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Political Ecology of Nagarhole: A Tale of Exploitation and Resistance

in Environmental Protection
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Picture from one of the haadis, part of the paadayatre.

On December 21, the Adivasis of Nagarhole started their historic 13-day Padayathra (December 21 – January 2) to claim their forest rights. The Padayathra was organised by Nagarhole Adivasi Jammapale Hakku Sthapana Samiti (NAJHSS), the federation of Gram Sabhas in Nagarhole. In Padayathra, people from each haadi (hamlets and villages) visited other haadis, and gram sabhas were held in each haadi to raise awareness among Gram Sabha members about the Forest Rights Act (FRA, 2006) and to promote the idea of a struggle for forest rights. The Gram Sabhas were held in 29 haadis. Gram Sabhas collectively decided to fight against displacement. This Padayathra concluded with a protest on 1st and 2nd January at the Udhburu forest gate in H.D. Kote. Demands were submitted to ADC Mysuru.

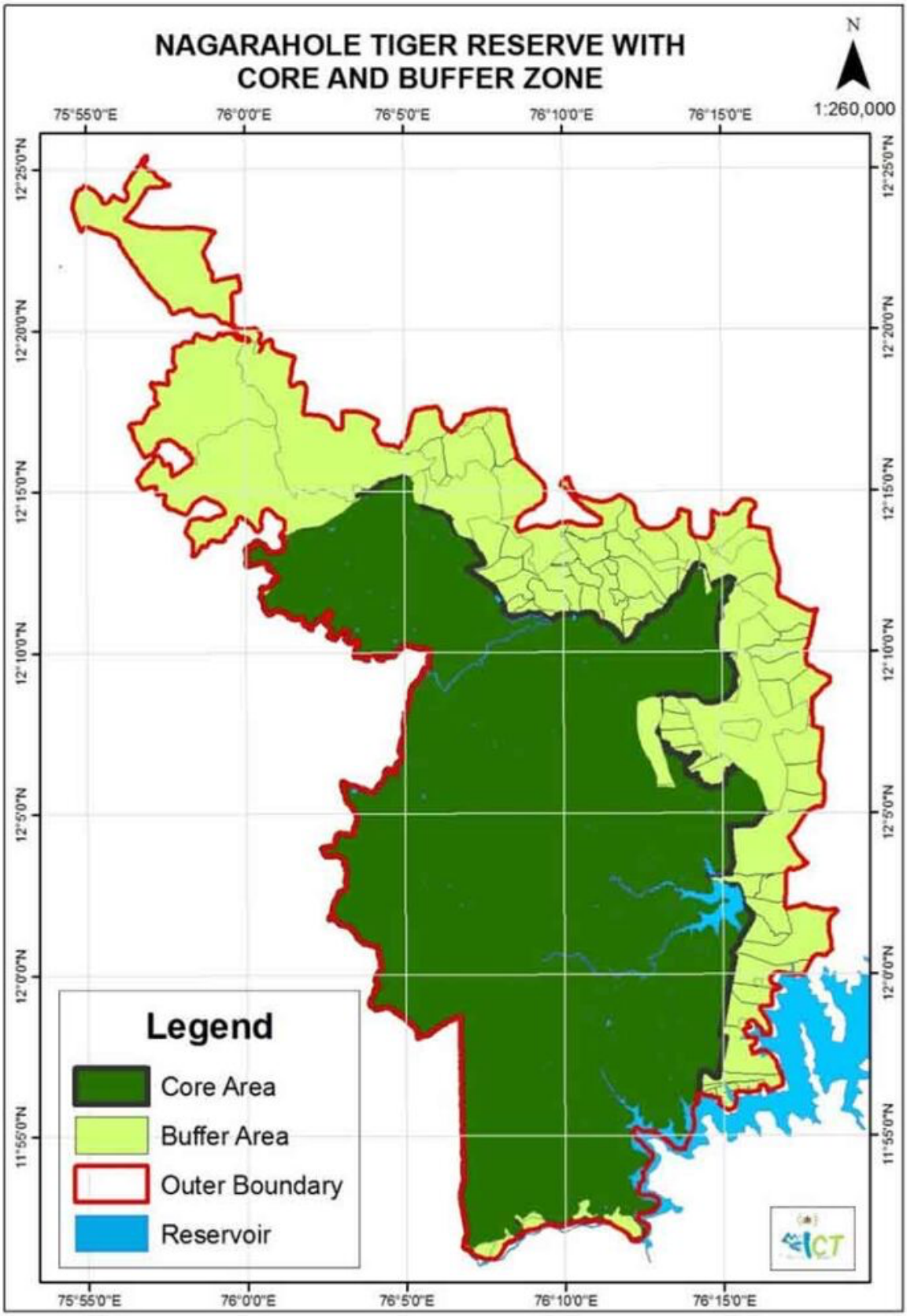
A team of comrades from All India Students Association (AISA) joined this Padayathra on December 26th in solidarity with the Adivasis of Nagarhole, to understand the socio-economic conditions of forest-dwelling communities and their

struggle against displacement, dispossession, and state violence in the name of conservation. During the Padayathra, they spent time in the haadis, listened to community members and Gram Sabhas, and held detailed conversations with around ten individuals, including elders, and young organisers actively involved in the struggle for forest rights.

