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## Systematic Denial of Natural Rights for Indigenous Communities: Gaps in the Implementation of the Forest Rights Act among Adivasi Communities in Karnataka

in Annihilate Caste by Dr Shantharaju S 04/01/2026



On paper, the Forest Rights Act, 2006 (FRA), appears to provide legal protection for primitive tribes in Karnataka, safeguarding native communities against eviction from their ancestral lands. However, in practice, the FRA has been systematically ignored, leaving primitive tribal communities of Karnataka in a state of limbo, unlike tribes of Kerala.

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The declaration of the Nagarahole forest as a National Wildlife Sanctuary in the 1960s and the subsequent construction of the Kabini reservoir for the river Kaveri displaced a significant portion of the Jenu Kuruba (Honey shepherds), Soliga, Betta Kuruba (Hill/mountain shepherds), Yerava, Paniya, and Vodiga tribes in the undivided Mysore district, including H.D. Kote, Hunsur and Chamarajanagar forest regions. The Jenu Kuruba, Soliga, and Yerava form a large section of the primitive tribes in Mysore, with a population of over 70,000, according to 2001 and 2011 census data. While some tribes had rehabilitated outside the declared forest by the 1980s, a majority of the Jenu Kurubas, Soligas, and Betta Kurubas continued to reside inside and on the fringes of forest lands. With each development project, including dam construction or tiger conservation initiatives, the natural rights of these communities are denied, making it a bureaucratic puzzle for the common tribal.

For instance, tribal activists point out the unnecessary documentation demanded by officials during the processing of land rights. Suresh, a Betta Kuruba tribal and an NGO worker, laughs at the bureaucratic demand for a family tree document (Vamsha Vruksha), questioning how a migrant family returning after decades would prove their ancestry on paper. Without the efforts of a few NGOs and their volunteers, no tribal person would have obtained land rights documents in the last 20 years, as understanding bureaucratic language is a challenging task.

It is not that the Forest Rights Act has not been implemented in Karnataka; rather, it is an inefficient system that has functioned at the discretion of authorities. After the Kabini Dam was constructed in H.D. Kote, a few hamlets were relocated within a 10 km radius and provided with substantial compensation packages, including financial compensation, land, and housing plots, during the 1970s and 1980s. However, not all hamlets received these benefits at once. Some received their share only in the 2000s after prolonged legal battles and civil society interventions. Hamlets located within forest areas are the last to receive compensation, and many residents wish to continue living on their ancestral lands. There are 22 such hamlets in the Nagarahole forest alone in H.D. Kote taluk, with more in the adjacent Hunsur Taluk and Bandipur forest regions.

While many have not received any land as per the FRA verdicts, land granted to some beneficiaries is misused or underutilised. According to field observations of L.C. Chennaraju, who has been actively working on watershed projects for the last 20 years in H.D. Kote, land benefits and usage vary due to multiple factors. Beneficiaries are allotted land of varying sizes, ranging from three guntas to three acres, based on assessments conducted by the Karnataka Forest Department and the Revenue Department. However, beneficiaries are required to prove their existence before the 1970s through evidence such as man-made structures, symbols, farming practices, or trees planted during that period. After completing the preliminary survey, the Forest Department imposed an additional requirement, mandating that beneficiaries must have been at least 18 years old by 2005. Such decisions place illiterate tribal communities in a difficult position. If a family migrated and their heir later returned to claim land rights, they may be deemed ineligible because they did not meet the age criteria. "As alcoholism is rampant in some hamlets, the early demise of the patriarch puts another challenge to many families" says Suresh.

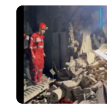
Among beneficiaries who have received land, there is often a lack of agricultural knowledge and a limited capacity to adapt to modern, market-



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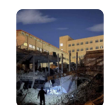
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driven, and intensive farming practices.

Due to limited exposure to alternative agricultural methods and a lack of farming tools, many beneficiaries lease their land to large farmers. These leases often span several years and involve one-time or annual contractual payments for cultivating cash crops such as tobacco and ginger. The extensive use of chemical inputs for these crops has led to soil degradation. This reflects the experience of many Betta Kurubas (Hill Shepherds) who received land under rehabilitation packages during the 2000s.

Some communities, such as that of the Jenu Kurubas, possess traditional agrarian knowledge, including practices like carving and sowing (Kettane–Bittane krushi) inside the forest flatland patches. These methods are restricted to growing certain millets during favourable monsoon seasons and are not intended for market-oriented production. Moreover, such practices are rapidly disappearing as younger generations migrate to work as labourers outside forest regions. A small number of beneficiaries have shifted toward cash-crop cultivation, which is often not economically sustainable and is vulnerable to market fluctuations.

Some communities have rejected proposed alternate lands due to geographical infeasibility for decades and have resisted persistent efforts by the Forest Department to relocate forest dwellers outside forest areas. Human–animal conflict also plays a significant role in disputes over land rights. At least seven tiger-related human deaths were recorded in the Nagarahole forest region of Karnataka in 2025 alone. Tribal activists argue that tiger conservation projects receive substantial institutional funding, which contributes to the Forest Department’s insensitive attitude toward tribal communities in forcing them out of forest hamlets.

“We have been running a school and hostel for tribal girls for the past 20 years. A very few of them attend college after completing their education here. Some marry off at a young age and go through the same cycle of their parents. I observed that the tribal communities moved out of their forest habitats face loneliness and always in constant mental depression as they are fundamentally forest dwellers. They have their own forms of farming methods and are able to survive even during extreme drought conditions as they know hundreds of edible greens and tubers. Our understanding of primitive communities is limited and influenced by mere economic models,” says L.C. Chennaraju.

The very institutions we have chosen to administer us require a holistic approach in rehabilitating the primitive tribe through the effective implementation of the FRA.

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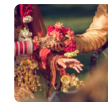
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**Dr. Shantharaju S is an environmentalist, documentary filmmaker, and currently teaches at Christ University, Bengaluru.**

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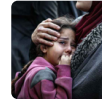
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