

## Adivasi honey harvesters demand forest control and criticise 'unfriendly' conservation measures

Max Martin

11 months ago



- *Fragmentation, plantations and climate change threaten the Nilgiri forest of south India. Local indigenous communities such as the honey harvesting Jenu Kuruba adivasis want to conserve these forests using their traditional knowledge.*
- *Conservationists and forest officials offer to collaborate, in a clear shift from earlier practices that kept local communities away from the forests.*
- *However, there is still resistance from the Jenu Kuruba adivasis, as they criticise some conservation measures and demand more control over the forests, for conservation.*

As fragmentation of forests, commercial plantations and uncertain weather conditions

threaten the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve on the Western Ghats highlands in southern India, a community of indigenous honey harvesters say they know how best to conserve its biodiversity.

“Leave the conservation to us,” said Shesha, a youngster hailing from Sajjehalli Hadi, a hamlet of Jenu Kuruba people nestled in the foothills of the Western Ghats in the district of Kodagu (erstwhile Coorg) in Karnataka. At Sajjehalli Hadi, people used to live in small huts covered with leaves, amidst bamboo bushes. Now, they have thatched or tin-roofed huts, which have electricity and are also furnished. “Our great-grandfathers grew up here and we know the forest very well.” Shesha belongs to an adivasi group known for conserving bees that are essential not only for their livelihood but also the growth of forests and farms.



A hut belonging to a member of the Jenu Kuruba adivasi community. Photo by Max Martin.

---

The primary demand of the Jenu Kuruba people is to be allowed to plant forest trees in degraded patches and promote organic farming on the fringes of the jungle, where chemical-laced crops are keeping honeybees at bay. They say it is the best way to save the trinity they worship – forests, wild animals and people.

Idols of tigers, bears and human figures adorn places of worship on the edges of adivasi hamlets near Sajjehalli Hadi.

A recent NGO [report](#) notes that 1,353 families used to live in 45 villages within the Nagarhole Reserve and more on its peripheries, but many families were relocated. The villages belonged mainly to Jenu Kurubas, but also other communities such as Betta Kurubas, Yeravas and the Bedugas. There are also the designated sacred groves, ‘no-go’ areas hidden amidst around 25 different kinds of forestland, that they frequent for honey, soapnut, fungus, fruits and seeds.

The Jenu Kuruba people point at the remains of a resort project abandoned decades ago after their protest. Nilgiri forests have a [record](#) of forced eviction, violence and resistance. Even [last year](#), demonstrations were held by the same community, against a forced eviction from the tiger reserve.



Nagarhole Tiger Reserve. Idols of tigers, bears and human figures adorn places of worship on the edges of adivasi hamlets near Sajjehalli Hadi. [Photo](#) by Kabeerali bilal/Wikimedia Commons.

---

Forest officials, however, insist that [colonial conservation](#) practices that excluded the adivasis are an old story.

“There is no pressure (on the adivasis) to leave the forest,” said Harshakumar Chikkanaragund, Deputy Conservator of Forests and Director, Nagarhole Tiger Reserve. “They have been living in these forests from time immemorial. We learn from them and work with them.”

Meanwhile, the [Wildlife Conservation Society – India](#) (WCS-India), an NGO working on wildlife conservation, had earlier assisted the government in shifting adivasis from the reserve. However, the NGO no longer participates in any pre-relocation work that involves people leaving their forest homes. “We are moving with the times,” commented Vidya Athreya the new director and head of science and conservation at WCS-India. “The old generation had its own style.”

The NGO aims to help the adivasis with post-resettlement paperwork, and also help those who intend to be shifted to new places. Athreya, an expert in human-animal conflict, states that they cannot leave people midway. “We need to work with the communities to achieve long-term conservation goals,” she added.

## Threats to pollinators in the Nilgiri forests

The [Food and Agriculture Organisation \(FAO\)](#) observes World Bee Day on May 20, in a bid to “raise awareness on the essential role bees and other pollinators play in keeping people and the planet healthy, and on the many challenges they face today.”

The FAO has voiced its concerns on how bees and other pollinators are [declining in abundance](#), affecting food security. The Jenu Kuruba people’s respect for the bees is admired by scientists worldwide.

Over the past century, tea and coffee plantations spread along the Western Ghats has led to the [degradation of the Nilgiri Shola forests](#) and grasslands. [Bees die](#) when there is too much “parasites and pests, pathogens, poor nutrition, and sublethal exposure to pesticides,” scientists explain. A [2020 study](#) of the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve showed that the pollinator species count at each farm declined as its distance from the forest edge increased.

“Bees just disappear from our forests,” Shesha said, and attributed the cause to the use of chemicals in plantations.



Tea plants with a backdrop of the Western Ghats in Kerala. Some members of the Jenu Kuruba community attribute the decline in bee population to the use of chemicals and pesticides in tea and coffee plantations. [Photo](#) by Timothy A. Gonsalves/Wikimedia Commons.

---

Changing climatic conditions in the forests often bring unseasonal rains and long dry seasons with the added risk of forest fires. “There have been major changes over the last ten years,” said Robert Leo, an advisor to [Keystone Foundation](#), a conservation group that has been studying the Nilgiris for decades, based in Tamil Nadu’s Kotagiri.