Nagarhole National Park :

Nagarhole forest in Karnataka, spanning Kodagu and Mysuru districts, is part of the Western Ghats-Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve, and is named after a small river Nagarhole (Snake Stream). It contains a mosaic of tropical forest types (both moist and dry forests containing more than 182 species of trees), numerous shrubs and grasses, diverse animal communities (from large carnivores to small amphibians), more than 300 species of birds, more than 167 species of butterflies, etc., and is one of India's key biodiversity hotspots. 284.15 sq. km of the Nagarhole forest was declared a Wildlife Sanctuary by Coorg State in 1955, and subsequently extended over an area of 571.55 sq. km in 1983 to include adjoining areas of Mysore district, and was thereafter declared a National Park (Nagarhole National Park or Rajiv Gandhi National Park). In 1986, Nagarhole National Park, along with Bandipur tiger reserve, was declared as a part of the 'Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve'. The National Park includes 7 forest ranges, i.e., D.B. Kuppe, Antharasante, Veeranahosalli, Kalahaolla, Nagarhole, Metikuppe, and Achanekowr. This park was declared the 37th Project Tiger Reserve in 2003, and 71.84 sq. km was added. The core area was about 192 sq km, and the buffer was 451.39 sq km, out of which 110 sq km were demarcated as the tourism zone. In 2007, the entire Nagarhole National Park was declared a Critical Tiger Habitat. In 2012, the Tiger Reserve area was extended to 1205.76 sq. km (847.981 sq. km forest area and 361.84 sq. km non-forest area), with a core of 643.35 sq. km and a buffer of 562.41 sq. km (200.57 sq. km forest area and 361.84 sq. km non-forest Area).

These successive changes from a Wildlife Sanctuary to a National Park, and later to a Tiger Reserve and Critical Tiger Habitat, were not merely ecological reclassifications, but a tool to displace the Adivasis in the name of conservation and wildlife protection. Each phase of expansion intensified state control over forest land and imposed increasingly restrictive regulations on human habitation and livelihood practices. For the Adivasi communities who had historically lived within and around these forests, these notifications translated into systematic curtailment of access to land, forest produce, cultivation, and mobility. The declaration and subsequent expansion of the tiger reserve facilitated the loot of jal-jangal-jameen through large-scale evictions and coercive relocations, particularly during the 1970s, 1980s. Haadis located within newly demarcated core and buffer areas were forced to relocate, homes were destroyed, and traditional livelihoods were criminalised under wildlife protection and forest laws. In the 1990s, under the World Bank-funded India Eco-Development Project (IEDP), displacement was promoted as 'voluntary resettlement' as part of conservation planning. The expansion of the protected area in Nagarhole became a central mechanism through which Adivasi communities were forcibly displaced in the name of conservation, while tourism infrastructure and safari activities were simultaneously expanded within the same landscape.



Nagarhole National Park and Tiger Reserve (https://www.Nagarholetigerreserve.com) [Core Area ~ 643.35 sq. km, Buffer Area ~ 562.41 sq. km]

Adivasis of Nagarhole

Nagarhole forest and its forest fringes are home to several tribal and traditional forest-dwelling communities (Jenu Kuruba, Betta Kuruba, Yerava, Paniya, Koraga, Soliga, etc.) who traditionally lived in and around these forests. Jenu Kurubas are the largest group in the Nagarhole area. Adivasis historically inhabited large tracts of what is now the Nagarhole Tiger Reserve. Early British records say that when they first came to this region (1847), they found that ~75 % of the people were Adivasis (mainly hunter-gatherers, pastoral tribes, and shifting cultivators). According to the Madras Census Report, 1891, these Adivasis have lived in Nagarhole since the 7th century and are deeply connected to the Nagarhole landscape on cultural, economic, and spiritual levels. Their traditional boundaries are defined by Devarakadus (sacred groves), streams and hillocks, and honey collection zones. These traditional markers are believed to be connected to local deities and ancestral spirits and define customary boundaries between communities and determine where cultivation, honey harvesting, and foraging can take place. For the Jenu Kuruba people, honey-harvesting zones are particularly important. Certain cliff regions and woodland areas are identified as belonging to specific clans or haadis, and are regulated by traditional laws to avoid conflict and overharvesting. Animals of Nagarhole, such as tigers, jungle dogs, elephants, bears, peacocks, and certain tree species, are worshipped as clan spirits. Before state intervention, these Adivasis lived in the forest under their traditional system of governance. All these tribes are legally recognised as Scheduled Tribes (STs), with Jenu Kurubas and Koraga also being Primarily Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) (Ministry of Tribal Welfare: State/UT-wise List of the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups). These Adivasi families live in small forest haadis and fringe villages spread across the Mysuru and Kodagu districts. The size of haadis typically ranges from 10 to 40 households, depending on the location, access to services, and past experiences of displacement. (There are around 22 families in Nanachegade Haadi. As we move toward the outer boundary, the number increases to almost 100 in some haadis, e.g., 102 families in Golur Haadi). As told by local villagers, the total Adivasi population in Nagarhole is approximately 10,000-12,000, estimated at 2,500-3,000 families in the core area (Jenu Kuruba: 1,400–1,700 families, Betta Kuruba: 400–500 families, Yerava: 350–450 families, Paniya: 200–300 families, and few Koraga families). Rajan, a CNAPA (Community Networks Against Protected Areas) activist, working on forest rights in Nagarhole area, said, “around 50,000-60,000 Adivasis live in Nagarhole, who are dependent on forest for their livelihood”. [As reported to the Lok Sabha on December 12, 2011, 45 villages (1353 families) live inside Nagarhole core area and 86 villages (16896 families) in the periphery of Nagarhole (‘We can live with the Tiger, not the forest department!’, Countercurrents.org, 25/05/2022).]

