

**Survival**



For tribes, for nature,  
for all humanity

**Illegal evictions from India's tiger reserves**

# **The officials from the reserve forced us to leave**

**Subelal Dhurwey, Baiga tribe** Evicted from Kanha Tiger Reserve, India

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### Introduction

Tribal communities living in Indian tiger reserves are being illegally evicted from their ancestral homelands in the name of conservation. Tiger conservationists insist that these evictions are “voluntary relocations” but as this legal analysis proves, in many cases they are forced and therefore illegal.

Over 100,000 people have already been removed from protected areas in India.<sup>1</sup> In 2016, the head of the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) announced that almost 300,000 people, from over 700 villages, are also earmarked for relocation.<sup>2</sup> A further three to four million people live inside India’s protected areas and wildlife corridors with the threat of eviction hanging over them.<sup>3</sup> Millions more have been deprived fully or partially of their sources of livelihood and survival.<sup>4</sup>

Relocations are still planned in more than 35 tiger reserves,<sup>5</sup> including Achanakmar (in the state of Chhattisgarh), Amrabad (Telangana), Nagarhole (Karnataka), Kaziranga (Assam) and Similipal (Odisha), disproportionately affecting tribal people, Adivasis, from tribes including the Chenchu, Mising, Jenu Kuruba and Baiga.

If Adivasis’ land is stolen, all of their rights are violated, because their land provides food and housing and is also the foundation of their identity, belief system and sense of belonging.

Evictions are in breach of Adivasis’ constitutional rights, including their rights to a secure livelihood, to practice their religion and to protect their culture. National laws to protect Adivasis’ land and forest rights are poorly implemented and willfully ignored. Survival’s analysis of the law demonstrates how forced evictions are illegal under both national and international law.

While tribal people are evicted from their lands in the name of tiger conservation, fee paying tourists are welcomed in. Destructive industries, such as plantations and mining are also allowed. In 2019 the central government approved exploration for uranium ore in Amrabad Tiger Reserve, whilst Chenchu families living there were told to leave their homes to create an inviolate space for tigers.

While some communities may wish to relocate, many, especially those most closely connected to the forest, do not. Forest

**We were one of the last families to resist. But the officials from the reserve forced us to leave. They told us they’d take care of us for three years, but they didn’t do a thing. Even when my brother was killed, no one came to help us**

**Subelal Dhurwey, a young Baiga man whose brother, Sukhdev Dhurwey, was murdered after being evicted**  
Kanha Tiger Reserve

**The Forest Rights Act is not being respected. People are being expelled from the forest without being consulted**

**Pranab Doley, activist from the Mising tribe** Kaziranga National Park and Tiger Reserve

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officials claim that people have “agreed” to be relocated yet they often use coercion, harassment, false promises and threats and do not inform people of their right to say no.

The Adivasis who live in India’s tiger reserves have managed, protected and depended upon these lands for countless generations. This is why their forests are so appealing to conservationists.

Tribal people are the best guardians of their lands and should be at the forefront of efforts to help protect it. However, as this report shows, they are bearing the costs of an ill-conceived and ineffective model of conservation that must urgently be changed.

**We see the well-being of the forest as our duty, we protect the animals and plants of this wild forest without harming them. This forest is our home. The flora and fauna of this forest are part of our family**

**Open letter from Chenchu of the Nallamala forest** Amrabad Tiger Reserve



## **What does national law say?**

### **Provisions of the Forest Rights Act (FRA)**

The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act 2006 (known as the FRA) recognizes tribal people's individual and community rights to their land, including the sustainable use of forest products. It also recognizes "habitat rights" for those categorized as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups, such as the Baiga or Chenchu. It recognizes the right of tribal people "to protect, regenerate, or conserve or manage any community forest resource, which they have been traditionally protecting and conserving."

Section 4(2) states that forest rights holders can only be resettled from "critical wildlife habitats" if **all** the following conditions are met:

- Their rights must first be recognized and recorded;
- The government has established that the community is irreversibly harming wildlife and coexistence is not possible;
- A resettlement and rehabilitation package must have been prepared which offers a secure livelihood for the community;
- The community must give its free and informed consent, in writing, both to the resettlement and the proposed rehabilitation package. This must be done by the council of all adults in the village, known as the Gram Sabha.
- The rehabilitation facilities and land allocation must be complete.

