

## From Karnataka's Nagarhole, MM Hills and Ramanagara, and beyond: Can forest conservation make room for justice?

In the forests of Nagarhole, [a quiet but determined reclamation is under way](#). In May 2025, 52 families of the Jenu Kuruba, one of the twelve Adivasi communities of Karnataka, walked back into their ancestral haadi of Karadikallu Atturu Kolli, inside what is today the Nagarhole Tiger Reserve. Their elders had been forcibly evicted nearly four decades ago, when the area was first sealed off for conservation and later notified as a tiger reserve. [The families built makeshift huts, set up shrines to their deities, and publicly declared that they were asserting rights guaranteed under the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers \(Recognition of Forest Rights\) Act, 2006 \(FRA\)](#). In December 2025, further news stories (1), (2) indicated similar acts of land assertion among the Jenu Kuruba in Mysore and Kodagu.

These were not new claims. The community has filed applications since 2009–11, attended multiple rounds of surveys and committee hearings, and waited through years of bureaucratic delay, much of it at the level of the Forest Department. Yet, as they attempted to re-establish their settlement, they were repeatedly warned to leave. Citing wildlife laws, officials termed the return an “illegal occupation”, even as community members stressed that they were not encroachers but rights-holders denied due process. As reported by *Frontline*, [Down To Earth](<https://www.downtoearth.org.in/forests/situation-in-nagarhole-tense-as-evicted-jenu-kuruba-tribals-attempt-to-return-to-their-land-reclaim-forest-rights>) and several independent media outlets, over 250 forest guards, tiger force personnel and police eventually [raided the settlement](#), dismantling shelters despite the presence of women, children and elderly people. The confrontation has become one of the most visible Adivasi assertions of land rights in a flagship tiger reserve, and a stark reminder that conservation policy in India continues to sit uneasily with justice.

This was not a sudden act of defiance but a symbolic return, rooted in memory, law and belonging. The Jenu Kuruba struggle mirrors the long, unfinished history of India's forest-dwelling peoples and their fraught relationship with forest administration, a system that still struggles to see Adivasis as rightful citizens of landscapes now rebranded as protected areas. The problem is not, as is often implied, one of “illiteracy” or ignorance among Adivasi communities. It lies in the tardy and obstructed implementation of the FRA, and in the persistence of a conservation mindset that continues to view Adivasis primarily as obstacles to ecological goals rather than as partners in sustaining forests. Notably, many ecologists and conservation practitioners in India no longer support such exclusionary models, but institutionalised practice of the colonial timber and estate protectionist style of the forest department has been slow to change.

### Conservation without people

The idea that effective conservation requires people-free forests remains deeply embedded in India's wildlife discourse. While such thinking is often framed as necessary for ecological recovery, it has produced a perverse outcome: Adivasi communities who have historically conserved biodiversity in their own landscapes now bear the highest costs of conservation, even as cities and towns expand at the

expense of nature and biodiversity all around us. Tigers they did not hunt and forests they did not fell have become reasons to deny them roads, electricity, schools and water; basic amenities that define equal citizenship.

This framing is visible in official responses to the Nagarhole return. In *Frontline*, [a Karnataka forest department's seniormost official described the Jenu Kuruba action as "illegal" and suggested that they were being "instigated"](#). Such statements are not neutral administrative positions; they echo a colonial vocabulary that infantilises Adivasis while valorising officers and often urban-based conservation advocates, however well-intentioned, as the "true" spokespersons for wildlife.

We have seen this gaze before. In 2024, a report of the Government of India National Tiger Conservation Authority titled [\\_Bridging the Gap: Unveiling the Effectiveness of India's Tiger Reserve Management\\_](#) identified Soliga villages inside the Biligiri Ranganathaswamy Temple (BRT) Tiger Reserve as a "threat" to conservation, citing their population growth and demands for infrastructure. This assessment sits uneasily with both history and evidence. The Soliga have lived in these forests for centuries, with written records dating back to the early nineteenth century, and their coexistence with wildlife has long been documented. What the report obscures is that it was the creation of sanctuaries and tiger reserves, not Adivasi habitation, that violently displaced thousands. In Nagarhole alone, the [Muzaffar Assadi Committee](#) of the Karnataka government documented the eviction of over 3,000 families, many without rehabilitation.

### **The myth of the "innocent tribal"**

The portrayal of Adivasis as "innocent people being instigated" is a familiar trope. It allows the State to simultaneously infantilise and criminalise them. Too naïve to act independently, yet too dangerous to be left within "protected" forests. This framing delegitimises democratic assertion. Is it really the state's position that communities need outside actors to demand roads, schools and water in villages that are legally recognised under parliamentary law?

In reality, such movements emerge from within communities that have exhausted every official route. The Jenu Kuruba of Nagarhole filed claims, attended endless meetings of Sub-Divisional and District Level Committees, and waited years for decisions that never arrived. Their return to Karadikallu is not lawlessness; it is an act of last resort grounded in legal entitlement and moral claim. Nor is this story unique to Nagarhole. Across the country, forest departments have fiercely resisted the settlement of lawful claims under the FRA, turning a corrective statute into a site of continuous tension between forest departments and district administration.

### **Parallel stories, shared neglect**

The pattern repeats across Karnataka. In Ramanagara, the Iruliga Adivasi community, as documented by [Dr K.V. Krishnamurthy in \*Deccan Herald\* \("Adivasis: the erased guardians of the forest"\)](#), continues to live without roads or basic amenities despite constitutional guarantees. In BRT, several Soliga villages—such as Purani and Bedaguli—remain without electricity or reliable water even after securing

individual and community forest rights. In the nearby MM Hills, Soliga villages like Palar, Aalambaadi and Mendare fear that a proposed tiger reserve will once again push them into legal and developmental limbo. These are not isolated failures. While they reflect tardy implementation on one hand, the general lack of solidarity with the Adivasis reflects a deeper erosion of the constitutional principle of fraternity; the refusal to see Adivasis as equal citizens.

### **Who speaks for the wild?**

As someone who has spent years watching birds and documenting wildlife, I share the conservationist's concern for forests and the species that inhabit them. Yes, someone must speak for the tiger, the elephant and the deer right? Yes, but when that voice consistently drowns out the lived experience of people who share their homes with these animals, conservation begins to resemble colonisation by another name.

Forests do not need to be "freed" of people to thrive. Globally, evidence shows that biodiversity often flourishes where Indigenous communities have secure tenure and stewardship. India's forest-dependent peoples have managed complex ecosystems for centuries without fences, permits or safari vehicles. In an era of accelerating ecological crisis, it is both morally and temporally unfair to expect Adivasis to shoulder the costs of biodiversity protection alone, especially when the benefits accrue far beyond their landscapes.

The question before us, then, is not whether Adivasis and wildlife can coexist. They already do. But whether the rest of us can learn to coexist with both. The Jenu Kuruba stand in Nagarhole is not an obstacle to conservation. It is a reminder that justice and ecology are inseparable, and that democracy must extend into the forest. Their message: *"Our forests, our lands, our rule"*, is not defiance. It is the spirit of the Forest Rights Act, asking to be taken seriously.

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