

Haritha Haram and forest rights: How a scheme to increase green cover has upended the lives of Telangana's tribals

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A Gutti Koya farmer from Jalagancha stands over the land he cultivated in the past, which now lies barren. All photographs by the author

We were dragged out of our lands and thrown into buses,” narrates Narsamma, a 45-year-old Koya Adivasi farmer from the Satyanarayanapuram village in Bhadrachalam district, Telangana. Hers is among 81 other Koya families from this village to be evicted from their agricultural lands in the last week of June. Satyanarayanapuram is a small village, home to the forest-dwelling Koyas, who have been cultivating lands here for over 22 years.

These evictions are the result of a plantation drive called ‘Haritha Haram’ by the Telangana government. The Telangana Ku Haritha Haram (which translates to A Green Garland for Telangana) scheme, as it is officially known, was launched on 3 July, 2015, by Chief Minister Kalvakuntla Chandrababu Naidu to raise vegetation levels in the state from [24 percent to 33 percent](#).

Ever since the beginning of this initiative, the resultant plantation drives have allegedly disturbed various Adivasi-inhabited regions.

The last 11 days of June saw the residents of Satyanarayanapuram camping on their 200-acre agricultural lands, to prevent them from being seized. Their fate is just like lakhs of other forest-dwelling Adivasi communities in the country – they don’t have the necessary documents to prove ownership, and they have been fighting for decades to prove that they rightfully deserve land titles.

Legal entanglements and loopholes

According to Section 4 (3) of The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 – which is commonly referred to as the Forest Rights Act (FRA) 2006 – tribes and other traditional forest dwellers are entitled to up to four hectares of land, if the land was used as an occupational source and was being cultivated on or before 13 December 2005.

This Act was an attempt to recognise forest-dwelling communities as a part of the ecosystem and to ensure their livelihood as the traditional residents of the land. Despite the Act granting lands by recognising dwellers, according to the [data](#) collected by the Union Ministry of Tribal Affairs in 2017, 80,890 claims out of a total of 1,86,535 received by the government from across the country were rejected without providing valid reasons.

The Koyas of Satyanarayanapuram have been trying to get documentation for their lands for many years, in vain. In 2002, cases were booked against a few villagers under Section 20 (1) (C) (ii), (iii), (iv), (vii) of the Andhra Pradesh Forest Act 1967, for illegal cultivation in Reserved Forest Areas. Ironically, it is the Preliminary Offence Report filed in this 2002 case that is the only existing proof the villagers can present, to state that they have been cultivating these lands before December 2005, thereby making them eligible for land titles under FRA 2006.

On 25 June, 2020, CM Rao inaugurated Haritha Haram's sixth phase. "We cooked and slept in the forest for 11 days. Forest officials and the police would visit the land every day, asking us to evacuate. We refused to give in, and it eventually enraged them. We asserted that these lands had been used for cultivation for more than 20 years, but they rejected our plea since we did not possess the required documents," Narsamma says. Even after they presented the Preliminary Offence Report from 2002, the officials still went ahead and evicted them.

Despite the Scheduled Area Land Transfer Regulation 1 of 1970, commonly known as 1/70, which prohibits the transfer of Adivasi land to non-tribals to safeguard forest-dwelling communities in Scheduled Areas, plantation drives have been conducted at a vast scale without giving intimation to gram sabhas.

Sanjeev Gumpenapalli, a student of law and a Koya Adivasi hailing from the Bhadradi-Kothagudem district, says, "The State is considered to be a non-tribe. Acquiring land for anything in a Scheduled Area, including social forestry, without taking permission from the gram sabha is illegal. Acquiring means taking a position, so it indicates that these plantation drives are also a way of positioning themselves as controllers of the land."

According to residents and local activists, gram sabhas are hardly ever informed about government intervention in these lands. "My permission was not sought before the officials entered the area. To my knowledge, the villagers have been practising *podu* cultivation there for over 20 years, but I do not wish to be involved in this conflict. Days after the officials started approaching the villagers to evict them, to plant saplings in their *podu* lands, they came to me asking me to coerce the tribals to move out, but I refused to do so," says Srinu, the Sarpanch of Satyanarayanapuram.