“Bees need pollen to feed their brood. However, when there is no moisture in the ground, there is no flowering of the plants and there will be no pollen. They just abandon the hive. You can see empty hives in many places,” Leo said.

The adivasis, however, know the bees and their habitats well and diligently conserve them so that the bees can multiply. “They never damage the whole hive. Let it be a tree, cave or rock, they make sure never to destroy the bee habitat,” Leo added.

## **The honey harvesters and their traditional practices**

Jenu Kuruba children, as young as six years of age, learn how to harvest honey, revealed a co-

authored [study](#) on traditional knowledge among the Jenu Kuruba published in the journal *Evolution and Human Behaviour*. According to the study, the tribal community first takes honey from *koljenu* or the little honeybee (*Apis florea*) and *nasarajenu* or dammer bee (*Trigona* species) that nests on the edges of their hamlets. Sometimes, they allow the small bees to procreate in bamboo hives.

By the time the children reach the ages of 10-12, the boys in particular join an elderly relative to harvest honey from *thudujejenu* or the giant rock bee (*Apis dorsata*) combs in the forest. Then, when they reach 18 years of age, they look for the Asian honeybee (*Apis cerana*) nests in tree cavities, or rocky cliffs as high as 40 metres. Groups of three to eight people hold light smoky torches to subdue the bees, cut the comb and hold a basket to collect the honey.



*Apis florea* nest on a tree branch. Representative picture. [Photo](#) by Dragfyre/Wikimedia Commons.

The practice of honey harvesting is prevalent across the Nilgiri forests at different altitudes among other adivasi groups such as Kattunaickens, Kurumbas, Sholigas and Irulas. “They often sing a ritualistic honey song,” Kunal Sharma, an expert in conservation and sustainability at Azim Premji University, Bengaluru told Mongabay-India. “It is a chant, a drone; and it is mind-blowing.” Sharma is, however, concerned about honey harvesting

becoming more commercial rather than a lifestyle choice.

In the evenings at Sajjehalli Hadi, elders come back from plantation work in a pick-up van. They also cultivate coffee, yam, rice, maize and ginger in forestland they got under India's [Forest Rights Act 2006](#).

“Earlier, we had no courage to ask for anything,” said 60-year-old Muthamma. Now, she cultivates these crops on her own own farmland, along with her daughters and son. However, they also face troubles with crop damage due to untimely rain. They say that they seldom face any trouble from wild animals.

The cropping systems are traditional, without the use of pesticides. They use cow dung, cow urine and a mix of herbs to selectively drive out pests.

## **Conservation and activism by the Jenu Kuruba people**

The Jenu Kuruba people are critical of the Forest Department for what practices they term as “unfriendly measures”, such as installing metal rails, digging trenches and erecting electric fences that prevent animals from entering villages on the edges of the forests. “They kill the animals, and so animals turn violent. Animals need their space,” said Shivu J.A., an adivasi youth activist from Karadikkallu, a village close the Kerala state border.



A young man from the Jenu Kuruba tribe demonstrates how they use their bow. Photo by Max Martin.

---

Then what is the solution? “We can sense them when they are around, and they can sense us. So either we walk first, or we let them,” Shivu added.

Another adivasi member, Vasantha, reminisces how they co-existed in the forests with the animals, without any fear. “We shared this space with elephants. We had no fear. These forests are not just our mother and father, but also our temple. We live here, and our ancestors rest here. Animals are our family, and we live with them.”

Roy David, Director, Coorg Organisation for Rural Development, an NGO that espouses adivasi rights, is of the view that conservation is best done by the adivasis. He sees the demand of the adivasis in line with [Global Environmental Facility](#) work that supports biodiversity protection, nature restoration, and climate change response. While acknowledging the support of senior forest officials, he opined, “This wisdom does not percolate down to forest guards on field duty.”

In Nagarhole, at the Geddahadi hamlet, local leader J. K. Thimma says that the forest department plants teak, cuts trees for profit, and lets in vehicles for safari, “but they harass us

when we try to do something for a living. Give us the control, and we will show what a forest should look like.”



J K Thimma, leader of the Geddahadi hamlet in Nagarhole demands control of the forest. He works on adivasi rights issues. Photo by Max Martin.

Shivu who works with Thimma on adivasi rights issues, rifles through policy documents to list a number of provisions that could help them secure rights and support conservation. A sense of ownership of the forest can work wonders, still there are challenges. “Adivasis are the stewards of the forest, but access to the forest is a challenging issue for them,” said Anita Varghese, a forest ecologist and director of biodiversity programmes at Keystone Foundation.

She elaborated that collaborating with the adivasi community will boost conservation efforts, however, this leads to another challenge. “The question is how to meaningfully involve adivasis in conservation activities. A first step could be more involvement of local forest rights committees in their village councils for planning conservation measures.”

---

Read more: [Aadhimalai, winner of UN Equator Prize from Nilgiris, offers a lesson in indigenous economics](#)

I

---

**Banner image:** A woman from the Jenu Kuruba tribal community, at work. Photo by Max Martin.

Categories: [Uncategorized](#)

Tags: [bees](#), [community conservation](#), [conservation](#), [forests](#), [pollinators](#), [Trees](#)

---

**Mongabay-India**

[Back to top](#)

[Exit mobile version](#)