Hobli, and the KIADB's plan to take over an additional 1,777 acres of farmland spread over 13 villages in Devanahalli. The protest began after the farmers were issued notices in January 2022.

Related: [Devanahalli farmers resist forcible land acquisition](#)

## Erasing identity

"It's been four years since this *horata* (struggle) began. They gave us the notice for a few areas like

Mattibarluru and Tellohalli. We have been protesting against the acquisition,” Munegowda, a protesting farmer, told **South First**.

The protest by the KIADB Land Acquisition Resistance Struggle Committee has the backing of various state and national-level organisations, including those of farmers, workers, Dalits, and women’s outfits.

Another farmer said taking away their land was akin to erasing their identity. “We will not give the land under any circumstances. No compensation is equivalent to this land. Nothing will make us give this land away. It’s like taking our identity away. It doesn’t matter if we have to go to jail for days; we will not stop this protest until we get what we are demanding,” she asserted.

Several organisations are backing the farmers.

The woman further said their land was equally developed and has been producing food. “The KIADB wants our fertile land—the land that has been producing food,” she lashed out.

Concurring, environmentalist and farmers’ rights activist Chukki Nanjundaswamy at the protest site said Devanahalli has been fulfilling 30 percent of Bengaluru’s agricultural needs. “Most of Bengaluru’s milk, vegetables, fruits, and flowers go from here,” he said.

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## **A pledge**

Actor Prakash Raj, who addressed the protesters, reminded Siddaramaiah of the Congress’s election promise to de-notify the land earmarked for acquisition. He also drew the chief minister’s attention to his advocacy AHINDA, representing the minorities, backward classes, and Dalits.

Later, people from 13 villages in Channarayapatna Hobli of Devanahalli Taluk took a pledge. “Today, there is an attempt to break our unity. An effort to lure us with false promises. An attempt to intimidate us. In front of the representatives of all people’s movements and communities of Karnataka, we take this pledge once again today: Even if we lose our lives, we will never sell this soil,” they vowed.

The police later arrested the protesters. Incidentally, the date coincided with the 50th anniversary of the internal Emergency, promulgated in 1975.

“We insisted on continuing the protest, but the police said the permission was only until 5 pm and decided to arrest us. They just took us away. We were only let out around 12:30 am,” Nanjundaswamy said.

“We didn’t want to come out. We were willing to be under detention. In the meantime, the chief minister called five of us, requesting that we call off the protest. After our discussion, we felt it was important to give the chief minister a last chance, as he has been asking for more time,” she said about the upcoming meeting.

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## **Minister’s version**

Meanwhile, Industries Minister MB Patil said several parcels of land have been excluded from acquisition.

“Farmers from this region had already lost their land twice earlier for industrial projects. Taking this into account, along with the fact that the land includes irrigated farmland and human habitation, the government has decided to exclude 231.23 acres in Channarayapatna, 185.18 acres in Mattibarluru, and 78.21 acres in Shrotriya, Tellohalli from the acquisition process,” he said at a meeting with Devanahalli MLA and Bengaluru Rural District Minister KH Muniyappa.

The acquisition of the remaining 1,282.38 acres would continue as planned. This will cover 10 villages: Palya, Haraluru, Polanahalli, Gokare, Bachchenahalli, Nalluru, Mallepura, Nallappanahalli, Cheemachanahalli, Muddenahalli, and Hadayala.

Patil added that those losing their land would have an option to receive 10,771 square feet of developed land per acre, which could be used for commercial purposes.

*(Edited by Majnu Babu).*

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