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Karnataka

# Nagarahole Adivasis hit out at environmentalists who accused them of cutting trees for cricket match

*Adivasis of Nagarahole in Karnataka have criticised the Forest Department for initiating an inquiry into a recent cricket match organised by their youth to commemorate Birsa Munda Jayanti.*



Adivasi residents of Nagarahole forests protest in front of the Nanachi gate of the Nagarahole Tiger Reserve after a video of a cricket tournament near a haadi went viral. Special arrangement

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**Inside**

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Nagarahole's Adivasis have hit back at environmentalists and the Forest Department after a video of a cricket tournament went viral. The tournament was organised by Adivasi youth to commemorate Birsa Munda Jayanti, which falls on November 15. The videos have since prompted an inquiry by the Forest Department.

Videos of the tournament were allegedly circulated by environmentalists who also wrote to the authorities, accusing the Adivasis of cutting down trees for the tournament. Media [reports](#) quoted unnamed environmentalists who said that the cricket tournament was a violation of wildlife laws and Supreme Court orders.

Adivasi youth had organised a cricket tournament on November 19 in front of the Balekovu haadi (hamlet) near the Nanachi gate of the Nagarahole Tiger Reserve, accessible from Kutta in Kodagu district.

Forest Minister Eshwar B Khandre wrote to the Forest Department officials on November 20, saying his office had received complaints from environmentalists who had sent satellite images of the area and said that trees had been cut down for the tournament. The minister sought a report within seven days.

The Adivasis of Nagarahole, who have been reclaiming the forests since May this year, staged a



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protest at the Nanachi gate on November 25, questioning the claims of the environmentalists.



## **'You are entering our ancestral land': Adivasis put up board outside Nagarahole Tiger Reserve**

The next day, the Nagarahole Adivasi Jammapale Hakku Sthapana Samiti and other organisations wrote to the Forest Minister.

Their letter questioned the actions of the environmentalists and the Department, and their locus standi in raising objections to the tournament and asserted their traditional claims to the forests. They also stated that they had not cut down any trees for the tournament.

"No trees were cut for the tournament. This is a lie being spread through the media. For several years, the Forest Department has been clearing lantana weeds and other plants on either side of the road to enable safari goers to see animals clearly," the Samiti's letter said.

The Samiti demanded action against environmentalist Navin Bopaiah for taking videos of the youth at the tournament without their consent and circulating them.

"Do indigenous people not have the right to privacy? You and your children have access to clubs, maidans, stadiums and theatres. All we want as indigenous people of Nagarahole is the right to live, celebrate, protect, and play, and co-exist with the forests and other living creatures with dignity and self-respect in the land of our ancestors," they said.

Navin Bopaiah, who lives in Kutta village, defended his actions, saying that he had “every right” to capture videos of an event in a public space. He told TNM that he had only shared the videos in a WhatsApp group and denied having complained to either the Forest Department or Minister Khandre.

“When I took the videos, someone objected, and I said I also wanted to play. But I have every right to take (videos/photos) of something that is happening in public. I have nothing against the tribals playing inside the forest. They have always been playing volleyball and cricket in the forests. A small gathering of 5-10 people from the hamlet playing is absolutely fine. Nobody can stop anyone from playing, it’s a constitutional right. But conducting a tournament inside the forest... I was a little appalled to see that,” Navin said.

The Samiti said that the tournament had been organised by youth from various haadis on the 150th anniversary of Birsa Munda’s birth and that it was an opportunity to teach the youth how Munda had fought against landlords and the British for the community’s land and forests.

“We are the people of the forest. Shouldn’t our children have the right to play? Don’t we have the right to organise or celebrate Birsa Munda Jayanti?” the letter from the Samiti questioned.

Speaking to TNM, Shivu, an activist from the Jenu Kuruba community, said there was a full-fledged cricket pitch inside the Bandipur Tiger Reserve and demanded to know how it had been permitted.

He told TNM that pictures of a cricket pitch were circulated on WhatsApp groups of tribal activists and of the community. “Concrete has been used to build this pitch. I am told it has been built near the house of DCF S Prabhakaran. Did the Forest

Department build this? They must answer.”



Adivasis of Nagahole allege that this cricket pitch is made of concrete and is inside the Bandipur Tiger Reserve. Special Arrangement

## **Adivasi rights**

The Samiti also said that it was painful that the

Forest Minister had not noticed the Adivasis' years-old protests to claim their rights to the forest, or the Department's alleged false cases against them and the killings of Adivasis, even as he had taken note of the cricket tournament.

The Samiti also said that Adivasis had not been consulted when the state government declared a tiger reserve under the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972. The Samiti asked the Forest Minister to provide documents to the grama sabhas pertaining to the action taken by the government under Section 38(v)(4) under the Act.

This provision directs the state government to notify Scheduled Tribes and other forest dwellers living in the reserves and ensure that their agricultural, livelihood, developmental and other interests are not affected either in the 'core' area, which is supposed to be 'inviolable' and the 'buffer' areas where a lesser degree of habitat protection is required.

Pointing out that it was the adivasis of Nagarahole who had led the agitation against the Taj Resort, they criticised the Congress government for promoting tourism in Nagarahole and forcibly relocating Adivasis from their traditional homeland.

They also criticised the government for ignoring their years-long fight for the recognition of their claims under the Forest Rights Act but paying attention when environmentalists "who have never co-existed with the forests and wildlife.

"Who are these organisations? Are the people running these organisations indigenous people? What measures have they taken to protect and conserve the creatures living in their cities and towns? It is evident that you are partial in your conduct and that you disregarded the knowledge.

...and that, for all general knowledge, values and opinion of Nagarahole's Adivasis," the Samiti said.



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The Samiti also demanded accountability for the conversion of forests into coffee plantations.

Adivasis



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