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# 'Whose Forest?': Why Indigenous People from Tiger Reserves Across India Gathered at Nagarahole

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THE WIRE

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Tiger Reserves Across India Gathered At  
Nagarahole

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Protesters from indigenous communities at a rally near Nagarahole in Karnataka. Photo: Pranab Doley



Pranab Doley



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**Nagarahole (Karnataka):** “*Kaddinna makkalu navene, kaddinna rajaru navene*”. “We are the people of the forest, we are the rulers of the forest”.



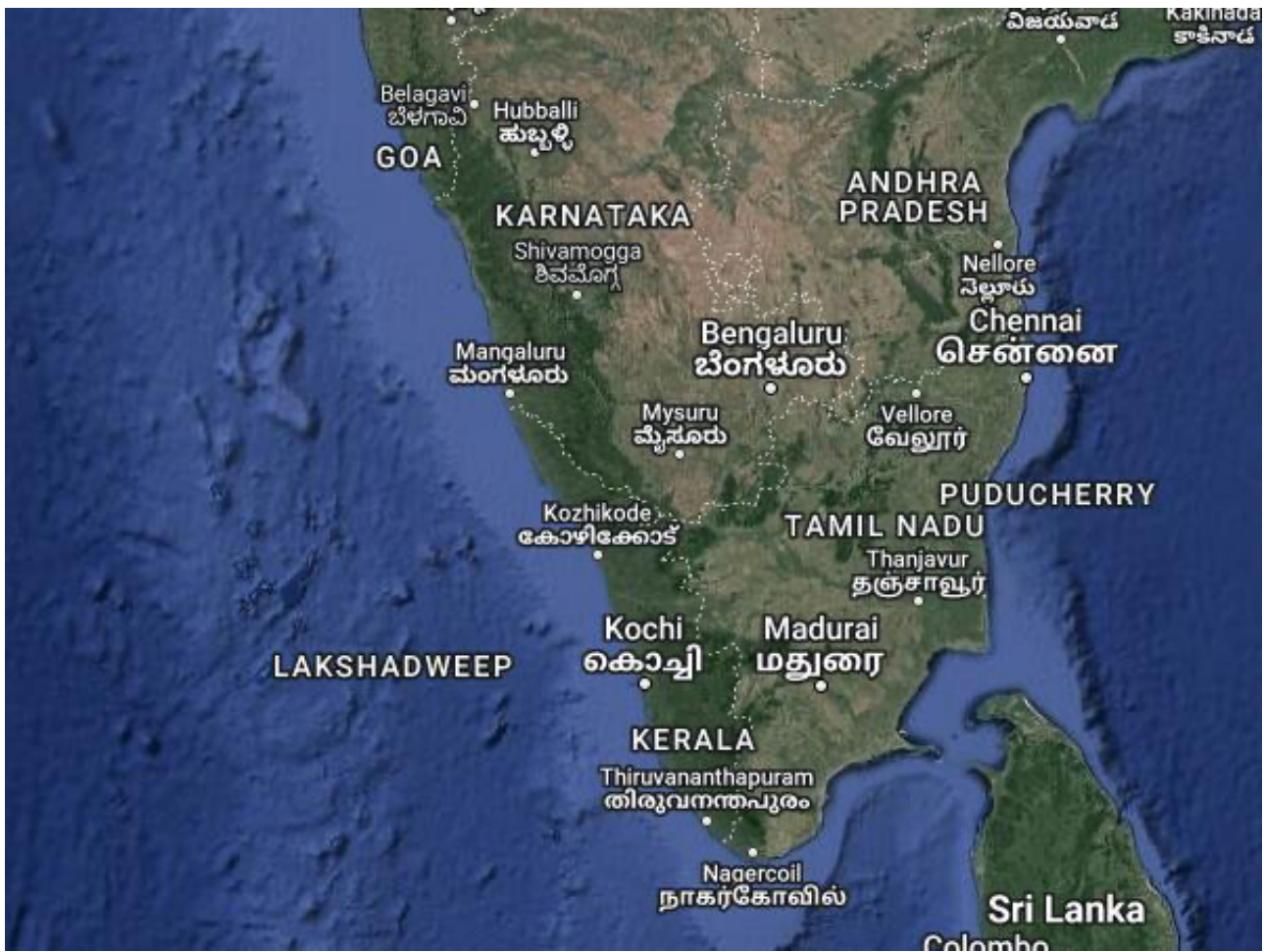
The long day’s walk had cast a tired shadow on the faces of graceful and quiet villagers – women, children and

youth.

