

People's Inquest into Thoothukudi Firings

INTERIM OBSERVATIONS



A coalition of civil society organisations in Tamil Nadu titled, 'Coordinating Committee for People's Inquest into Thoothukudi Police Firing' organised a People's Inquest (PI) on June 2-3, 2018 at Thoothukudi and its suburbs, into the targeted killings, arbitrary detentions and torture on May 22, 2018 and thereafter, in Thoothukudi. As per the latest records, 15 protestors were killed and more than a hundred severely injured in protests against the Sterlite Copper plant. May 22, 2018, marked the 100th day of protests against the Sterlite Copper plant.

The PI team composed of:

1. Justice (Retd.) B.G. Kolse Patil, Former Judge, Bombay High Court
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3. Mr. M.G. Devasahayam IAS (Retd.) Former Chief Secretary Haryana
4. Mr. Christudoss Gandhi IAS (Retd.), Former Additional Chief Secretary, Tamil Nadu
5. Mr. Kamal Kumar IPS (Retd.), Former Director, National Police Academy, Hyderabad
6. Mr. R.B.S. Sreekumar IPS (Retd.) Former Director General of Police, Gujarat

7. Mr. Jacob Punnose IPS (Retd.) Former Director General of Police, Kerala & Special Rapporteur NHRC
8. Prof. Dr. K. Mathiharan, Forensic medicine expert & formerly with University of Malaya, Malaysia
9. Ms. Geetha Ramaseshan, Advocate, Madras High Court
10. Dr. Usha Ramanathan, Legal Researcher, New Delhi
11. Ms. Maja Daruwala, Senior Advisor – Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative, New Delhi
12. Prof. Kalpana Kannabiran, Director – Council for Social Development, Hyderabad
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14. Ms. Pamela Philipose, Senior Journalist, New Delhi
15. Mr. Amit Sengupta, Senior Journalist, New Delhi
16. Ms. Kavitha Muralidharan, Journalist, Chennai
17. Dr. Savior Suresh, Forensic Medicine Expert, Chennai
18. Dr. V.A. Ramesh Nathan, Advocate & General Secretary – National Dalit Movement for Justice, New Delhi
19. Mr. Tom Thomas, Convenor – Corporate Responsibility Watch
20. Ms. Kavitha Gajendran, Social Activist, Chennai
21. Dr. T.M.N. Deepak Nathan, President – December 3 Movement
22. Mr. T. Peter, National Fishworkers Forum, Trivandrum
23. Mr. Jasaiah Joseph, National Fishworkers Forum, Kanyakumari



The objectives of PI were –

To ascertain the facts that led to the continued protests in Tuticorin over the years and particularly in the last 100 days.

To ascertain the facts and circumstances of the incidents which lead to the police firing through gathering statements from eye-witnesses, family of the deceased, meeting the officials from Tuticorin district administration, Tuticorin district police department, representatives of the Anti-Sterlite protest committee and to ascertain who authorized the firing and under what circumstances.

To ascertain details of the police actions in Tuticorin immediately after the police firing on 22nd May

To ascertain and gather information about the actions taken by the Government of Tamil Nadu, Tuticorin district administration, police department to prevent the firing incident from happening.

To analyse the available documents, evidences from various government departments, Tamil Nadu Pollution Control Board, petitions, affidavits, evidences, and judgments in the High Court and Supreme Court regarding the firing incident and the Sterlite Copper plant in Tuticorin and compilation of the same.

To suggest ways for legal intervention in all the courts, national and state human rights institutions, and other relevant bodies nationally and the United Nations.

Brief Introduction

Sterlite Copper started its operations in Tamil Nadu in 1996 by setting up a plant in Tuticorin district. Sterlite Cooper known as Sterlite Industrial India Ltd. is a a unit of Vedanta group that has setup smelter, refinery, acid plant, and copper road plant in the land allocated them in State Promotion Corporation of Tamil Nadu. There have been numerous complaints against the company of harming the environment and breaking the government environmental regulations. There are numerous reports which suggests that the company with help of its money power and political clout have gotten away with breaking laws.

The company carried its malpractices for many years but in 2013 the company was found releasing excessive sulphur dioxide. Many people who were living in the nearby area of the plant complained of health issues and even some women had the miscarriage due to gas leakage. Tamil Nadu Pollution Board who has been really supportive of the Sterlite Copper actions took an U-turn and ordered the company to shut down for two and half months and even set up an inquiry on the company.

The National Green Tribunal allowed the factory to resume production in 2013 but the Supreme Court in a separate case fined Sterlite Copper company Rs.100 crore for polluting the environment. Since then protest against the company continued. In January 2018, the company had plans to double the capacity of the smelter but people got scared for their health and started the protest in a small village of Kumarredyapuram.

