

'Forests Our Ancestral Lands': Tribals Protest PM Modi-Led International Big Cats Meet In Karnataka

The group criticised the decision to hold the International Big Cat Alliance (IBCA) meeting in Nagarahole without consulting local gram sabhas.



Members of a tribal federation holding placards to register protest against the PM Narendra Modi-Led international meet on Big cats in Karnataka (ETV Bharat)



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Bengaluru: A federation of Adivasi gram sabhas in Karnataka's Nagarahole National Park has opposed the recent meeting of the International Big Cat Alliance (IBCA), alleging that conservation policies have led to decades of displacement and denial of rights for indigenous communities.

The Nagarahole Adivasi Jammapale Hakku Sthapana Samiti (NAJHSS), which represents Jenu Kuruba, Betta Kuruba, Paniya and Yerava communities, said

the forests are their ancestral lands and have been home to their people for generations.

In a press statement, the federation said its members had lived in and protected the forests long before they were declared protected areas. “We believe that people, forests and animals are equals. We have coexisted in this shared space for generations, and protecting each other is a fundamental way of life,” it said.

The group criticised the decision to hold the IBCA meeting in Nagarahole without consulting local gram sabhas. It urged visiting delegates to “conduct themselves with dignity and respect” in what it described as indigenous territory.

The IBCA was launched by Prime Minister Narendra Modi to strengthen global cooperation for the conservation of big cats. However, the federation alleged that such initiatives ignore the human cost of conservation in areas notified as tiger reserves.

Allegations against conservation agencies

The Samiti accused the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) and international conservation groups of promoting exclusionary policies. It names organisations such as the World Wide Fund (WWF) for Nature and the Wildlife Conservation Society among those it claims influence conservation practices in India.

According to the statement, since the launch of Project Tiger in 1973 and the formation of the NTCA in 2005, indigenous communities across India have faced evictions from tiger reserves. It is alleged that relocations have often been presented as voluntary while communities experienced pressure to move.

The federation also referred to a directive issued by the NTCA on June 19, 2023, stating that it has raised concerns among indigenous groups, but has not been clarified despite protests.

'160 years of displacement'

Tracing the history of forest notifications in the region, the Samiti said the area was declared a Reserved Forest in the 1870s; a Game Sanctuary in 1955, later renamed Rajiv Gandhi National Park in the 1980s; and finally designated a Tiger Reserve in 2007.

It is alleged that these changes were made without obtaining free, prior and informed consent of Gram Sabhas, as required under the Forest Rights Act, 2006, and the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996.

Following a 13-day foot march across villages in the Nagarahole region between December 21, 2025, and January 2, 2026, the Samiti said the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination wrote to the Government of India on January 19, 2026, highlighting concerns over alleged human rights violations in tiger reserves. The federation claimed that no response has yet been received from central or state authorities.