I was walking with them too. We were marching through the forests of Nagarahole Tiger Reserve in southern Karnataka to various villages in the vicinity to celebrate the long standing struggle for local peoples' rights to stay on their own land.

A fire glowed in the middle of the field where the hundred-odd villagers gathered. Thimmana, veteran elder leader of the Nagarahole Adivasi Jammapala Hakku Sthapana Samiti (Nagarahole Adivasi Communities Rights Assertion Committee) walked to the middle, whispered in a muffled voice and raised his folded hands in greeting to everyone present in the rally. His smile of courage and reassurance flowed like a wave, washing away the hopelessness from the faces of the gathered crowd.

The struggle of the people of Nagarahole has a long history, and is an example of how conservation has gone wrong in India.



There is a clash between varying interests: coffee estate owners (Nagarahole is located in the districts of Mysore and Kodagu, and there are coffee estates both within and around the Park), profit-centric wildlife lobbies and the colonial Forest Department are pitted against the Jenu Kurubas, Betta Kurubas, Paniyas, Yaravas and other original inhabitants of the forest. Known as the Rajiv Gandhi or Nagarahole National Park, the lands were also

declared a tiger reserve in 1999.

The struggle of local communities here is rooted in the very basic principle of people's right to live on their own lands.



Protesters from indigenous communities gather at Nagarhole in Karnataka. Photo: Pranab Doley

The Adivasis, and their ideologies and practices of living with the forests, are best suited to protect the forest and know the most about the lives of flora and fauna. This is embedded in the community's call for their right to live in their own homes, which the Forest Department repeatedly violates through the creation of a national park and tiger reserve. The struggle has seen brutal repressions and also killings of people in the name of conservation. This is a result of the militarised conservation practised by the forest department with increasing impunity in India.



The unbroken history of displacement of its original inhabitants started in Nagarahole in 1978-80 and the saga continues unabated despite people's continuous struggle for their rights to live in Nagarahole. The number of villages displaced stands at 47 since the inception of Nagarahole as a Protected Area. But the forest regime has not stopped here. Locals say forest officials have killed eight people and permanently injured many more. They say that this is part of their strategy to invoke fear.

In 2021, Basava, a *jenu kuruba* tribe member, was allegedly **shot** by forest officials in retaliation because he defended his sister who was being harassed by them. In 2022, Cariappa, another tribe member, was allegedly **tortured and killed** by the officials of the Forest Department, say locals. These versions, which forest officials have not confirmed, point to a denial of the dignity of life to people. With such an outlook, how can India aim to be a 'Vishwa Guru'?

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**Also read: [Why Is the Upcoming SC Hearing on Forest Rights Act Crucial for 78 Lakh Adivasis?](#)**

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In solidarity and support with the Adivasis of Nagarahole, forest dwellers from across India joined the foot rally organised between March 15 and 21 by the Nagarahole

Adivasi communities. Representatives arrived from places as far as Kaziranga National Park and Tiger Reserve, which epitomises the model of militarised fortress conservation in India; Gir National Park, Simlipal National Park, Dudhwa National Park, Achanakmar National Park, and more. Different communities separated by language and culture came together. They walked through the forests of Nagarahole and stayed in the villages, united by their collective memory and the history of having their basic human rights violated.



A young woman leader from a forest dwelling community, who is a lawyer now, spoke to the people about the plight her family has had to go through as a part of her community's great fight for their land.