In February 2018, the anti-Sterlite movement gained momentum and on March 24, 2018, mobilized around 2 lakh people for protest. In March 2018, the plant was shut down for 15 days due to maintenance as the plant owners wanted to expand the capacity of the plant. The plant was not granted operating license beyond March 2018, due to non-compliance with environmental regulations.

On May 22, 2018, to mark 100 days of the protest, over 50000 people marched towards the District Collectorate to demand the closure of the plant.

Events on May 20-21

The Thoothukudi Administration called for a 'peace meeting', inviting the organisations and protesting villages' representatives on May 20, 2018, prior to the community rally (rally hereafter) on May 22, 2018. It has been learnt from people's testimonies that the administration used a selective approach in inviting the organisations and protesting villages' representatives for the said meeting. People with whom the PI team interacted in Thoothukudi allege this to be a deliberate attempt of the administration to divide the anti-Sterlite movement. It has also been brought to the notice of the PI team that invitation sent to one such organisation (Makkal Adhikaram) was done to an individual who had no association with that organisation. The administration didn't ensure that all organisations and individuals involved in anti-Sterlite movement are communicated with. The PI team observes that the district administration negotiating with only one set of the organisers made the bona fides of the administration suspect in the eyes of the people.

The district administration had assigned SAV School ground as the substitute rally assembling venue but with imposing 17 conditions. The SAV School ground is a small ground and the administration failed to get a grasp of the large number of people being part of the rally. Further, the SAV School ground is near the old bus stand and within the town which would have been more difficult administratively for the district administration. The District Collectorate and the surrounding areas are more spacious and would have accommodated more people. There were no public announcements stating the assigning of the substitute venue. The PI team observes that allowing assembly in one place and prohibiting it in another nearby place, despite knowing that

the rally participants wanted to march towards the District Collectorate appears to be a strategic blunder which made Section 144 practically unenforceable. The PI team further observes that if the district administration was serious about imposing Section 144, it would have prevented even small group formations in the district. Waiting for crowd to accumulate before thinking of dispersal was a gross error and led to avoidable loss of life.

The PI team observes with grave concerns about the absence of the District Collector (DC) in the above mentioned meeting. The meeting was led by the Thoothukudi Superintendent of Police (SP) along with the Sub Collector. As the head of the district administration, it was the DC who should have led the meeting and reached out to the people. This would have been more respectful to the people who have been protesting for close to 100 days. Role of the SP is solely towards maintaining law and order. Given that the protests were seen only as a law and order issue and the demands of the people overlooked, do raise doubts on the intentions of the district and state administration.

It has to be noted that the rally participants were on for 99 days on May 21 and May 22 was the 100th day of the same. It was a common knowledge, as announced during the protests on March 24, 2018, which was attended by close to 2 lakh people, that anti-Sterlite movement has called for a large public protest at District Collectorate in Tuticorin. It is appalling that during 100 days of peaceful and non-violent protests, none of the ministers from either the Tamil Nadu state government or the union government ever reached out to the anti-Sterlite movement. The administration also waited till the very end to reach out to the anti-Sterlite movement. Clearly this move on part of the administration was much delayed and provided limited space and time for the organisers to communicate with the rally participants of any developments. In little over 24 hours, it is practically impossible to reach out to and hold discussions with the lakhs of protesters across the district.



After the above mentioned meeting between the SP and anti-Sterlite movement representatives, Section 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code 1973 was imposed. It is to be noted that Section 144 was imposed in two police station (PS) jurisdictions only, i.e. South PS and SIPCOT PS covering largely the District Collectorate and Sterlite

Industry. Sterlite had moved the Madurai Bench of the Madras High Court seeking

imposition of Section 144. It didn't make the anti-Sterlite movement as a party to the case. The Madras High Court on May 18, 2018, passed directive to the district authorities to pass appropriate orders regarding imposition of Section 144. Executive magistrates were appointed to monitor the law and order situation on May 21, 2018. Nine revenue department officials were appointed as executive magistrates to work along with the police department and to monitor the law and order situation and to inform the higher officials. The order imposing Section 144 has never been made available to the public. The same hasn't been shared with the PI team despite several efforts.

Section 144 is declared when there is grave and imminent danger. If violence was anticipated so strongly as to warrant prior promulgation of Section 144, it is surprising that not even tahsildars were deployed as executive magistrates. The FIR version of deputy tahsildars ordering firing is highly unnatural in an anticipated law and order situation. This is specially so since the DC, Sub Collector, Deputy Collector and Tahsildars have all failed to be at the spots. The DC, Revenue officer and Sub-Divisional Officer were not present on May 22 in Thoothukudi. If the DC had declared Section 144, he should have been in Thoothukudi to oversee its enforcement. Further, the PI team observes that the police claims about extremists infiltrating the anti-Sterlite movement. Had this been so, they had 100 days to isolate them, expose them or to take them into preventive custody. This further leads to questions over intelligence failure.