Religious practices of the Adivasis of Nagarhole are nature-centric, involving ancestor worship, forest spirits, and sacred groves. The internal hierarchy is minimal, although elders hold moral authority. There are some families known as Doddamanatana who bear the responsibility of the entire tribe and community. All communities face marginalisation within the wider caste-based social order. Their religious practices are also affected by the forest department’s strict regulations. Their places of worship were small hut-like structures built on trees, which they regard as the home of their deities. However, the Forest Department cut down the trees and destroyed the structure, stating that, according to forest rules, no houses should be built on trees.

Adivasis of Nagarhole			
Community	**Language**	**Traditional Occupation**	**Side**
Jenu Kuruba	Jenu Kurumba (Jennu Kurumba or Jen Kurumba) (Southern Dravidian language of the Tamil-Kannada subgroup of Dravidian languages, closer to Kannada)	Jenuthuppa harvesting (Honey gathering), collecting minor forest produce, foraging, and small-scale agriculture (kittane Bittane)	Planta
Betta Kuruba	Betta Kurumba (Southern Dravidian language of the Tamil-Kannada subgroup of Dravidian languages, closer to Kannada)	Bamboo crafts [Making More (winnowing baskets and trays), Kori (Basket), Goragu (bamboo drying tray), Chapi], collecting minor forest produce, foraging, and shifting cultivation (Kumri)	Planta
Yerava (Erava / Ravula / Adiyan)	Ravula [locally known as Yerava (in Kannada) or Adiyan (in Malayalam)]. (Southern Dravidian language of the Malayalamoid subgroup of Dravidian languages, closer to Malayalam)	Fishing, small agriculture, collecting minor forest produce, foraging,	Planta agricu
Paniya (Paniyan)	Paniya (Pania, Paniyan, Panyah) (Southern Dravidian language of the Malayalamoid subgroup of Dravidian languages, closer to Malayalam)	Foraging, small-scale agriculture, and forest labour	Planta agricu house in esta
Soliga (Sholaga)	Sholaga (Soliga) (Southern Dravidian language, closely related to Kannada but not a dialect of Kannada)	Shifting cultivation (Podu), collecting minor forest produce, and hunting-gathering	Planta agricu house in esta
Koraga	Koraga (Southern Dravidian language of the Tamil-Kannada subgroup of Dravidian languages, closer to Kannada)	Making bamboo baskets, small-scale agriculture, collecting minor forest produce, foraging, and forest labour	Planta agricu house in esta

(The Yerava, Paniya, and Koraga tribes have been historically subjected to bonded labour systems as agricultural labourers for Kodava landlords.)

Occupation and Livelihood

Before the displacement and the Forest Department's strict regulations, Adivasis depended on traditional occupations for their livelihood. Honey, nellikayi (gooseberries or amla), antuvalakayi (soapnuts), tree bark, and medicinal plants are the main forest products that Adivasis of the Nagarhole region collect and sell. Other forest produce, such as fruits, soppu (leafy greens), lichens, Nara Gandashu (wild yams), and wild tubers, are mostly collected for consumption and domestic use. In the Jenu Kuruba community, men engage in honey collection, plantation work, and

agriculture, whereas women do not participate in wage labour. The Betta Kurubas traditionally made bamboo utensils, but due to the erasure of bamboo trees from the forest by the government, they no longer make them. Only in the Thithimathi region are Betta Kurubas now making utensils, but they are not made from bamboo. They also work in plantations. In the Erava and Paniya community, men primarily engage in plantation work, while women are involved in agriculture and undertake cleaning or housekeeping work on estates. Erava men fish in small streams using nets, mainly for household consumption rather than for commercial purposes, but they face several restrictions from the forest department.