A Tharu leader, who had arrived from Dudhwa, shared how her father was brutally tortured. In the starlit meeting, streaks of tears rolled down people's cheeks into the lands of Nagarahole, uniting all in pain and struggle.



Protesters from indigenous communities gather at a rally near Nagarhole in Karnataka as police look on. Photo: Pranab Doley

Rajni, working under the banner of the Mahila Majdoor Kissan Manch, has been part of the long struggle of Tharu Adivasis in Uttar Pradesh's Dudhwa National Park. He says that wherever there is an abundance of natural resources, be it jungles, coastal areas, hill areas, or mining areas, "You will find state repression."



The experience of the Nagarhole Adivasis, however, paints a different picture. Locals believe that land

grabbing private coffee estate owners are the stronger force here.

“The Forest Rights Act was to be implemented from December 31, 2007, but just 11 days before that Nagarahole was hastily declared a tiger reserve, that too with the official notification not mentioning the Forest Rights Act. The intentions of the Forest Department and the state government are clear – to stop the Nagarahole Adivasis from exercising their rights under the Forest Rights Act. We are with the Nagarahole struggle. From Dudhwa to Nagarahole, the struggle is one. We will fight together,” Rajni said.

The rally, which spread like a wildfire through the forests of Nagarahole and was joined by the young and elderly, women and men alike, concluded with a huge meeting of local villagers in one of the villages inside the park boundary. The rally has a charter of demands which locals submitted to the Divisional Forest Officer of Nagarahole Tiger Reserve in the presence of many local leaders and protesters joining from various forest and tiger parks.



Protesters from indigenous communities at a rally near Nagarhole in Karnataka. Photo: Pranab Doley

### **The charter of demands are as follows:**

1. Indigenous Adivasi communities of Nagarhole must be brought under the FRA of 2006.
2. The community has to have resource rights, cultural rights, and habitation (housing) rights within the forest according to the FRA. The Gram Sabha does not recognise Nagarhole as a tiger reserve, hence it is a violation of the wildlife act to impose it.

3. Stop forceful resettlement of people in the name of tiger conservation.

4. All communities that have been evicted before the FRA of 2006, must be given the right to go back to their lands and have their rights recognised.

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**Also read: [Tribal Panel Invokes Special Powers to Evaluate States' Implementation of Forest Rights Act](#)**

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5. Whatever decisions are taken need to be for the needs of the people of the forest and the wildlife concerns of indigenous peoples. Indigenous peoples have laws and provisions in the Indian constitution (and international laws) that clearly state that they are the people who will decide what happens to their lands and what happens to their forests. By completely violating that, people in government offices, sitting in cities and making decisions for indigenous peoples are stepping on our agency.

6. Forceful evictions must stop and whatever is the law of the land has to be implemented and followed.

7. Our lands and our forests cannot be declared as a tiger reserve area or a protected area without our consent. The

constitution states that wherever indigenous communities live, that is a scheduled area.

8. Under the 5th schedule of the constitution every scheduled area will have a minister from a Scheduled Community representing it in the government. But in the last 15 years, this law has been changed so that now somebody who is not a native of this place can also become a minister. This has to change. This is entirely wrong because whoever has come and settled here will not understand our pain or our connection to the forest. The minister should come from the native communities of this land.

Interestingly, this year marks 50 years of Project Tiger in India. The events conducted to celebrate this take no cognisance of the role of Adivasi and forest dwelling communities in tiger conservation and the sacrifices they have made to protect wildlife. While the decisionmakers of conservation gather in the safe confines of Dehradun, a rallying cry for peoples' rights by communities from protected areas across India took place in Nagarahole.

The walk witnessed indigenous people holding hands through days and nights. Songs of freedom and cries for rights reverberated through the forest. Young people learnt from their elders lessons on discipline and resilience in times of precarity, they learnt of dignity and justice. A united democratic voice for all the people in the country was raised in the beautiful lands of Nagarahole.

*Pranab Doley is an Assam-based political activist.*