

Why Tribes in Odisha's Sijimali Are Protesting Against a Vedanta-Owned Bauxite Mine

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Indigenous communities clash with the police in Sijimali, Odisha. Photo: X/MahuaMoitra

New Delhi: On April 7, clashes [erupted](#) between indigenous communities and police at the village of Kantamal in Odisha's Rayagada district. Nearly 70 people were injured.

According to a [fact-finding visit](#) by the Congress undertaken on April 10, police entered the village around 3 am on the night of April 6, cut electricity supply, broke open doors, and detained residents opposing a road project.

Why were such alleged detentions made, and why are locals – belonging to tribal communities – opposing a road project? *The Wire* explains.

Cutting a road through forest land

On April 7, nearly 70 people were injured after police personnel and villagers clashed in Kantamal, a village in Odisha's Rayagada district. Videos circulating on social media show heated arguments and the police allegedly [opening fire](#) on people.

Indigenous communities in the area were protesting against a road being laid through forest land in the Sijimali hills in Rayagada district, for a bauxite mine operated by the Vedanta Group. The proposed 3-km road project will mean clear-felling forests on nearly five hectares of forest land.

The protest is [not new](#).

The villagers of the tribal belt in these regions have been protesting since 2023, when the state government allocated the bauxite mining project – spread across an area of 1,549 hectares, which includes 699 hectares of forest land in the Rayagada and Kalahandi districts – to Vedanta Limited.

The mine has [estimated reserves](#) of 311 million tonnes of bauxite, while the proposed bauxite production capacity here is [9 million tonnes](#) every year. According to [Vedanta](#) in January this year, the Sijimali bauxite mine is to be “operationalised” in the coming monsoon months.

Videos of protests on April 7 clearly show villagers sloganeering against the Bharatiya Janata Party, which currently rules the state

Numerous rights violations

The indigenous communities of this region have several reasons to protest.

Between November 2023-April 2024, the Human Rights Lawyering Clinic at the National Law School of India University, Bengaluru, studied the human rights and environmental implications of the Sijimali bauxite mine. They scrutinised project-related documents including Environment Impact Assessments (EIA), actions taken by authorities, and media reports on the project and issues raised.

Their ten main findings listed in a [report](#) published in April 2024 titled “*Under the Surface: Human Rights and Environmental Implications of the Proposed Sijimali Bauxite Mine in Odisha*”, are disconcerting.

One is that the legal framework governing both mining projects and the proposed project violate land, autonomy and cultural rights of adivasis and other forest-dwelling communities under domestic and international law. Another is that the draft EIA report under-reports the probable forced displacement and loss of livelihoods in the affected villages, and “egregiously distorts” the health impact of the proposed mine on affected communities and workers.

“The proposed project will likely cause long-term irreversible and irreparable harm to forest and wildlife biodiversity and likely increase in human-animal conflict,” the study noted. It also added that the project will likely lead to the depletion and contamination of surface and ground water sources in the region.

“The study finds serious violations of the fundamental, constitutional, and human rights of adivasis and other affected communities under the Fifth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, PESA, Forest Rights Act (FRA), LARR Act and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP),” wrote Radhika Chitkara, Assistant Professor (Law) at NLSIU, Bengaluru, who leads the Human Rights Lawyering Clinic, in a NLSIU [blogpost](#).

A [report](#) by *Frontline* in January 2026 quoted villagers who alleged that fake gram sabhas were listed by the Rayagada administration to clear the project; other reports [such as this](#) one too say that according to villagers, the gram sabhas were fake and that their signatures were forged.

Among the NLSIU study's several recommendations is that all criminal actions against individuals and leaders of affected communities in relation to the current project be immediately withdrawn, and that action – criminal and/ or disciplinary – be initiated against state and non-state actors responsible for rights violations in Rayagada and Kalahandi since August 2023.

No final clearance yet

Meanwhile, the proposed road project does not yet have forest clearance from the Union environment ministry.