**Any "voluntary relocation" which does not fulfil the above conditions is, therefore, an illegal eviction.**

### **Provisions of the Wildlife Protection Act (WLPA)**

In 2006, the Wildlife (Protection) Act was amended to recognize the rights of tribal peoples. Section 38V(5) of the Amendment states: "No Scheduled Tribes or other forest dwellers shall be resettled or have their rights adversely affected for the purpose of creating inviolate areas for tiger conservation" unless certain conditions are met. These clauses are similar to those in the Forest Rights Act, with the additional provision that the consent of the community must be gained to assess whether they are causing irrevocable harm and whether coexistence is possible.

**Any relocations that take place without the agreement of both the individuals concerned and the whole community are, therefore, illegal evictions.**

**The real truth is that they have been evicted by force. They have been beaten**

**JK Thimma, Jenu Kuruba leader talking about people who were "voluntarily relocated"** Nagarhole Tiger Reserve

**No, we don't want to leave, but again and again people are putting pressure on us to leave**

**Baiga father threatened with eviction** Achanakmar Tiger Reserve

### The Indian Constitution and PESA

India's tribal peoples are protected under the Constitution as "Scheduled Tribes" and by the Provisions of the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996, commonly known as PESA, which refers specifically to the "Scheduled Areas" (areas where the tribal population is more than 50%). PESA states that the Gram Sabha (village council) is the appropriate body for making the important decisions that affect tribal communities and is "competent to safeguard and preserve the traditions and customs" of the people. It should be consulted before any relocations or land acquisition and should "approve of the plans, programmes and projects for social and economic development before such plans, programmes and projects are taken up for implementation."

The Gram Sabha should, therefore, be the body which decides (freely and without coercion) what should happen to the community, its land and future. Evictions which bypass the Gram Sabha are therefore unconstitutional.

**Any relocation which bypasses the Gram Sabha is, therefore, an illegal eviction.**

The constitutional rights of Adivasis also include their rights to life, including an adequate means of livelihood (Article 21), to practice their religion and to protect their culture (Articles 39, 25 and 29).

**Any relocation process which violates these rights is therefore unconstitutional.**

**We are told this is a tiger reserve, you can't stay here, you can't build new houses, we are not allowed to conduct Gram Sabhas**

**Husain Swamy, Chenchu activist**  
Amrabad Tiger Reserve

**The Forest Department people came and said: "Orders came from above and you are going to be evicted from here"**

**Sarhau Baiga, Baiga farmer, forbidden from farming his land in Achanakmar Tiger Reserve** Achanakmar Tiger Reserve

## **How is national law being violated?**

Survival's investigations into evictions from nine tiger reserves across seven states, show that the necessary legal processes are not being carried out. The following summary looks at the provisions of the FRA and the WLPA and how they are being violated.

### **1. Forest rights are not being recognized and recorded prior to any relocations (FRA and WLPA)**

Prior to any relocation, forest rights processes must be followed, but many people interviewed by Survival have little understanding of their forest rights, have not had them officially recognized and should, therefore, not have been relocated. In many cases even the initial step of holding a Gram Sabha meeting was not taken before evictions occurred. Chenchu families from Amrabad Tiger Reserve have repeatedly been told by officials that forest rights don't apply inside the tiger reserve. Villagers due to be relocated imminently from Achanakmar had never been told about their forest rights. Many applications for forest rights in tiger reserves have been ignored or rejected.

### **2. The government is not providing evidence that communities are harming wildlife and cannot coexist with it (WLPA)**

Survival has yet to find a single example of Forest Department officials collating this proof, discussing it with the Gram Sabha and showing that coexistence is impossible. Nor have we found evidence that consent to such conclusions has been given by any community. In Biligiri Rangaswamy Temple Tiger Reserve (BRT) (Karnataka) the reverse has been shown: when the Soliga tribe had their rights to live in a tiger reserve recognized, tiger numbers increased far more than the national average.<sup>6</sup>

In 2018 it was reported that Karnataka, the state with the most tigers, also had the largest number of people living inside the core of its tiger reserves.<sup>7</sup>

