

Adivasis say Project Tiger and tourism are displacing them from their ancestral land

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TOI correspondent from London: Indigenous communities across India are being pushed out of their ancestral lands in the name of tourism and expansion of tiger projects whilst the laws to protect them are being diluted and not implemented properly, Adivasis told a global press briefing on Monday.

"They say India has got freedom. But I think Adivasi people have not yet got freedom," J C Shivamma, from the Jenu Kuruba tribe, said at the online event organised by Community Network Against Protected Areas.

She is among the 52 households who reoccupied their ancestral land within Nagarhole tiger reserve on May 5, 35 years after their families were forcibly evicted.

"Some of our family members died when in the plantations, but our sacred deities, our graveyard, everything that concerns us, is still in the village, so we used to go back to bury our people in our ancestral land, but it was always a fight with the forest department to conduct rituals. We consider our ancestors to be on the lands, they become deities and this way we were tortured. If we have to die, we will die on our ancestral land," she said.

Shivu JA recalled how their houses were burnt and elephants brought to destroy their fields when they were evicted from Karadikallu. "This land is ours. It's not any tiger project or scheme of the govt for tiger conservation," he said.

"Our elders are very happy now. We are having our food, we are going for honey collection. We have our own water resource. We sit together in the evening, and they are teaching us songs. All these songs and lessons were silenced for 40 years."

"The forest department keeps saying that only after your rights are recognised, you can live on this land. We already have these rights," he said.

The Jenu Kurubas are filing a case against the Forest Department under the SC/ST Atrocities Act for withholding their rights and filing an appeal against 39 rejected forest rights claims.

"Why are their rights not being recognised despite the notification of central legislation such as the Forest Rights Act 2006," asked scholar Nitin Rai.

"People across the country in different states are fighting the same battles. It is important to find a way to raise a collective voice for what is happening all over," said lawyer Lara Jesani.