Agriculture

The Adivasi communities of Nagarhole traditionally depend on minor forest produce as a major source of food, but they also have a historical connection to small-scale subsistence agriculture in which crops are sown among existing trees and vegetation, without clearing large tracts (this interspersed cultivation was integrated with forest ecology). Soligas and Betta Kurubas in adjacent areas practiced shifting cultivation (Kumri and Podu), which involved clearing small patches of forest, farming for one or two seasons, then leaving the land fallow. Land was governed by communities, not by individuals. These traditional agricultural practices were stopped by the forest department in the name of conservation after the notification in 1975 to develop Nagarhole from a Wildlife Sanctuary to a National Park. As a result, subsistence agriculture was abandoned in many communities, replaced by wage labour or marginal farming on the forest periphery. The decline in traditional agriculture increased the dependence on the market and reliance on manual labour, such as plantation work.

Now small-scale cultivation is carried out on small plots near haadis in forest clearings or fringe areas by families or collectively by haadi, without formal land titles but recognised through customary use. These lands form the basis of the present Individual Forest Rights (IFR) claims under the Forest Rights Act. The primary crops grown are ragi, paddy, and traditional millets, etc., selected for their suitability to forest ecology and rain-fed conditions. Agricultural production is aimed at household food security, not commercial sale. Almost none of the Adivasis have land titles. Some of them have titles for homestead land (a title deed was shown of 0.01 Gunta, which is 10.89 sq.ft). Among the entire population, ~95% do not have land for farming. Agriculture is mainly for consumption, no profits are made by selling agricultural produce. There is no reinvestment, upgrading of tools, storage infrastructure, or expansion of livelihoods. Forest laws, wildlife protection measures, and denial of land rights disrupted the agricultural practices, leading to loss of cultivation space and increased dependence on wage labour. Recognition of historical agricultural use is central to current demands for secure land tenure under the FRA. Rajan said, “While coffee-plantations are allowed in the name of revenue generation inside the core area, Adivasis are not allowed to do agriculture on their own land in the same area.”

Honey Collection

Among forest products, honey collection is nowadays the main source of livelihood and income for all these Adivasis. Apart from Jenu Kuruba, other communities are also involved in honey collection. After locating the bee hives, they form teams of about 10 people to collect honey. Each group can harvest up to 1-2 quintals in a

single season (a year). While harvesting honey, they do not remove the entire hive. Instead, they cut only a portion of it, leaving the rest intact, allowing the honeybees to survive and regenerate. Thimma J.K. said, “We harvest Jenuthuppa mostly once a year. If we are lucky, we might get a second harvest. But mostly we’ll get it once a year. There are two types of Jenuthuppa we harvest. The most common type is Mungari Jenu (During monsoon, May-June). We get up to 20kg in one beehive. The other type is Kanyari jenu (After monsoon, Nov-Dec), which is rarer. It has more medicinal value and is also slightly intoxicating. We can obtain up to 15 kg of this type of honey from a single hive.”

Market and Income

Across the forest produce collected (honey, gooseberries, soapnuts, etc.), earnings are low, irregular, and unpredictable. Prices are usually set by traders or cooperatives, quantities are limited by forest restrictions, and payments are often delayed. After meeting basic household needs, very little income remains. For most households, forest produce provides subsistence-level income rather than profit. The forest produce collected is sold to the Large Area Multipurpose Society (LAMPS) in Thithimathi (VIRAJPET TALUK GIRIJANA DODDA LAMPS THITHIMATHI). At the LAMPS, they are paid ₹400-450/kg of honey, which is very low compared to the market price. In contrast, they earn a better income (up to ₹1000/kg) by selling honey directly to local resorts and to individuals who visit their homes to purchase it. Recently, a few corporate companies have also started buying honey from them, but they tend to offer a low rate of Rs. 200/Kg. Only a few kgs of honey is sold to individuals and private companies, most of the honey is sold to LAMPS. In a year, each person can earn up to Rs 15-20K from selling honey. Whatever is earned from selling forest produce is used for immediate consumption, i.e., food, healthcare, education expenses, festival obligations, or debt repayment. There are no significant savings or expansion of livelihoods. Due to permit requirements, forest department regulations, and the threat of fines, the quantity and diversity of forest goods marketed have decreased significantly over time. Because of this, households are forced to rely on wage labor and social programs because sales are erratic, seasonal, and insufficient to support incomes on their own. Restrictions on legal access by the forest department and market control by intermediaries prevent economic stability.

Plantation labour

In addition to their traditional occupations, they also toil in coffee estates as seasonal wage labourers. Most of these Adivasis work in coffee plantations. The coffee-picking season lasts from mid-December to March. During this period, they work from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Earlier, they used to get work for about three months during the coffee-picking season, but now they get work for only two months due to migrant Assamese workers willing to work for lower wages. Apart from coffee-picking season, they also get some irregular work in coffee plantations. Overall, they spend approximately 5 months working in plantations. Many Adivasis who fled to Kerala and HD Kote during displacement are still coming to Kodagu for plantation work. The working conditions are not good, there are several violations of labour-laws. Workers are forced to work more and get lower wages. There are still cases of bonded labour (we met a person recently freed from bonded labour in Nanachegade Haadi). The daily wages vary in plantations. In some plantations, workers get ₹350-400/day, in others, they get ₹500/day. They get one day of leave per week. There is a demand

of a daily wage of ₹500/day across all plantations, but this has not yet been achieved. Due to low wages, minimal income from selling forest products, and increasing dependency on the market because of strict regulations of the forest department, Adivasis are forced to take debt from plantation owners. The continuous debt cycle gives plantation owners an opportunity to exploit the workers.