All the tribal people Survival has interviewed are adamant that they are not causing irreversible damage and that coexistence is not only possible, but in many cases necessary. Baiga from Achanakmar told Survival, "How can Baiga harm the jungle? Only we can save the jungle. If we are here, only then will

**The Tribal Welfare Department, the Forest Department and the Revenue Department all tell us that the Forest Rights Act doesn't apply in the tiger reserve**

**Thokala Guruvaiah, Chenchu leader**  
Amrabad Tiger Reserve

**We have been the ones that look out for tigers. You remove us, and you remove the tigers**

**Madegowda C, Soliga activist** BRT  
Tiger Reserve

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the jungle remain.” The Chenchu in Amrabad Tiger Reserve explained, “We have been living with wildlife for generations and we have never faced any problems. They are our relatives. The tiger is our big son and god.” Similar sentiments were repeated in every tiger reserve we have studied.

Renowned Indian expert on conservation and communities, Ashish Kothari, filed a Right to Information request to the NTCA asking for evidence that coexistence had ever been proved impossible in any tiger reserve. The NTCA couldn't provide any.<sup>8</sup>

On the contrary, there is mounting global evidence that recognizing tribal communities' land rights is the most effective way to lower the incidence of poaching, wildfires, illegal logging and encroachment.<sup>9</sup>

### **3. Resettlement packages do not offer a secure livelihood for the community (FRA and WLPA)**

Most tribal people living in tiger reserves have a largely sustainable livelihood involving gathering minor forest products and small-scale farming. Relocation packages aim to sever communities' connection with the forest, which is at the heart of their physical and spiritual lives.

Untenable assumptions are often made by conservationists about how readily people can make radical changes, such as from reliance on the forest to farming, and how secure such livelihoods will be. Monetary assistance for these new livelihoods is often promised but not delivered, or is significantly less than promised. In several cases, promises of fertile land have materialized as barren, un-farmable land, leaving the resettled communities no option but to trek back and forth to the forest, attempting to continue their previous livelihoods. Of course, with their land now out of bounds, this is done under even greater threat of arrest, beatings, and imprisonment.

Villagers evicted from Achanakmar Tiger Reserve in 2009 were allocated poor, non-irrigated land, which was too dry to cultivate. Jobs promised at the time of the relocations have not materialized many years later and people struggle to grow anything on the barren land.

**Any relocation which does not offer a secure livelihood for the community is therefore both illegal and unconstitutional.**

**The National Tiger Conservation Authority has been unable to provide a single document or study specific to any of the declared critical tiger habitats that establishes irreversible damage is occurring and coexistence is not possible**

**Ashish Kothari, environmentalist**  
Kalpavriksh Environment Action Group

**We got some [compensation] money, but we are lost - wandering in search of land. Here there is only sadness. We need the jungle**

**A Baiga man evicted from Jholar village** Kanha Tiger Reserve





### 4. The communities do not give their free and informed consent (WPLA & FRA)

Officials usually claim that tribespeople have “agreed” to relocation and rehabilitation packages. Clearly, any agreement to relocate can only count as “free and informed consent” if it is made with no coercion, in full knowledge of the facts.

However, in all the cases of relocation that Survival has investigated, villagers report that the Forest Department waged a campaign of harassment and threats against them so great that finally, exhausted, they “agreed” to move. This includes filing, or threatening to file, false legal cases against leaders who resist.<sup>10</sup> Communities are also denied basic amenities, such as schools and health clinics, which they are entitled to by law, and told these will only be provided once they’ve moved out of the forest. Obviously these relocations aren’t “voluntary” at all.

Significantly, villagers are rarely, if ever, told that they do have the right to say “no” to their relocation. Obviously, if tribespeople are not told they can choose to stay on their land, any subsequent “consent” to leave cannot have been “informed.”

**Relocations taking place in these circumstances are therefore illegal.**

#### Achanakmar Tiger Reserve

Baiga families told Survival that they absolutely did not want to relocate. However, the authorities hadn’t informed them that they were able to remain on their land if they preferred. Forest Department officials threatened to release bears and poisonous snakes into villages to drive the inhabitants out. They made the villagers’ lives impossible by preventing them from collecting *anything* from the forest, to the extent that families feared they would starve to death if they remained. The villagers explained to Survival investigators that Forest Department officials hounded them to leave with such intensity that they couldn’t withstand the pressure any longer and finally “agreed” to the relocation package against their wishes.

