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## Adivasis: The erased guardians of forests

Adivasis in Karnataka are asking for one fundamental thing: recognition -- that their identity, knowledge, and way of life be seen as valid, dignified, and rooted in the forests they have nurtured for generations.



**Krishnamurthy K V** Last Updated : 17 September 2025, 22:27 IST

As India approaches 100 years of independence, it is time to pause and ask a painful but necessary question: Who did this independence really reach, and who was left behind?

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In the dense forests and hilly tracts of Karnataka live more than a lakh people from forest-dependent communities such as the Jenu Kuruba, Iruliga, Soliga, Yerava, Paniya, Hasalaru, Gowdalu, Siddhi, Koraga, Bettakuruba, Kudiya, and Malekudiya. They have lived here for generations, often on the invisible margins; many without land rights, without basic services, and with only seasonal or migrant jobs in coffee estates and brick kilns. Even today, many families live in sheds or makeshift tents, without ration cards, caste certificates, or voter IDs, documents now essential to access the minimal entitlements of the welfare state.

These communities, known as Adivasis or Indigenous Peoples, have for centuries lived lives of mutual respect with the forest. They see land not as property but as a collective resource. In their worldview, land is a mother, animals are kin, and community is the centre of life. Their farming systems, such as shifting cultivation, do not harm the forest. No one individual held vast tracts of land; people cultivated only what they needed. Trees were not felled unless absolutely necessary, and even then, rituals were conducted to seek the forest's forgiveness.

Their societies are egalitarian, without caste or class hierarchies. Every person is considered equal; there is no "high" or "low", "rich" or "poor". Village leaders (Yajamana) are not kings or lords but ordinary members tasked with guidance. Decisions are taken collectively. Food, labour, land, and rituals are shared.

It is important to understand that Adivasis are not nomads. They are not wanderers. Their life rhythms are rooted in land and shaped by generations of interaction with forest ecosystems. This conflation of one community with another undermines the very foundations of the Adivasi identity.

Despite this civilisational wisdom and sustainable way of life, these communities have remained excluded from the mainstream. After independence, they were placed under the "Scheduled Tribes" category in government records but rarely treated as a distinct social or political entity. Their forests were taken over by State institutions. Forest laws criminalised their daily existence: their routine activities such as fishing, gathering, collecting firewood, even visiting ancestral sites were criminalised by wildlife and forest protection laws. As estates and development projects expanded, many were pushed out without resettlement.

Today, many Jenu Kuruba and Soliga work as migrant labourers in coffee estates, often in bonded conditions. Alcoholism is rising. Young people struggle to compete for education or employment without basic documents to prove their identity. Genetic