

Press Release

21st October, 2026

PUCL condemns the continuing arrests of Dalit-Adivasi leaders and activists opposing the Vedanta mine in Sijimali

PUCL condemns the arrest of Dr. Randall Sequeira and Laxman Naik from Bhawanipatna on the night of 16 October 2026. Theirs is the latest in a series of arrests of Dalit-Adivasi leaders and activists of the movements opposing Vedanta's bauxite mine at Sijimali (referred to as Tijmali by local residents) in Rayagada and Kalahandi districts of Odisha. We demand their immediate release, and an end to the criminalisation of a peaceful, constitutionally protected movement.

Laxman Naik is a Dalit activist with the Ma Mati Mali Suraksha Manch, the main people's movement that is defending the Tijmali, Kutrumali and Khandualmali hills against bauxite mining. He has been key in organising and mobilising local Adivasi communities to defend their land and oppose the forced land acquisition for the Vedanta mine in Tijmali. Dr. Randall Sequeira is a doctor who has worked among Adivasi communities in the region and has stood in solidarity with their struggle to defend their land. He is also a member of the Medico Friend Circle and Jan Swasthya Abhiyan.

At around 10:45 pm on 16 October, police officials arrived in two jeeps, many in civilian clothes, and entered Dr. Sequeira's residence in Bhawanipatna, where Laxman Naik was also present. Their phones were snatched, and they were forcibly taken to the Town Police Station in the middle of the night. From 6 am on 17 October until 6:30 pm, their whereabouts were unknown to their lawyers, family and friends. They were then produced before the Sub Divisional Judicial Magistrate (SDJM) in Rayagada and remanded to 15 days of judicial custody.

At no point at the time of arrest were they told the grounds of their arrest, in writing or otherwise, nor were they allowed to speak to their lawyers. This violates Article 22(1) of the Constitution, which guarantees the right to be informed of the grounds of arrest and to consult a lawyer, and the Supreme Court's repeated directions, including in *D.K. Basu v. State of West Bengal*, *Pankaj Bansal v. Union of India* and *Prabir Purkayastha v. State (NCT of Delhi)*.

Both were arrested in connection with Case No. 85, registered against 26 named and over 100 unnamed persons, relating to incidents around 6 and 7 April 2026. Neither Dr. Sequeira nor Laxman Naik are named in the FIR.

On the intervening night of 6 and 7 April, at around 2 am, at least 200-300 police personnel raided Kantamal, one of the villages affected by the project. Until the early hours of the morning, they used tear gas shells and lathi charges on the villagers, injuring more than 50 people. Though the villagers protested peacefully, three FIRs were registered against them, falsely alleging rioting, attempt to murder, offences under the Arms Act, unlawful assembly and other serious charges.

Background

In February 2023, the Government of Odisha issued a 50-year mining lease to Vedanta Ltd. for the extraction of bauxite from an area spreading across 1549 hectares in Rayagada and Kalahandi districts. Ever since, the Adivasi communities have been organizing protests to oppose the

project. They have also alleged that the company was given the lease without following due process, in gross violation of the people's right to free, prior and informed consent guaranteed under FRA and PESA. In April 2024, PUCL, Campaign for Survival and Dignity, Campaign against Fabricated Cases and Women against Sexual Violence and State Repression (WSS) jointly published a report highlighting how Gram Sabha resolutions were falsified and even obtained under coercion.

In January 2026, a 12-foot-wide road was cut through forest to Kurkuti Mauja, a 42-acre patch of forest land in Kalahandi district. Ever since, villagers, especially from Kantamal, have been protesting peacefully against the building of the road. On 18th March, bulldozers and heavy machinery arrived to level the land, and the Tehsildar told the villagers that Kurkuti Mauja would become a resettlement colony for families displaced by Vedanta's Tijmali mine. That is how people learned they would lose their homes.

Since then, protests have grown in intensity, with people asserting that no mining project can take place without the consent of the Gram Sabha of all the villages that will be affected by the project. These protests have been met with brutal police repression, heavy surveillance using drone cameras and continuous presence of officials of the Odisha Police and Rapid Action Force.