WWF (World Wide Fund for Nature) is complicit in evictions. It has been working for the conservation of Achanakmar and surrounding forests since 2003 and has supported the forest guards with vehicles, equipment and training.<sup>11</sup>

**When do we ever have a choice? We were bundled here in trucks and left under a few trees, and had to live through the summer and the rains while the houses were built**

**Tugur Baiga, Baiga grandfather**  
Achanakmar Tiger Reserve

**There is a proposal to relocate the villages out of the Tiger Reserve’s core area... positively impacting the habitat leading to regeneration of grasslands and water bodies free of disturbance, which in turn will help the tiger population to grow**

**WWF website:** “Conserving the frontiers of Central India’s wilderness.”

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### Similipal Tiger Reserve

The Similipal authorities claimed that Munda villagers from Jamunagarh “voluntarily” relocated from Similipal Tiger Reserve in 2015.<sup>12</sup> However, Survival received testimony from individuals who had been present at a pivotal village council meeting.

Sukuram Soy told Survival, “Unknowingly I gave my signature, I didn’t know what was in the paper, other people near me signed so I signed it too. I cannot read or write but can only sign my name.” Another said that he signed the document in the belief that it was a register of attendance at the meeting. He said, “Later we heard that it was the resolution in agreement for relocation.” This document was then used by the Forest Department as evidence of their “consent” to relocation.

**These relocations were clearly undertaken without the informed consent of the villagers and were therefore illegal evictions.**

In December 2013, 34 families from the hunter-gatherer Khadia tribe were evicted from their villages inside Similipal Tiger Reserve. They reported that they were forced out of their homes through a combination of “threats and deceit.” One Khadia woman told researchers, “The government wanted us to move out of the forest before anyone had the slightest chance to convince us otherwise.”

**Despite Forest Department claims that this eviction was voluntary, agreeing to move without true consent means the evictions were forced and therefore illegal.**

### Nagarhole Tiger Reserve

Jenu Kuruba recently evicted from Nagarhole Tiger Reserve told Survival, “What the Forest Department did with us before the eviction was a kind of torture. They said we killed animals, they put false charges against us, and they didn’t allow us to do anything in the forest.”

They also reported that they were misled about the relocation package they would receive and that they felt tricked into giving up their rights to live in the forest.

Villagers were initially told they would receive 15 Lakh (approximately US \$21,000) and would be given education and health facilities at the new site. They reported that only after they signed and accepted the resettlement package did they discover

**Really, most people signed out of fear, but people have been threatened and harassed and they agreed to go to escape from this trauma. They don’t know what life will be like there. They agreed to sign because they were frightened**

**Jamunagarh villager, Munda tribe**  
Similipal Tiger Reserve

**The entire relocation process is being carried out only after the consent of the villagers in the Gram Sabhas. The forest settlers have been given all the rights that have been laid down in the Forest Act**

**Ajit Satapathy, Deputy Director**  
Similipal Tiger Reserve

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that the cost of the houses and other facilities would be taken out of their compensation, and so they would get much less money than they were expecting. When they asked for a copy of the agreement letter they had just signed, the Forest Department refused to give them one.

**These relocations were clearly undertaken under duress and without the informed consent of the villagers and were therefore illegal evictions.**

### 5. The rehabilitation facilities and land allocation must be complete (FRA)

Promises of land, amenities and compensation, which are used to lure people to leave their homes, regularly fail to materialize. Families often find life significantly harder on the outside. In 2013, when Khadia families were evicted from Similipal to the relocation site at Asankudar, they were promised that good quality houses with basic facilities would be ready before they moved.

Instead, when they arrived there, they found merely black plastic shelters on barren land. They were forced to live in these makeshift homes for many months, until they could build their own houses. It was impossible for the families to make a living from this land, so they were totally dependent on hand-outs from the government.

According to the National Tiger Conservation Authority guidelines, “handholding” of newly relocated families “must be ensured” and committees should be set up from village to district levels to oversee the whole process and ensure nothing goes awry. Grievance mechanisms are also necessary. However, many people evicted from different tiger reserves have reported to Survival that they did not get what they were promised and were left entirely to fend for themselves in totally alien circumstances.

