

# Nagarhole Tiger Reserve Tribes Oppose Relocation, Demand Land Rights

## Nagarhole Tiger Reserve: Village councils reject eviction from tiger reserve, invoke Forest Rights Act amid Supreme Court scrutiny

by : Ayaskant Das | Updated On : 30 Jan 2026 7:42 PM IST [f](#) [X](#) [in](#)



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## Nagarhole Tiger Reserve Tribes Invoke Forest Rights Act, Claim Ancestral Lands

On 1 January, at the culmination of a 12-day-long foot march undertaken by various tribal communities in Karnataka's Mysuru and Kodagu districts to press for their traditional rights over natural resources, including forest land, people from more than two dozen settlements refused to move out of the boundaries of the Nagarhole **Tiger Reserve**. A collective decision against relocation was taken at meetings of Gram Sabhas—self-governing village councils comprising all adult residents—citing compounding historical injustices caused by repeated displacements over the years that were carried out without any community consultations.

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**The foot march and the protest were organised by a joint forum of various forest-dependent tribal communities called the Nagarhole Adivasi Jamma Paale Hakku Sthapana Samiti (NAJHSS), in the backdrop of a Supreme Court order asking the Karnataka government to prepare a blueprint to relocate and rehabilitate households that have continued to live within the protected area nearly 18 years after it was notified as a tiger reserve in 2007. On 2 January, a massive protest was also held by members of the forum outside a gate of the Nagarhole tiger reserve opening into Mysuru district, where it was resolved that the government is aiding “land grab in the garb of tiger conservation”. An eight-point charter of demands was presented by the protestors to the district administration and forest department officials.**

“The government allows tourism within the notified tiger reserve, but tribal communities are forced to relocate outside their traditional homelands. Through unilateral executive decisions, tribal communities suddenly turn into outsiders in their own homeland,” the forum's president, JK Thimma, said, adding, “The Nagarhole forest has historically been the traditional and customary ancestral territory of indigenous communities. In this land, we have historically coexisted and lived in harmony with forests, wildlife and nature. Within these customary boundaries lie our revered ancestral spirits, sacred worship places, the unique social fabric of our communities, traditional governance systems, food security, livelihoods, and the forest-based way of life that has sustained us for generations.”

Nagarhole Tiger Reserve Relocation Plan Triggers Legal and Political Pushback



The photo captures a moment during a padayatra (foot

Prominent tribal communities in the Nagarhole forests include the Jenu Kuruba, the Beta Kuruba, the Yerava and the Paniyan. Of these, the Jenu Kuruba have been classified by the Union government as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG), under which they are entitled to various schemes designed for their conservation and to special rights under the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006—popularly known as the **Forest Rights Act**, 2006.

**In the backdrop of Karnataka Chief Minister Siddaramaiah’s plan to provide piped water and electricity to all households in the state—facilities that conservationists argue would reduce communities’ willingness to relocate—wildlife conservationists filed a petition in the Supreme Court, saying the move could hinder the relocation of villages located within the core area of the Nagarhole tiger reserve. The petition was filed as an intervening application in the matter of the landmark public interest litigation filed by conservationist TN Godavarman Thirumulpad, which is a long-pending environmental case before the apex court.**

The Karnataka government informed the court that 1,280 households living in 43 hamlets would be affected if basic facilities were withheld from those living within the core area. A three-judge bench headed by the then Chief Justice of India, BR Gavai, allowed the Karnataka government to go ahead with work pertaining to electricity and water supplies for these hamlets. However, it also asked the government to disclose what steps it had taken to clear human habitations from the core area.

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“It cannot be said that the right to potable water and the right to electricity are now considered very basic rights to which a citizen is entitled in order to live a life with dignity... However, the State shall also finalise a proposal for resettlement of the villagers to an area outside the core area,” the bench said in an order issued on 12 August 2025.

The forum has claimed that the rightful consent of local tribal communities living in the region for centuries was never obtained before notifying the Nagarhole Tiger Reserve. They have demanded recognition of their ancestral land and **forest rights**, guaranteed under the provisions of the Forest Rights Act.