On 1 and 2 April, police lathi-charged peaceful protests, and on 3 April prohibitory orders were announced by loudspeaker. The villages have since been ringed by police and personnel of Mythri Infrastructure Ltd., a Vedanta sub-contractor. The raid of 6 and 7 April followed, and a sudden build-up of CRPF camps in Kantamal and Bondel villages since September 2026 continues to date.

It is not a coincidence that since the BJP came to power in Odisha in June 2024, there has been a dramatic escalation in deployment of police and armed forces, drone surveillance, police harassment and arrests.

PUCL demands:

1. Release Dr. Randall Sequeira, Laxman Naik, Lado Sikaka, Lingaraj Azad immediately, and all other Adivasi and Dalit leaders jailed for opposing the Sijimali project.
2. Halt all land acquisition, land-bank creation, road construction and other work at Sijimali and Kurkuti Mauja until the Gram Sabhas of all affected villages have decided freely, in a fearless environment, as required under the Forest Rights Act and PESA. Review the mining lease and the forest clearance process in light of the above violations.
3. Withdraw all false and fabricated cases against villagers and activists, and pay compensation for illegal arrest, detention and custodial torture. Police officials who registered these false cases, abducted, detained and tortured people must be held accountable.
4. Investigate allegations of custodial torture and casteist abuse, and invoke the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act against officials where made out.
5. Immediately register FIRs on the complaints about fake Gram Sabhas and forged signatures, and conduct the inquiry directed by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs.
6. Withdraw the heavy police and Rapid Action Force deployment, stop the misuse of prohibitory orders and preventive arrests.
7. Ensure that lawyers, medical professionals and human rights defenders in the region can work without harassment or pressure.

Context of continued state repression and criminalisation of Dalit-Adivasi leaders of communities residing in project affected villages

Local Adivasi movements such as Ma Mati Mali Suraksha Manch and Khandualmali Suraksha Samiti have been consistently organizing protests to oppose the mine since 2023. Since then, any

Adivasi person in Rayagada and Kalahandi who has expressed their opposition to the mine peacefully, exercising their constitutional rights, has faced arrest and false cases of attempt to murder, voluntarily causing grievous hurt, rioting and other non-bailable offences.

Leaders from the affected villages including Kartik Naik, Subhasing Majhi, Gobind Majhi, Gobind Naik, Lai Majhi, Umakant Naik and Sanu Majhi and leaders from Adivasi movements from nearby hills such as Lingaraj Azad and Lado Sikaka, have been subjected to multiple arrests and false cases for mobilising peaceful protests against the Vedanta mine.

PUCL would like to reiterate that the issues we highlighted in earlier representation to the Governor, state and district administration and police authorities continue till date:

- Young leaders have been arrested and re-arrested multiple times under false charges, with more than nine in jail at the time of that representation. Laxman Naik, who had earlier been lodged in Rayagada jail, has now been arrested again. Persons illegally detained and then arrested have reported custodial torture, casteist and racist slurs, and threats of retaliation if they complain to Magistrates.
- Men dressed as civilians have tried to abduct village leaders in broad daylight, including at Sunger Chowk in Kashipur block.
- Prohibitory orders and breach-of-peace notices under Section 163 of the BNSS have been served on respected members of the Ma Mati Mali Suraksha Manch since June 2025.
- Lawyers defending the villagers have reportedly been pressured by the police to seek a "compromise with the company" and withdraw cases, failing which their clients would face long jail terms.
- Notices have been issued to stop observances such as World Environment Day, World Indigenous Peoples' Day and Birsa Munda Jayanti, falsely claiming that villagers were gathering with "weapons".
- Armed police presence, increasing CRPF camps and fear of random arrest have kept villagers from leaving their villages even to buy medicines, and have brought daily livelihoods to a halt.

PUCL stands in firm solidarity with the Adivasi and Dalit communities of Rayagada and Kalahandi and with all who defend their right to land, forest and a dignified life.

Kavita Srivastava, President

V. Suresh, General Secretary

People's Union for Civil Liberties