

## Social media campaign fuels protesters against Sterlite

TUTICORIN: Promotional videos and a strong campaign on social media asking people to join the mass protest on Tuesday to put pressure on the government to close down Sterlite helped mobilise several thousand people. Over 5,000 protesters gathered near the Our Lady of Snows church in the morning though Section 144 of the CrPC was in force in select areas covering the collectorate and the Sterlite plant. According to the protesters, this turned out to be a campaign against the government and the district administration. Members of some radical outfits had sneaked into the protest, which was predominantly led by youth from Tuticorin and nearby districts.

Had the government allowed us to stage a protest, we would have silently marched to the collectorate, petitioned the collector, staged a demonstration and waited for the government to close down the polluting plant. The violence was what the police wanted, to bring the protest to an end. It was completely unexpected,” a protester said. He added that the violence was an outcome of the protesters’ frustration over 22 years.

“We are fighting a capitalist government machinery that is completely against the interest of the people, he said on the condition of anonymity. “We made representations, fought a legal battle and pleaded with the government to close the plant. But it did not happen,” he said. The protesters are introspecting where and what went wrong during the protest, he said and added that the struggle will continue until the copper plant is closed.

Human rights activist and executive director of People’s Watch Henry Tiphagne, who was also in Tuticorin on Tuesday, told TOI that there was total violation of human rights in the police firing. He alleged that the people who shot at people were not in police uniform and that no formal procedure was followed before the firing.

Tiphagne said the intention of police was not to disperse the crowds. “Had it been so, they would have used pellets and not bullets. The fact that some of the victims had received bullets in their mouth is proof that the motive of police was to kill,” he said and added that the NHRC and the SHRC should conduct an inquiry into the incident.

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