A Baiga man evicted from Achanakmar in 2009 said, “They promised us: ‘We are going to give you good land, water supply, a house, five years of work, we will support you for five years.’ But that didn’t happen. We got labor work, sometimes for 15 days, sometimes for one month, but we haven’t even got the money from that. Now we are not even getting that work.”

Whole communities have been scattered and thereby destroyed. People from Kanha, evicted in 2014, do not even know where

**Now people are scattered everywhere. Nothing was sorted out for them. They’ve been abandoned**

**Sher Singh, Baiga activist** Kanha Tiger Reserve

**We have been there. Seeing their condition made my heart cry. Please don’t displace us**

**Telenga Hassa, Munda leader, after visiting Khadia families at Asankudar resettlement site** Similipal Tiger Reserve

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the families they lived with for generations have ended up.

Jenu Kuruba evicted from Nagarhole Tiger Reserve in 2018 told Survival that they were promised they'd be supported for two years but, "We came here, and nobody is taking care of us. Even the land is not in our name. Life is very difficult here."

The NTCA guidelines stipulate that families should be given a choice: financial compensation or direct help from the Forest Department with housing, land, community facilities etc. In Kanha, families reported no choice was offered. In Similipal, families were offered only houses and no land.

Families in Kanha who were promised monetary compensation have reported that when they tried to access their money, there was none in their relocation fund accounts.

When a High Court Committee investigated the situation of tribal people in the resettlement sites of Nagarhole Tiger Reserve, they concluded damningly, "We have not found a single tribal enjoying the fruits of development."<sup>13</sup>

### 6. Constitutional breaches

#### The Gram Sabha

Under the Constitution and PESA, the Gram Sabha should decide what happens to the community, its land and future.

The Gram Sabha, the root of Indian democracy, is regularly sidelined and ignored in tiger reserve relocations. It should be involved in every stage of the process and should be the single collective body to decide whether a community is relocated or not. In both Achanakmar and Amrabad Tiger Reserves, plans for relocations are underway but Gram Sabhas haven't been called or consulted. Survival has received reports that Chenchu families threatened with relocation from Amrabad have been told by the Forest Department they cannot hold Gram Sabhas.

In several villages in Kanha, such as Jholar and Ajanpur, for example, families were coerced and threatened individually or in small groups into "agreeing" to leave their forest homes, rather than the Forest Department respecting the authority of the whole Gram Sabha. Relocations were then piecemeal, scattering and destroying whole communities.

**They said do your signature here and I did it. I didn't understand what the paper said**

**Ashok, Gond man evicted from Jami village** Kanha Tiger Reserve

**There are lots of restrictions: they are making our lives miserable**

**JJ Thimappa, Jenu Kuruba elder** Nagarhole Tiger Reserve

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**Any “voluntary relocation” which does not receive the consent of the Gram Sabha is unconstitutional and is therefore an illegal eviction.**

The right to live with human dignity

The Supreme Court has repeatedly held that Article 21 of the Constitution includes not only the physical right to life, but also the right to live with human dignity. This includes the right to “adequate nutrition, clothing and shelter over the head.” The Forest Department, by banning tribal people from collecting food, medicines and the materials they need to build their houses, is denying them their constitutional rights to live with dignity.

The Forest Department regularly violates this right when it tries to coerce villagers to leave, by making their lives inside a tiger reserve all but impossible. This is done by banning them from collecting even firewood or medicines from the forest and from visiting their sacred sites (also violating their constitutional right to practice their religion). Many live in fear of being arrested, or even beaten or shot, for collecting the things they need to survive. In Nagarhole Tiger Reserve, villagers told Survival they were treated like “thieves” and one man was shot for collecting mushrooms. In many reserves, people have reported that they are also stopped from collecting the resources they need to repair and maintain their houses.

These restrictions mean that tribal people often feel they have no choice but to “agree” to leave – it is like someone who lives in a town being forced to accept relocation because they are told the power, water, and food supplies to their house will be cut off.