As reported by *Telangana Today*, the Minister of Forests and Environment of Telangana, Allola Indrakaran Reddy, announced at the launch of the sixth phase of Haritha Haram that 182 crore saplings have been planted since 2015, and that the Telangana government aims to plant 230 crore more across the state to reach its goal. "Thousands of villages across the state have fallen prey to this scheme. The Forest Department has been conducting plantation drives exclusively in the areas where tribals have been cultivating for several generations," says activist Lingaswamy who hails from Bhadradi-Kothagudem.

A [response to an RTI](#) filed by activist J Sudheer states that thus far, Rs. 4572.94 crore were spent on Haritha Haram from the time of its launch in 2015 to 4 September 2020. It received Rs 26.76 lakh as a donation. The RTI also revealed that 203 crore saplings were planted during the past five years, although there is no data on the number of saplings that have survived.

Responding to the [Writ Petition](#) filed in 2008 by Wildlife First and several other prominent wildlife NGOs questioning the constitutional validity of FRA 2006, the [Supreme Court passed an order](#) on 13 February, 2019, directing states to evict up to two million forest dwellers,

whose claims had been rejected. On 28 February 2019, the bench [deferred the eviction order](#) and instead demanded a [review](#) on the process of the implementation of the Act and if the state governments duly followed procedures before rejecting pleas for land titles.

Uke Ramakrishna Dora, State President of the Adivasi Rachiyetala Sangham, says that “between 2002 to 2004, up to three lakh tribals were evicted from their lands in the name of development and conservation. Regardless of the FRA being passed, not much has changed. Scheme after scheme falls into place to drive the traditional forest-dwelling communities away from their lands.”

Growing dissent

Several [clashes](#) between the tribals and the Forest Department have been reported since the implementation of Haritha Haram. “The officers visited us for 11 days and then turned up with a large troop. It seemed like they were everywhere in the forest, their jeeps and vans surrounded us. We were told that they were charging 20 of us with cases, and we were pushed into their vehicles. Our lands have been targeted before, but this was the first time we were being physically attacked,” Narsamma says, in distress.

“It was chaos. Children were crying and watching their mothers being pushed away into vehicles. We sat there for 11 days with barely any belongings, with the real threat of being bitten by insects and snakes. We had spent the last few months ploughing the land and sowing jowar, red gram and corn seeds, which had begun to sprout. They came and destroyed all that,” she alleges.



Koya Farmers in the Bhadradi-Kothagudem district, indicating how only a few saplings from the plantation drive have managed to survive.

The villagers and activists say that three members of the community had been severely injured, and some of the elderly had to be rushed to the hospital as they were trampled amid the chaos.

“I was trying to stop them. They were taking away young children, and this could jeopardise their future” says 60-year-old Venkatamma, “Troops were all over, and I kept insisting they leave youngsters out of this. I fell and couldn't manage to get up, and I was trampled on. My husband and I have worked for most of our lives on these lands, why are these people claiming that we are the encroachers?” she says.

As [reported](#) by *NewsClick*, by the end of July, tribals in 13 villages resisted the Forest Department's actions. Social activists and political leaders from opposition parties have consistently criticised

Haritha Haram. Gudur Narayana Reddy, the treasurer of the Congress Committee (Telangana Pradesh), demanded a census of every single tree to prove the authenticity of the project in a press conference held on 20 July. He accused the government of scamming in the name of a plantation drive and also revealed that Rs 3,630 crore was spent on Haritha Haram in the past five years, by quoting an RTI query.

However, government officials have rejected claims of attacks on the villagers by the Forest Department. The Chief Conservator of Forests (CCF) PV Raja Rao [told The News Minute](#) that according to the Forest Rights Act, the officials working in the forest do not touch the lands where dwellers have valid documents. He said that if an individual from the forest Department tries to interfere or does something that violates the Act, they will have to bear the consequences. He also asserted that action would be taken against a forest official on the grounds of inefficiency if they are found to be incapable of protecting the forest department's land when someone tries to infringe upon it or cultivate anything on it.

