

## PRESS RELEASE

Maa Mati Mali Surakhya Mancha, Rayagada & Kalahandi

Date - 25.10.2024, Bhawanipatna

Ever since the Odisha govt signed MoU with Vedanta Ltd to mine bauxite in Tijmali (@Sijimali in govt records) hills without consent of the people living around Tijmali hills, we have been raising several important and critical questions against the bauxite mining project. Through Maa Mati Mali Surakhya Manch, people of Tijmali have organised themselves against the imposition of the mining project on our sacred hills of Tijmali.

Since the last one and half years, our people have faced the brutal police oppression, fake criminal charges being slapped against us and regular intimidation from the police and company goons. Several of our community leaders have faced imprisonment for rightfully questioning Vedanta's mining project. In August 2023, just around the time when the mining proposal was due for environmental clearance by the MoeFCC, several of our leaders (around 24 of them) were brutally beaten, illegally detained and put in jail under false criminal charges for opposing mining and questioning the environmental impacts of mining on our farm lands, forests and streams. And ever since, police harassment and intimidation by company goons hasn't stopped and has rather become a part of our daily struggles.

On December 8th, 2023, Vedanta's mines developing agency Maitree infrastructure , along with police officials of Rayagada and Kalahandi attempted to hold Gram Sabhas to garner consent for diversion of forest lands for mining purposes across ten villages in Tijmali hill area (six villages and two moujas in Rayagada and two villages of Kalahandi districts). However, in none of these villages, the company was able to get people's consent and so they used heavy deployment of police and paramilitary personnel to coerce people to give their signatures. While in many villages the company was not able to enter the village, in few others they forced people into signing resolutions stating they they have consented to give away their lands and forests areas for the mining project. Maitree company even hired daily wage workers of Panasguda village (not part of Tijmali) and brought them on 8th December to a few villages for posing as Gram Sabha members and took pictures of them as attendees of Gram Sabha. All of this happened with the complicit involvement of the district administrations of Rayagada and Kalahandi as Tahsildars, Block Development Officers and staffs of the Collectorates were present. We are completely outraged by this clandestine attempt of the company officials and district

administration to coerce Gram Sabhas in stealing our lands, forests and scared Tijmali hills. We got to know of this criminal and unlawful attempt to trample our rights through Right to Information applications. This is a violation of the Forest Rights Act, 2006 as well as PESA Act,1996. We have been demanding that the police in Kashipur and Thuamul Rampur register cases against the concerned officials who were involved in such unlawful conduct under the ST & SC Prevention of Atrocities Act as this is a grave violation of our rights.

As part of asserting our Constitutional rights, villagers of Kantamal, Banteji (Pelanakana), Sunger (Katibhata), Dumerpadar, Aliguna, Bundel, Malipadar and Sagabari in Rayagada (Kashipur block) & Tijimali and Chulbadi in Kalahandi (Thuamul Rampur block) conducted special Gram Sabhas from August 30th to September 4th, 2024 demanding implementation of Forest Rights Act, 2006, 'Mo Jangal Jami Jojana' of Odisha government aimed at expediting the recognition of community and individual forest rights. The Gram Sabhas of ten villages have passed resolutions that the meetings on 8th December,2023 were false and coerced, done without giving notice to the people and forging hundreds of signatures. All the Gram Sabhas have passed unanimous resolutions demanding an independent inquiry into the fake Gram Sabhas and for registering criminal cases against government officers and company staffs who were involved in the process. Disconcerted by the peoples' Gram Sabhas, company officials are filing fabricated criminal charges against all those of us who are at the frontline of the struggle to save Tijmali hills. Several women leaders have also been dragged into these false cases in Kalagaon and Kantamal villages. Kartika Naik, one of the young leaders of Maa Mati Mali Surakhya Mancha was picked up and sent to Rayagada jail without prior notice or information on false criminal charges.

Our Demands :

1. We demand immediate cancellation of the bauxite mining leases over Tijmali, Kutrumali and Majhingmali
2. We demand proper implementation of the resolutions passed in our Gram Sabhas conducted from August 30th to September 4th, 2024 (Copies of resolutions passed in these bonafide Gram Sabhas have been sent to Hon'ble Governor and Collectors of Rayagda and Kalahandi districts).
3. We demand the immediate release of Kartika Naik by dropping all fabricated charges against him and all our community leaders who face similar charges.
4. We demand that as per our bonafide Gram Sabha resolutions, the police of Kashipur and Thuamul Rampur immediately register FIRs based on the complaints submitted to them and initiate investigation into this criminal act of conducting forced Gram Sabhas and forging peoples' signatures.