**Relocations under these conditions cannot be viewed as “voluntary” and are therefore both forced and illegal.**

### **7. Violation of the Scheduled Castes and Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989 (Atrocities Act)**

Individuals strongly resisting relocation are often threatened and abused by forest officers. Telenga Hassa, a Munda man from Similipal Tiger Reserve, feared for his life after threats from forest officers. He told Survival, “The Forest Department is pressurizing us to go – they are giving a lot of threats to us, saying things like, ‘If you try to stay we will lodge many police cases against

**The authorities stop us from practicing our traditional customs, our rituals and our way of life. They tell us we can’t do these things inside the forest**

**J K Thimma, Jenu Kuruba** Nagarhole Tiger Reserve

**They’ve been placing restrictions on us for two or three years. They don’t let us live. They are harsh and strict. They put us in jail for nothing and are making it difficult for us to live**

**Shanti, Baiga mother, harassed for collecting herbs and medicines from the forest** Achanakmar Tiger Reserve

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you, we will say that you are Maoists and we'll arrest you.” Many Baiga and Jenu Kuruba also report that they've had false cases filed against them. It is a criminal offence to institute a “false, malicious or vexatious” suit or case against a member of a Scheduled Tribe.

Similarly, anyone who “forces or causes a member of a Scheduled Tribe to leave his house, village or other place of residence” or “wrongfully dispossesses” him from his land or “interferes with his enjoyment of his rights, including forest rights” is in violation of the Atrocities Act.

**Therefore any relocation where people are threatened with false cases, or forced in other ways to leave their houses or land is illegal.**

### 8. Violation of Right to Education Act, 2009

To encourage relocation, tribal people are often denied facilities and access to government schemes inside the forest, despite being entitled to them by laws like the Right to Education Act.

They are promised they will have schools and clinics when they are relocated, but these often don't materialize. Nine years after communities were evicted from Achanakmar, the school in Bokra Kachar resettlement village had still not been finished.

**Any relocation that uses the denial of access to education as a means to pressure people to relocate cannot be described as “voluntary” and is therefore illegal.**

**The forest guards threaten us, they tell us that it's a crime to go into the jungle**

**Sirhu, Baiga man threatened with eviction** Achanakmar Tiger Reserve

**It was a kind of torture. We were much happier before the tiger reserve was created. Then they started building trenches. It was like they were building walls around our lives.**

**Jenu Kuruba leader, anonymous to avoid reprisals** Nagarhole Tiger Reserve





## **Violations of international law and commitments**

Evicting communities from their lands without their free, prior and informed consent is also illegal under the international law for tribal peoples, ILO Convention 169 (Article 16).

India supports the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), which states: *“Indigenous peoples shall not be forcibly removed from their lands or territories. No relocation shall take place without the free, prior and informed consent of the indigenous peoples concerned and after agreement on just and fair compensation and, where possible, with the option of return.”*

UNDRIP also enshrines indigenous peoples’ rights to:

1. *manifest, practice, develop and teach their spiritual and religious traditions, customs and ceremonies*
2. *maintain, protect, and have access in privacy to their religious and cultural sites*
3. *participate in decision-making in matters which would affect their rights, through representatives chosen by themselves*
4. *be secure in the enjoyment of their own means of subsistence and development*
5. *engage freely in all their traditional and other economic activities*
6. *maintain and strengthen their distinctive spiritual relationship with their traditional lands*

All of these rights – and a number of other fundamental human rights - are threatened when tribal people are removed from their lands without their free, prior and informed consent.

India is a signatory to the Civil and Political Rights Covenant, which enshrines several rights which are violated by illegal evictions including the right to self-determination, religious and cultural freedom.

To tribal peoples, the connection to their land is at the very heart of their existence; to be forcibly removed from it makes their enjoyment of any of their human rights impossible. Many view it as a death sentence.

