

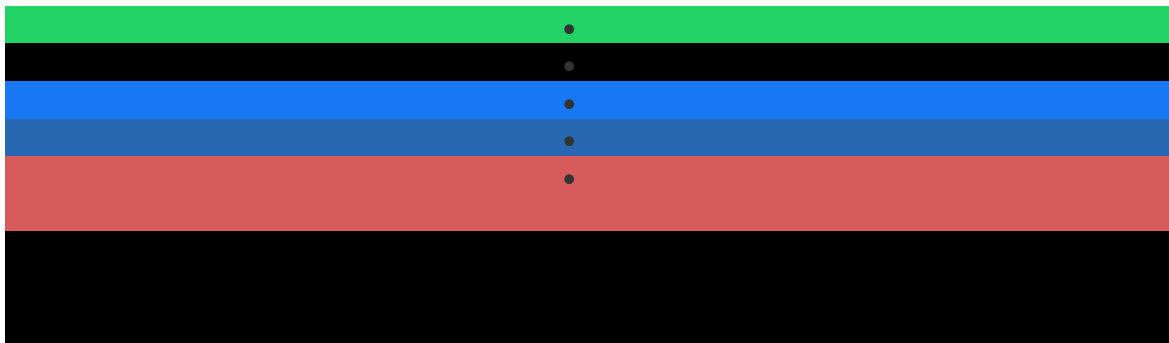
# On paper only: How Adivasis of this Kerala hamlet were stripped of their forest rights

*Encroachments, forged records and bulldozers are systematically eroding Moolagangal residents' ancestral claim while state schemes continue in their name*

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Moolagangal is a hamlet on the south-eastern edge of Attappady in Kerala's Palakkad district. It is home to 70 Adivasi families whose lives and cultural identity are inextricably linked to their ancestral forest lands. These 982.43 hectares of forest, falling under the Varadimala Adivaram Village Forest Committee in the Agali forest range of the Mannarkkad Forest Division (Palakkad District, Kerala), were legally recognised as Community Forest Rights (CFR) land under the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 (FRA).

The Act, particularly under Sections 3(1)(c) and 3(1)(d), guarantees forest-dwelling Scheduled Tribes the right to own, access, collect, use and dispose of minor forest produce, along with other community rights such as grazing and seasonal resource access.

Despite these protections, the Adivasis of Moolagangal face relentless dispossession, as their lands are being encroached upon, illegally transferred and denied to them—even as government schemes continue to operate in their name.

The land records of Moolagangal reveal a disturbing pattern of illegal transfers and encroachments. Different land survey numbers have been fraudulently recorded in the names of non-Adivasis, primarily from neighbouring Tamil Nadu and one non-profit trust, in clear violation of the FRA and the Kerala Scheduled Tribes (Restriction on Transfer of Lands and Restoration of Alienated Lands) Act, 1999 (KST Act). These transactions lack transparency and legal validity, yet they have effectively stripped the Adivasis of their rightful ownership.

The consequences of these illegal transfers are severe. Non-Adivasi claimants have fenced off large portions of the land, blocking the Adivasis' access to critical resources. In particular, two survey numbers now under non-tribal control cut off pathways to the Kodungarapuzha river, the community's cremation ground and their temple.

These areas are also vital for their traditional livelihoods, especially the collection of *chool pullu* (leaves used for making brooms) and the cultivation of millets for personal consumption. With their access denied, the Adivasis can no longer sustain their agroecological practices, forcing them into dependency on external food systems.

Adding to this injustice is the blatant misuse of government schemes meant for tribal welfare. Projects under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, agricultural schemes, soil conservation initiatives, National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development-funded programmes and drinking water projects are all being implemented in Moolagangal in the name of benefiting Adivasis.

However, the Revenue Office has explicitly stated that the land does not belong to them. This contradiction underscores a systemic exploitation in which funds are siphoned off in the name of tribal development, while the actual beneficiaries — the Adivasis — are excluded from their own land. As Sukumaran, an Adivasi activist from Moolagangal, starkly puts it, "For utilisation of funds, these are tribal lands. After that, they are not."

The physical destruction of the land further compounds the crisis. Large-scale clearing using heavy machinery such as bulldozers has devastated the forest ecosystem that once provided the Adivasis with food, medicine and cultural sustenance.

Large-scale clearing using heavy machinery such as bulldozers has devastated the forest ecosystem. Anjali Ashokan

The cleared land is reportedly being repurposed for commercial activities, including tourism infrastructure, which not only erases their heritage but also threatens their nutritional sovereignty. The loss of biodiverse forests means the disappearance of wild edibles, medicinal plants and traditional crops like millets, pushing the community towards monoculture diets and worsening food insecurity.

The situation in Moolagangal is not merely about land grabbing; it represents a broader erosion of Adivasi sovereignty. The FRA was designed to correct historical injustices by empowering forest-dwelling communities with legal rights over their resources. Yet, in Moolagangal, the law has been rendered toothless. The Project Officer of the Integrated Tribal Development Programme in Attappady, the Divisional Forest Officer of Mannarkkad and the District Collector of Palakkad have all acknowledged that the community forest area and its rights belong to the Adivasis. Despite this, no concrete action has been taken to restore their lands or hold the encroachers accountable.

The Adivasis of Moolagangal have been protesting and filing complaints, but their pleas have been met with bureaucratic apathy. Their struggle highlights a critical failure in the implementation of the FRA, where legal recognition does not translate to actual possession or protection. The case also exposes how state machinery, instead of upholding tribal rights, often facilitates their dispossession, whether through complicity in illegal land transfers or the mismanagement of welfare schemes.

The implications extend beyond Moolagangal. Across India, similar stories of Adivasi communities fighting for their FRA rights reveal a systemic pattern of neglect and exploitation. When laws meant to protect marginalised groups are undermined, it perpetuates cycles of poverty, displacement, and cultural erasure. For the Adivasis of Moolagangal, the risks are higher: without their land, they lose not just their livelihoods, but their identity, food systems, and intergenerational knowledge of forest ecosystems.

To address this crisis, immediate steps must be taken. First, the illegal land transfers must be nullified, and the rightful ownership of the Adivasis restored through proper verification of records. Second, the forest clearance activities must be halted, and the destroyed ecosystems rehabilitated with the participation of the Adivasi community. Finally, there must be greater accountability for officials who have failed to enforce the FRA and KST Act.

The case of Moolagangal is a litmus test for India's commitment to tribal rights and environmental justice. If the government cannot uphold the law in this small hamlet, it raises troubling questions about its ability to protect Adivasi communities nationwide. The time for empty promises is over; what Moolagangal needs is decisive action to reclaim what has been stolen: Their land, their rights, and their future.

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*Views expressed are the author's own and don't necessarily reflect those of Down To Earth*