

Can forest conservation make room for justice?

Adivasi assertion of land rights is a response to exclusionary conservation models and institutional failures

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In Nagarahole in southern Karnataka, a quiet but determined reclamation is underway. In May 2025, 52 families of the Jenukuruba, one of the twelve forest-associated Adivasi communities of Karnataka, reclaimed their ancestral haadi of Karadikallu Atturu Kolli, inside the Nagarahole Tiger Reserve. Their elders had been 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, 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 indicated similar acts of land assertion among other Adivasi communities.

These were not new claims. They have filed applications since 2009-11, attended multiple rounds of surveys and committee hearings, and waited through years of bureaucratic delay. 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 in 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 apparent act of defiance is also a symbolic return, rooted in memory, law, and belonging. The Jenukuruba 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 conservation practitioners in India no longer support such exclusionary models, but the institutionalised practice of the colonial, protectionist style of forest administration has been slow to change.

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, bear the highest costs of conservation, even as cities and towns expand at the expense of biodiversity. 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.

A senior official in the Karnataka Forest Department, while calling the self-assertion in Nagarahole “illegal”, suggested the Adivasis were “instigated”. The National Tiger Conservation Authority, for instance, in its reports, including the 2024 report titled Bridging the Gap: Unveiling the Effectiveness of India’s Tiger Reserve Management, identifies Soliga Adivasi villages inside the Biligiri Ranganathaswamy Temple (BRT) Tiger Reserve as a “threat”, citing 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 19th century, and their coexistence with wildlife is well documented. In Nagarahole, the Muzaffar Assadi Committee of the Karnataka government documented the eviction of Adivasis, 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, and delegitimises democratic assertion. Does any citizen need “instigation” 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 Jenukuruba filed claims, attended meetings of sub-divisional and district committees, and waited years for decisions that never arrived. Their return is an act of last resort grounded in legal entitlement and moral claim.

Across the country, forest departments resist the settlement of lawful claims under the FRA, turning a corrective statute into a site of continuous tension between forest departments and district administration. In Ramanagara, the Adivasi scholar K V Krishnamurthy recently wrote in DH about Iruliga villages without roads or basic amenities. In BRT, several Soliga villages, such as Purani and Bedaguli, remain without electricity or piped water even after securing individual and community forest rights. In the nearby MM Hills, Soliga villages like Palar, Aalambaadi, and Mendare fear that the proposed MM Hills tiger reserve will once again push them into legal and developmental limbo. These are not isolated but institutional failures.

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. In an era of accelerating ecological crisis, it is unfair to expect Adivasis to shoulder the costs of biodiversity protection alone, especially when the benefits are shared by all of us. The Jenukuruba stand in Nagarahole 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 FRA, asking to be taken seriously.

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