PDS, Schools, Hospital, and other basic facilities

There are no proper schools in Nagarhole. There are only anganwadis and primary schools in some haadis. For further education, they have to travel 5-7 km. Similarly, there is no healthcare facility. People from Kodagu have to travel to Kutta to reach the nearest hospital. Even the hospital in Kutta is in poor condition, and doctors are often absent. Apart from the forest produce, they also get the PDS ration. There is one PDS center for every five hadis. From PDS, they get around 15 kg of rice, 15 kg of daal, 2 kg of sugar, etc., per family. But PDS ration distribution is not regular in many haadis. The quantity and composition of the ration vary from village to village (in Nanachegade Hadi, the PDS center provides only rice, the ration officer records that each household receives 3 kilograms of rice, but in reality, households receive much less). Describing their condition, Thimma J.K. said, “Moor thingalu Jenuthuppa, moor thingalu Gandashu-soppu, moor thingalu tota kelasa, moor thingalu upavasa, ide namma jivana”. [3 months of honey harvesting, 3 months of wild leafy vegetables and yams, 3 months of estate work, and 3 months of fasting, this is our life].

Coffee Plantations

Karnataka accounts for around half (50.84%) of India’s total coffee plantation area (248,942 ha) and is the country’s dominant coffee-growing state, and Kodagu is the largest (43.2%) coffee-producing district of Karnataka, with a coffee plantation of 107,721 ha (coffeeboard.gov.in, July 2024). The plantation economy was introduced in Kodagu by British colonialism in the latter part of the 1850s. By 1983-84, the total coffee plantation area (including Kerala and Tamil Nadu) increased to 5,61,885 acres (from 96,110 acres in 1895), of which Karnataka accounted for 3,06,848 acres (54.6%). In Karnataka, of the total 80,257 registered holdings (CEIC, 2023), those having less than 10 ha (hectare) constitute 98.8% of holdings and control about 74.6% of all coffee lands. At the same time, just 1.2% of the planters with individual holdings above 10 ha control 25.4% of the coffee lands (0.4% having more than 50 ha control over 17.7% of coffee land). (CEIC and coffee board data). In Karnataka, the average daily number (daily and seasonal) of persons employed in coffee plantations is 5,23,019 (264808 in Kodagu alone). This consists mainly of landless, poor, and middle peasants of the areas adjoining the coffee plantations and the seasonal migrant labourers from poor peasant families of the North and South Maidan Regions. During coffee harvest (picking) season (typically December to March), labour demand spikes sharply. These workers face severe exploitation by the coffee planters and coffee companies with foreign dependence. The Coffee Board, which exports nearly 60% of all coffee produced in our country to the imperialists, has an absolute monopoly on the purchase and distribution of coffee. Coffee requires expensive fertilisers and pesticides, and this industry is again controlled by the dependent companies and imperialists.

The coffee plantations in the Kodagu region started with the British colonisation of this tract. Forests along the hilly slopes were cleared, and large, extensive coffee

plantations emerged, with a captive working-class. Earlier, these plantations were owned by Europeans. In due course, native feudal lords and rich peasants were also motivated to cultivate coffee. Instead of creating a working class to toil in their coffee lands as the European capitalists had done, these feudal forces used their bonded labourers and the poor peasantry who worked on their paddy lands, for their coffee holdings too. Over time, even the middle peasantry began cultivating coffee.

In the Kodagu area, most of the plantations are owned by the Kodava community. With eviction from forests, the Adivasis were compelled to work as daily wage laborers on coffee plantations. Coffee plantation means profit for plantation owners, but for Adivasis who had lost their land, it became a source of low-paid employment and survival. These plantations are hubs of exploitation of workers. Numerous reports have documented precarious working conditions for plantation laborers on these estates. Women, in particular, face gendered hardships, including limited opportunities, unequal pay, and increased workloads both at work and home. There are still some cases of bonded labour.

Thimma J.K. explained the contradiction between landlords and Adivasis as, “Kodava landlords are our main enemy. Even this year, a Yerava plantation worker was shot dead by a Kodava man for plucking a jackfruit. Their landholding starts from 10 acres, goes to 100-300 acres, and then up to 5000 acres. Tata has 15,000 acres of land for a coffee plantation (e.g., Pollibetta). Jenu Kurubas don’t even get 3-4 acres of land for farming. We want a simple life, 3-4 acres of land, and no torture from the administration; we are not getting even this basic thing.” Note that the conservation NGOs that pressurize the government to displace the Adivasis are also dominated by Kodavas.