The proposed 2.98 km-long access road connecting the Sijimali hilltop bauxite reserve area to State Highway 44 needs a total of 11.3 hectares, of which 4.9 hectares is forest land. Incidentally, the Union environment ministry is yet to give the final, Stage-II clearance to clear this tract of forest, as per a [report](#) by *The New Indian Express*. The project only has Stage-I (in-principle clearance) for now.

According to [Vedanta's Earnings Conference Call in January this year](#), the mining project received Stage-I Forest Clearance on December 31, 2025, and Stage-2 Clearance was expected in February.

Political parties raise issues

Several politicians and parties took up the issue, criticising, among other things, the treatment of the villagers by the police.

"Today, in the Tijimali-Sijimali area of Rayagada-Kalahandi district, I strongly condemn the brutal mistreatment and night-time demonic repression of the local people and the brothers and sisters...especially the tribal mothers and sisters, sponsored by the police, district administration and Vedanta-Maitri company," [said](#) Ranendra Pratap Swain, of the Biju Janata Dal and member of the state legislative assembly, who [participated](#) in a protest in the capital of Bhubaneswar on April 8 and also later visited the villages to speak with people there.

The Azad Samaj Party has [demanded](#) that prohibitory orders in the Sijimali region be lifted immediately and police forces withdrawn from the entire area. It also asked that the Sijimali mining lease granted to Vedanta Company, without the consent of the Gram Sabha, be canceled, and the Forest Rights Act and PESA Act be effectively implemented.

Many have also asked why the President of India, Droupadi Murmu – also a member of the tribal community from the same state – has not spoken up for the communities of Sijimali.

On April 11, BJD leader and Member of Parliament in the Rajya Sabha Sasmit Patra [wrote](#) to Union tribal affairs minister Jual Oram – who also hails from a tribal community in Odisha – seeking the ministry to urgently intervene in the matter, highlighting that injuries had been reported among both tribals and police personnel.

In his letter to the minister on April 11, he said that the developments over the past few days have raised serious questions about "brute and indiscriminate police action" on tribal communities; free, prior and informed consent of gram sabhas for mining-related activities; and

adherence to statutory safeguards under the PESA and Forest Rights Act.

He urged that the ministry ensure “restraint on ground” and “safeguard the rights, dignity and security of tribal communities”.

“Serious irregularities and violations”: Congress fact-finding mission

Bhakra Charan Das, INC president of Odisha, [announced](#) on April 10 that the Odisha Pradesh Congress Committee had constituted a committee to look into the issue and would visit the site to engage with locals and understand their concerns.

On April 11, the Congress fact-finding team led by Lok Sabha MP Saptagiri Ulaka said that after “extensive interactions” with residents, the team had found “serious irregularities and violations of due process”.

These included “strong allegations” that eight Gram Sabhas held in December 2023 were “false and fabricated, with the Sarpanch allegedly signing resolutions for all 8 gram sabhas on the same day, raising serious questions about the credibility of the consent process”.

It noted that Community Forest Rights and Individual Forest Rights claims have been pending for the last three years. It also highlighted that there were “multiple allegations of arbitrary arrests”.

Discussions with people suggested that on the night of April 6, the police entered the village around 3 am, cut the electricity, broke open doors, and detained residents opposing the project, the Congress press release said: “Such actions constitute a grave misuse of state machinery and have escalated tensions, leading to avoidable violence.”

Among the Congress’s key demands are that a fair and transparent Gram Sabha process, monitored under judicial supervision on the lines of the Niyamgiri Gram Sabha process, be conducted in Sijimali; pending Community and Individual Forest Rights be immediately recognized and settled before any further project activity; and that all false police cases against innocent villagers be withdrawn.

“A joint committee of local representatives, MP, MILAs, etc., should be constituted to initiate dialogue with stakeholders and determine the future course of action, ensuring that all decisions are fully compliant with constitutional provisions,” it said, adding that the District Administration “must immediately and independently examine these allegations, including concerns regarding fabricated Gram Sabhas, pending forest rights, and excessive use of force, and ensure that all actions are strictly in compliance with legal and constitutional provisions”.

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