P Gowtham, the Project Officer at ITDA Bhadrachalam, also told *The News Minute* that there were no FRA claims pending in Satyanarayanapuram, as opposed to the allegations being made. He stated that officials were not approaching anyone who possessed documents and said they would set up an inquiry if they received any complaints against officials who were conducting plantation drives on lands where people had titles.

The National Herald [reported](#) that activists had appealed to Arjun Munda, the Union Minister of Tribal Affairs, stating that the use of Compensatory Afforestation Fund Management (CAMPA) for Haritha Haram, which is undermining the fundamental rights of tribals, needs to be thoroughly reviewed, while expressing their concerns about the considerable social distress that this scheme is causing to tribals in Telangana.

Legislation versus reality

Procuring documents by proving ownership under the guidelines of FRA 2006 has been a long, arduous process for indigenous communities across India. The government has labelled traditional forest dwellers as being encroachers without conducting proper land surveys. "Officers have been visiting our villages for more than ten years! We cooked for them, we worked as daily wage labourers when they needed us to. How could they call us encroachers?" Narsamma asks in despair. According to the Panchayat (Extension to Scheduled Areas) (PESA) Act 1996, panchayats in a Scheduled Area are empowered to prevent alienation of any land that takes place unlawfully. Although the Act protects the rights of tribals, the ground reality is that implementation is challenging due to constant systemic repression of tribals at the hands of the State.

The incident at Satyanarayanapuram is one among many similar ones that have unfolded in the state's Adivasi villages – some of which are as recent as the last five years. In September 2017, 200 forest officers arrived at Jalagalancha village in Jayashankar Bhupalapally district and razed the homes of 36 Gutti Koya families with tractors, claiming they were encroachers. The villagers were beaten up, and the women abused. The Gutti Koyas migrated from Chhattisgarh to Telangana more than 15 years ago. They possess Aadhaar cards and voter IDs, which recognise them as residents of Telangana.

This case sparked significant outrage from activists and opposition parties, following which, in 2017, a division bench of the High Court directed the government to stop the displacement of Gutti Koyas from Jalagalancha.

Tribals in Telangana who were employed as daily wage workers have extensively helped in the initial phases of plantation drives under Haritha Haram. Vetti Ramesh, a resident of Jalagalancha, says, "Most of the saplings that were planted have died. We were forced out of our lands, and our crops

were destroyed to plant these saplings. We were first accused of encroaching and destroying the forest, and then made to plant these saplings, which have hardly survived.”

The [State of Forest](#) report 2017, by the Forest Survey of India (FSI), indicates that the green cover in the state had increased by 565 sq kilometres as compared to the green cover reported in 2015. The increase in tree cover was attributed to areas outside recorded forest cover, whereas the forest cover showed depletion, the report stated. Contrary to the 2017 report, the [State of Forest report 2019](#) shows that the forest cover increased by 0.8 percent, but the state’s tree cover outside recorded forest areas decreased by 155 square kilometres. The increase and decrease of the tree cover outside the recorded forest area is visible, but there is no noticeable change in the forest cover.

Most reserved and protected forests across the globe have been guarded and conserved by tribal communities. Colonial methods of conservation rely on bureaucratic approaches to take away lands from indigenous people in the name of environmental safeguarding. Various studies have shown that indigenous conservation has a greater level of efficiency compared to methods where forests are imagined to be naturally free of human presence – termed as “fortress conservation”.

A 2018 [Rights and Resources Initiative study](#) conducted in 28 countries, including India, reveals that instituting fortress conservation is not only harmful to the indigenous communities, but also flora and fauna. It shows that when the traditional dwellers handle conservation, the land and resources are more likely to be respected and protected on an everyday level. Despite several environmentalists raising their voice against fortress conservation while presenting adequate proof of significant results through indigenous conservation, State-implemented projects in the name of conservation continue to take place, by evicting and abusing those who call the forest their home.

Source: <https://www.firstpost.com/india/haritha-haram-and-forest-rights-how-a-scheme-to-increase-green-cover-has-upended-the-lives-of-telanganas-tribals-8827481.html>