Colonial and Imperial Model of Conservation

Forests in India have never been just nature. They have been traditional homes and sites of livelihood for Adivasis. The forest laws implemented by the state historically reflect the priorities of the ruling powers in the name of conservation. Before colonial rule, there were no forest laws in the modern sense, and forests were commons regulated through local customs and community governance. Adivasi and pastoral peoples had communal access to forest resources. When the British consolidated control in India, forests became a source of raw materials (timber for railways, shipbuilding, etc.) and revenue, and their governance became highly statutory through the Indian Forest Acts (1865, 1878, 1927). These Forest Acts made forests state property and consolidated the state power to declare forests as ‘reserved’ or ‘protected’, regulating use and restricting customary rights by criminalising traditional livelihood practices. Forest dwellers lost access to forest produce, grazing, hunting, and shifting cultivation. Violations of regulations could lead to fines and criminal penalties. This exclusionary legal architecture laid the foundation for many of the conflicts that persist in India’s forest areas today. After the formal independence in 1947, the forest laws of the British period continued, and forest governance remained centralised and bureaucratic. Forest Department authority was strengthened, not democratised. From the late 1970s onwards, India’s forest governance was reshaped not only by domestic laws but also by global capital, multilateral financial institutions, and international conservation regimes. The World Bank emerged as a major influence on India’s forest and wildlife policies from the 1980s onward, through loans, eco-development and biodiversity projects, and institutional reform of forest departments. These interventions promoted centralised,

technocratic, and market-friendly forest management, often framed as scientific management, sustainable development, or biodiversity protection, but in practice deepened the dispossession of forest-dwelling communities. The Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, established modern protected areas such as ‘national parks’ and ‘sanctuaries’, and extinguished the basic rights of Adivasis. These acts continued the state monopoly over forests and did not recognize forest-dependent communities as rights-holders.

Nagarhole Tiger Reserve in Karnataka is an example of continuation of the dispossession of Adivasis in the name of conservation. Nagarhole was declared a wildlife sanctuary in 1955, upgraded to a national park in 1988, and later designated a tiger reserve in 2003, imposing stringent conservation norms and further restricting human use. Adivasis frequently remained excluded from meaningful participation in conservation governance and denied recognition of their customary rights under the law. Thousands of Adivasis were forced out during the 1970s and 1980s before the official park and tiger reserve notifications by destroying their homes and disrupting their livelihoods. Displaced families were often relocated far from forest lands, cut off from their traditional food systems, economy, and spiritual sites. Nagarhole became one of the most prominent sites of World Bank intervention in India through the India Eco-Development Project (IEDP) in the 1990s. Adivasi presence was treated as a ‘problem to be managed’, their traditional livelihoods were labeled forest dependency, and forced displacement and relocation were encouraged as voluntary resettlement. The eco-development became a new form of enclosure, reproducing colonial logics under global funding. Shivu J.K. said, “We are being removed in the name of protecting nature, while outsiders profit from tourism.”

Imperial Conservation Model and the Role of NGOs

Alongside the World Bank, international conservation NGOs (often funded from the Global North) shaped policy narratives around ‘pristine wilderness’, ‘inviolate tiger habitats’, and ‘people-nature conflict’ to increase the displacement of Adivasis from forests and to develop eco-tourism for profit. This ‘fortress conservation’ model originated in colonial Africa and North America, and is now exported globally. The NGO-bureaucracy-finance nexus portrayed Adivasis as threats to wildlife, but safari tourism and luxury resorts were normalised. The imperial conservation and financial institutions stand structurally opposed to Adivasi self-determination. Organisations like World Conservation Society, Centre for Wildlife Studies, Coorg Wildlife Society, and Wildlife Trust of India, etc., work for the forest department to remove Adivasis from their land.

In recent years, the number of NGOs working in the Nagarhole area has increased multifold. Many of these NGOs are funded by international organisations like the World Bank, and local Kodava plantation owners. Many RSS-backed NGOs also started working in the Nagarhole area in recent years. These NGOs are constantly working for the displacement of Adivasis. Harish and Ganesh from Nanachegade Hadi said, “Every year, the Adivasi communities of Nagarhole hold a cricket tournament called the Birsa Munda Cup. In 2025, while the tournament was taking place, some NGOs came and took photographs of the players and later filed a case against them, alleging that they had cleared forest land to build a cricket ground. However, the area where the matches were played had already been cleared by the Forest Department and NGOs for safari purposes about 20-30 years ago. Despite this, the NGOs blamed the Adivasi communities for clearing the land.” Many NGOs

provide some basic facilities, but they do not work for their rights. Shivu J.K. said, “These NGOs are putting bandages on bullet wounds without removing bullets.” RSS backed NGOs also try to convert them by telling them they are Hindu. Thimma J.K. said, ‘Yes, they came to me. They tried to convince me that we are Hindus. I asked him, “How do you know that I am a Hindu?” I said, “I am not a Hindu, I follow Adi Dharma.”’