**“Various government departments, including the forest department, tiger reserve authorities, the department for the social welfare of tribal communities, and the revenue department, are acting with vested interests in arbitrarily rejecting the recognition of forest rights of rightful claimants in the Gram Sabhas. Forest department officials threaten us and slap false cases against us if we conduct our sacred rituals to worship our clan spirits. Due to the illegal declaration of tiger reserves and national parks, community forest rights and community forest resource rights have been withheld in areas declared as tiger reserves and national parks,”** Thimma added.

# Nagarhole Tiger Reserve Conflict Deepens Over Tourism and Rights



The adivasi community gathers near the Nagarhole Tiger Reserve area for a meeting to discuss the ongoing issue. | Photo courtesy: Ayaskant Das

In a letter to the Karnataka government in November 2025, forum members alleged that despite assurances from the district administrations of Kodagu and Mysuru, no steps had been taken to initiate the process of recognising habitat rights of the Jenu Kuruba community, which is classified as a PVTG and entitled to special rights under the Forest Rights Act, 2006.

**Citing the presence of numerous tourism routes within Nagarhole, the communities raised a collective concern during the foot march that tiger conservation efforts are nothing but commercial ventures being undertaken by encroaching upon their traditional lands. In the resolution passed during the foot march, the Gram Sabhas not only decided against relocation but also unanimously declared that tourist safaris would have to be stopped within their ancestral lands and the customary boundaries of each village. They cited Section 5 of the Forest Rights Act, 2006, under which Gram Sabhas proposed to form protection committees in villages to prevent all commercial and illegal activities on their traditional lands.**

A further resolution was adopted not to cooperate with non-governmental or social organisations engaged, if at all, by the state government for the rehabilitation and resettlement of communities, and to prohibit any research activities or studies within Nagarhole except with the permission of Gram Sabhas.

The forum has alleged that the Nagarhole Tiger Reserve was notified without following the legal procedures required under the **Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972**, and the Forest Rights Act, 2006. Neither individuals nor Gram Sabhas, they claim, ever gave consent for the notification of the tiger reserve.

**Historically, under the rulers of the Wodeyar dynasty — which held sway over the erstwhile kingdom of Mysore for around 600 years during the medieval period — the Nagarhole forests served as an exclusive hunting reserve of the kings. In 1955, the area was designated a wildlife sanctuary by the erstwhile Coorg state, covering 284.16 square kilometres. The sanctuary was later expanded to 643.39 square kilometres and upgraded to a national park in 1988. Tribal communities have alleged that while the level of protection accorded to the forests and wildlife was increased in stages, the plight of traditional local communities was never considered. They have claimed that hamlets were forced to relocate to different parts of the forests without their consent at every stage when protection levels were raised. The affected tribal communities have termed these repeated displacements “compounding historical injustices”. Nagarhole’s four prominent tribal communities — Jenu Kuruba, Beta Kuruba, Yerava and Paniyan — have alleged that the protected area has been imposed on their “traditional clan territories”.**

Apart from tigers, other wildlife present in the reserve includes panther, wild dog, elephant, bison, sambar, spotted deer, barking deer, sloth bear, wild boar, common langur, bonnet macaque, and a wide variety of reptiles and birds.

Over the past two decades, particularly after the enactment of the Forest Rights Act, tribal communities in the Nagarhole forests have become increasingly assertive over their traditional and customary rights. On World Indigenous Peoples’ Day on 9 August 2025, tribal communities installed a notice for outsiders at a gate of the Nagarhole Tiger Reserve opening into Kodagu district, proclaiming that the entire land belonged to them.

**“The customary laws of the Adivasi (tribal) people and the special provisions of the Gram Sabha are applicable here. Your conduct here [within the Nagarhole reserve] must be respectful and dignified,” the notice warned visitors.**

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In May 2025, as many as 52 households belonging to the Jenu Kuruba community marched back into a dense part of the forest from where they had been forcefully evicted in the mid-1980s, when a process was underway to notify Nagarhole as a national park. Allegedly, these households were neither consulted nor paid any compensation when they were evicted nearly four decades ago to facilitate the national park notification. The march back to their ancestral homes followed the rejection of applications filed by 44 of these households claiming rights over forest land under the provisions of the Forest Rights Act, 2006, by a subdivision-level committee, the second-tier appellate authority for settling forest rights. Notwithstanding this rare show of defiance, their claims were again rejected by the third and final tier for forest rights settlement at the district level on the grounds that there was insufficient evidence of their historical habitation or cultivation in Nagarhole.

**Tags:**