**Relocations that take place without free, prior and informed consent and in violation of the rights enshrined in ILO 169 and UNDRIP are therefore illegal under international law.**

**The Forest Department threatened they will let loose wild animals and frame us in animal poaching cases. They demolished our huts and stole our food**

**Karan, Baiga man evicted from tiger corridor near Achanakmar Tiger Reserve**

**We will not move even if we die, we have been here since the time of our ancestors. Our relationship with the forest is like a mother and a child. We can't survive outside the forest**

**Husain Swamy, Chenchu activist  
Amrabad Tiger Reserve**

### **Involvement of international conservation organizations**

Evictions are carried out by India's Forest Department but big conservation organizations, such as the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) and WWF, are guilty of supporting them, both directly and indirectly. For many years WCS India has led the call for the relocation of tribal people from tiger reserves.<sup>14</sup>

In 2019 WCS India ran a training course on "voluntary relocation for Tiger Reserves" for India Forest Service officials from 14 states, jointly organized by WCS-India and the Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change.<sup>15</sup> They have also received funds from the US Fish and Wildlife Service to "facilitate government-sponsored, voluntary relocation of forest-interior families to new sites outside the forest."<sup>16</sup>

JK Thimma, a Jenu Kuruba leader, from Nagarhole Tiger Reserve told Survival, "WCS and Living Inspiration for Tribals (LIFT) go to the Forest Department and bring officials and come here to tell us to leave."

WWF and WCS are complicit in evictions and human rights violations. WWF trains and equips forest guards who not only illegally evict communities from their homes but also kill and torture tribal people.<sup>17</sup> Those living in tiger reserves generally feel threatened by both WWF and the Forest Department; they see them as the same thing.

WWF India's CEO advised on drafting the draconian amendment to the Indian Forest Act, which, had it not been withdrawn, would have militarized India's forests, given guards the power to kill with virtual impunity and allowed the authorities to take away forest rights in the name of conservation.<sup>18</sup>

In order to best guarantee the survival of the tiger, the big conservation organizations should be helping protect tribal peoples' rights. Conservation will not work without the support of the local communities. As Rohit Singh, a WWF wildlife crime expert has said, "It doesn't matter how effective your rangers are, if the people around the park hate you, you can't protect the park."<sup>19</sup>

**Evicting tribes from their ancestral lands not only destroys them, it is counterproductive for conservation and, as this report shows, is illegal under Indian and international law.**

**What kind of a future can the children of forest dwellers look forward to if they continue to be stuck inside nature reserves?**

**WCS film:** "Making room for nature - by helping people"

**To the best of our knowledge, the relocations have been voluntary and have largely followed the due process as laid down by law**

**Ravi Singh, CEO WWF-India**

(In correspondence with Survival, our emphasis)

## Conclusion

As this legal analysis unequivocally demonstrates, evictions of tribal people from tiger reserves in India are taking place without their free, informed consent and in violation of relevant laws.

**This means these evictions cannot be classed as “voluntary” and are therefore illegal under both Indian and international law.**

Tribal people are the best conservationists, as increasing international evidence shows.<sup>20</sup> This is also demonstrated by the Soliga’s protection of their forests and its tigers and by the spiritual connection between many tribes and the wildlife they live with. They have much more motivation to protect and sustain their lands than forest guards. Tribal peoples are the best guardians of their lands and should be at the forefront of conservation, not suffering because of it.

The idea of inviolate spaces as a tool of conservation should be revised. A new model of conservation is needed that puts tribal peoples at its heart. It’s best for tribes, for nature, and for all humanity.

Survival is calling for a moratorium on all relocations from tiger reserves; for an independent investigation into instances of forced evictions and for those within the Forest Department responsible for illegal evictions to be brought to justice.

Those who have been illegally and forcibly evicted must be allowed to return, if they wish to do so. It is essential that the Forest Rights Act be fully implemented – tribal peoples must not be relocated from India’s tiger reserves without their genuine free, prior and informed consent and with the full protection of the law.

Learn more: visit [svlint.org/tigerreserves](http://svlint.org/tigerreserves)

Take action:

Please write to the Indian government calling for an end to illegal evictions from tiger reserves: visit: [svlint.org/StopEvictions](http://svlint.org/StopEvictions)

**People are being forced to leave. The Forest Department are controlling everything. Six villages have already been thrown out and we are to be the next**

**A Baiga man threatened with eviction from Chaparwa village** Achanakmar Tiger Reserve

**We’ve lived together with tigers for centuries. We revere the tiger as a deity; we have tiger shrines over in the forest. The conservationists from the city don’t understand the forest. As long as we’re alive the tigers will still be safe. If we disappear, the loggers and poachers will have free rein**

**Muthamma, Jenu Kuruba leader and matriach** Nagarhole Tiger Reserve



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