History of Struggle

In Nagarhole, the struggles against the colonial forest acts, displacement, and forest department started in the 1970s. The Nagarhole anti-Taj struggle of the mid-1980s was a landmark movement combining Adivasi resistance and environmental justice. The conflict emerged when the Taj Group of Hotels (a major Indian hotel chain owned by the Tata group) proposed a luxury eco-tourism project within the protected forest area, raising serious concerns about wildlife protection laws, forest rights, and the displacement of Adivasis in the area. Thimma J.K., one of the leaders of the Jenu Kuruba community, questioned the displacement of Adivasis by allowing the Taj Group to construct a resort. Local Adivasi communities opposed the project and blocked the construction. This led to multiple Adivasis, including Thimma, being arrested and slapped with cases. A Public Interest Litigation was filed by Adivasis against the Ministry of Environment and Forests, the Forest Department, and the Taj Group. The resistance was led primarily by local Adivasi communities themselves, organised through bodies such as the Nagarhole Budakattu Hakku Sthapana Samithi (Nagarhole Adivasi Rights Restoration Forum). Thimma emerged as a key figure articulating community opposition. The struggle gained wider visibility through the involvement of the Environment Support Group (ESG), which played a significant role in legal advocacy, documentation, and public campaigning. In January 1997, the Karnataka High Court struck down the agreement between the Taj Group and the state government to set up a resort in the sanctuary, ruling it violated wildlife and forest laws. The High Court ruled that tourism was a non-forest activity and declared the Taj project illegal within a protected area. This decision was upheld later when the Taj Group challenged it. The Taj Group was ultimately forced to withdraw. The movement strongly challenged state-corporate claims that commercial “eco-tourism” could coexist with Adivasi rights. The Nagarhole struggle became a turning point in conservation debates in India, establishing that environmental protection cannot be separated from social justice and indigenous rights, and that conservation models excluding forest-dwelling communities are fundamentally flawed. Since then, the struggle for forest rights continued.

Oraganisations supporting the struggle

Several organisations have been active in the Nagarhole region, most prominently Environment Support Group (ESG), along with a few smaller, rights-based collectives and legal support groups. Currently, Community Networks Against Protected Areas (CNAPA) is working to organise the Adivasis of Nagarhole to claim their forest rights. These organisations have played a crucial and largely positive role in supporting Adivasi struggles against displacement, corporate tourism, and forest department control, providing legal intervention, documentation, and public visibility. At critical moments, such as the anti-Taj resort struggle and subsequent Forest Rights Act battles, these organisations helped expose illegal evictions, challenged state narratives of “conservation,” and amplified Adivasi voices in courts, media, and policy spaces that would otherwise remain inaccessible. These organisations are

viewed as useful allies, but not the substitutes for autonomous Adivasi movements. Some felt that long-term dependence on NGOs can limit the development of independent Adivasi leadership and mass-based organisations. Legal advocacy, while essential, often shifts struggles into courts and expert spaces, distancing them from collective mobilisation on the ground, sometimes prioritising litigation and policy reform over grassroots political education and cadre-building among Adivasis. The long-term need, as many have expressed, is for stronger community-led unions and federations that can sustain resistance beyond legal battles and NGO involvement. Despite these limitations, left, pro-Adivasi organisations are considered as allies in confronting the forest department, corporate tourism interests, and state violence. Their role is seen as supportive rather than directive, and most respondents emphasised that the struggle itself has always been led by Adivasi communities.

Last day of the protest at the park boundary, where other organisations came in solidarity

FRA and Struggle for Forest Rights

The biggest shift in forest rights and conservation came with the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, which corrected the historic exclusion by colonial and post-colonial laws and recognised the rights of forest-dwelling communities to land they traditionally used. FRA directly challenged the eco-development and imperial conservation framework by recognising historical injustice, habitation, community forest resource rights, gram sabha as the authority, and protection responsibilities for indigenous communities. FRA provided pathways for the legal recognition of the customary rights of Adivasis. But the bureaucratic resistance and enforcement gaps have prevented FRA from fully transforming forest governance, with new policy amendments sometimes undermining the spirit of FRA.

In recent years, Adivasi communities of Nagarhole have been asserting their rights under the Forest Rights Act, 2006. Since 2010, several evicted Adivasi families have been trying to return to Nagarhole but have been mercilessly beaten and harassed whenever they attempted such a comeback. They are facing administrative resistance. In Nagarhole, the FRA claims are delayed or rejected, and displacement continues to be promoted. In many cases, claims filed since 2009 remain unrecognized. Rejections and delays have deepened grievances, leading to gram sabhas and protest marches demanding recognition of habitat and land rights. In May 2025, 52 families returned to the ancestral land they were evicted from in the mid-1980s, invoking their legal rights under the FRA. Adivasis now challenge the logic that lets tourism and tiger safaris flourish while their own habitation and customary authority remain unrecognised.

Gram Sabhas

In Nagarhole, Gram Sabhas are formed under the FRA. There are 43 haadis in the Nagarhole Tiger Reserve area. Each Haadi has a Gram Sabha that includes all adults in the Haadi. The Gram Sabha together elects a 15-member Forest Rights Committee (FRC), comprising 5 women and 10 men. This election occurs every three years. Thimma J.K. said, “However, if there is any problem with any member and we need to replace them in between, we can do so. We do not need to wait until the next election [Right to recall]. There is one Panchayat Development Officer (PDO) assigned to an FRC; however, he lacks the authority to make decisions. He can only take notes and keep records.” Gram Sabhas are different from Panchayat, there are separate elections for it.” The democracy that is dead in most bureaucratic institutions is kindling alive in these Gram Sabhas, upheld by the most oppressed of the masses.

To strengthen the movement for forest rights, Adivasis are forming a higher committee, the Grama Sabhada Okkutta, with 2 representatives from each haadi. Shivu J.K. said, “We need to form this and strengthen this. If we have a strong Okkuta, we do not need the forest department to manage the forest area within our traditional boundary (Jamma); we can manage it ourselves”.

Padayathra

In the Padayathra, people walked from one haadi to another through the forest, raising powerful slogans and songs against the displacement and oppressive forest laws, and asserting their forest rights. For example, there was a slogan, “Kaadina Makkalu Navene, Kaadina Raja-rum Naavene,” which translates to “We are the people of the forest, and we are the kings of the forest,” and “Aane huline kadavaru aranna neetige anjadhiley,” which roughly means “We who have seen elephants and tigers do not fear your laws.” These slogans powerfully represented the struggles and valour of the Nagarhole Adivasis. Similarly, the songs were simple yet deeply philosophical. These songs, composed by Adivasis across different movements, spoke to their struggle against displacement and exploitation. For instance, there was a song called “www.com,” which conveyed the exploitation of Adivasis in the name of fake neoliberal development, and another song called “Horatta Nanga Horatta,” which talked about their struggle, was poignant and carried a radical texture. People in different haadis eagerly and deeply invested in the Gram Sabhas, eager to discuss and decide what was to be discussed and decided. From energetic youngsters to calm elderly men, from new leaders with well-matured ideas to active

old women throwing sharp criticisms, we could see a clash of ideas. In Padayathra, middle-aged women marched in the front rows, while teenage girls excitedly carried banners. In every haadi, the inhabitants welcomed the padyatris with aarti. People cooked food with great care for strangers they had never met before, united by a shared commitment to the struggle. In some haadis, such as Golur and Balle, even enthusiastic children took part in the Padyatra, believing they were fighting for a just cause. With passion and innocence, they raised revolutionary slogans, adding to the collective spirit of resistance.

Loot of Jal-jangal-jameen and Adivasi Resistance

Today in India, the nexus of the corporates, landlords, and their political pawns steamrolls Adivasis, peasants, and workers. Adivasis are being forcibly displaced in different parts of the country in the name of development (e.g., for mining in Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Odisha, Maharashtra, and Telangana) and conservation (e.g., in Karnataka and Madhya Pradesh). In the neoliberal era, displacement has intensified through corporatisation. Natural resources are increasingly opened to private capital through auctions, public-private partnerships, and policy reforms. Corporations benefit from state-backed land acquisition, tax concessions, and legal immunity, while displaced Adivasis are forced to wage labour and shift from subsistence-based autonomy to dependency on capitalist markets. National parks, wildlife sanctuaries, and tiger reserves are often created by evicting forest-dwelling communities who have lived there for generations. Adivasi communities that historically protected forests are portrayed as threats to wildlife, while resorts, safaris, and corporate eco-tourism projects flourish within or around protected areas. The Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006, was meant to correct historical injustice by recognising individual and community forest rights. In practice, its implementation has been systematically sabotaged. Claims are rejected en masse, community forest rights are denied, and evictions continue. Wherever displacement meets resistance, the Indian state responds with militarisation. Adivasi regions are among the most heavily policed and militarised areas in the country. Laws such as the fake-encounters, UAPA, sedition provisions, and preventive detention are used to silence dissent. Peaceful struggles for land and forest rights are criminalised, while state violence is normalised.

Despite centuries of dispossession, Adivasis continued their struggle against state oppression. From colonial-era rebellions to contemporary movements against dams, mines, and tiger reserves, resistance has been continuous. Movements for forest, land, and self-rule rights challenge the colonial-imperial model of development and conservation. Nagarhole today is not just a local forest conflict, it is a node of global capital, conservation ideology, state power, and Adivasi resistance. From colonial forest acts to World Bank eco-development projects, external forces have repeatedly shaped forest governance in ways that marginalize Adivasis. The Adivasi struggle in Nagarhole is the resistance to colonial forest laws, bureaucracy, and the imperial conservation model. Adivasi movements asserting Forest Rights Act claims, habitat rights, and community control are not anti-conservation, they are anti-imperial struggles for justice.

The main demands of Adivasis are :

1. Recognition of Forest Rights under FRA, 2006.

2. Set up a judicial inquiry committee to assess the effects of the declaration of the National Park and Tiger Reserve.
3. End of forced and coercive displacement and relocation of the displaced Adivasis in their original habitat with legal documents of land ownership.
4. Stop eco-tourism, safari, and commercial exploitation of Nagarhole.
5. Democratization of Forest Governance and inclusion of Adivasis in decision-making.
6. Rejection of the colonial-imperial model of conservation.