The PI team observes several gaps in Section 144 imposition. The administration was fully aware about the anti-Sterlite protests at District Collectorate on May 22, 2018 well in advance and despite that waited till its eve for imposing Section 144, which do appear only symbolic. Section 144 was imposed only at 8PM on May 21, 2018. As gathered from people's testimonies, after the Section 144 imposition, announcements were not made by the administration in most areas, to reach the information to the people. People got to know about the same only through television news around 9:30 PM on May 21, 2018 and in the newspapers the next day. It is evident that these channels were too late to communicate to the people and wouldn't have deterred the protesters who were entering into the 100th days of the peaceful anti-Sterlite protests. It is important to note, given that Section 144 was imposed in only two PS jurisdictions, there was no legal restriction on the protesters to walk for as many as 15 kilometres, to enable them to reach and assemble at the District Collectorate.

The PI team observes that there has been clear irregularity in the process through which Section 144 was imposed and implemented. The DC has abdicated all his responsibilities.

Events on May 22, as gathered from People's testimonies

As mentioned in the above section, from the people's testimonies it seems evident that most participants in the rally were not aware about imposition of Section 144 and further, its limited imposition allowed people to march and gather towards the District Collectorate. Right opposite the District Collectorate on the other side of the main road,



the lanes going towards the villages witnessed free movement and were not barricaded or controlled by police. These lanes connecting the main road to villages served as arteries for the protesters to march forward. People who were obstructed at certain spots which were

barricaded, could easily use these lanes and reach the District Collectorate. According to the testimonies, even those who were moving towards the assigned SAV School ground for protests were stopped, thereby diverting them with crowds moving towards the District Collectorate.

People's testimonies consistently stated that women and children were participated in the rally in large numbers and even carried food and bedding with them, indicating that the rally was a peaceful protest carried out with an intention to petition to the Collectorate their grievances. It was also revealed that inspite of presence of such large numbers of women and children, commensurate numbers of women police were not deployed.

As told to the PI team, the total police strength was around 1900 personnel and protestors were over 50,000. It is apparent that the strength of the police was not capable of controlling the large number of protestors. Most of the PS jurisdictions were not covered under Section 144 and allowed protestors to march forward legitimately and freely. Some of the testimonies from villages near the District Collectorate do mention about the limited use of tear gas but none confirms the use of water canons as means to restrict the protestors. No testimony confirmed about any public announcement or bugle call asking the protestors to disperse or move to the assigned protest area i.e. SAV School ground.

Testimonies state that when the protestors reached the District Collectorate, there were vehicles in the compound already on fire. Testimonies also reveal that some police men wearing white shirts with khakhi pants carrying stones posed as protestors and pelted stones and when they were identified by some of the protestors, the policemen swiftly ran away.

People's testimonies confirmed the use of lathi charge on protestors in certain parts of Thoothukudi, including brutal attacks on women and children. Many witnesses produced their medical records revealing the extent of their injuries and also showed their injuries to the PI team. By way of illustration, a woman victim, who's house the PI team visited, testified that she was badly assaulted with the butt of the rifle on her stomach, resulting in serious injury.

Several witnesses deposed on being beaten ruthlessly by the police. A polio-affected man who was beaten, testified that he had even informed the police of his disability, but was beaten on his legs inspite of the same by the police who stated that if you are disabled you should not have come for the protest.

Testimonies were also received which revealed that children who were part of the rally were ruthlessly attacked by the police and several children were illegally detained. Further these brutalities towards children continued in the aftermath of the firing during the searches being conducted by the police. Snowlin and other children. The PI team noted that inspite of such serious reported crimes and atrocities against children, the State Commission for Children did not take any immediate action.

People's testimonies alleged targeted firing at the District Collectorate state that gunmen with assault rifles climbed on top of the police vehicles and also from the upper floors of the District Collectorate and shot at the protestors. The images in the media also confirm the same. Some of the testimonies allege that those wearing black clothes were particularly targeted, identified as protest leaders. By way of illustration, killing was also undertaken in Terespuram of a woman at 2.30 p.m. on May 22. Terespuram is 10-13 k.m. from the Collectorate, under the North PS where Section 144 was not imposed. She was one of the leaders of the movement but was not part of the protest on May 22. She was on her way to her daughter's house in the same vicinity to deliver fish. She was shot in her head in such a manner that her face collapsed. Other killings were at Food Corporation of India Roundana and Third Mile.

It was reported by several witnesses that even after the firing and attacks on the people on May 22, when the injured people reached the Government Hospital for treatment, the police arrived there and attacked several injured and their families. People and families going to the mortuary to identify the dead were lathi charged by the police outside the mortuary. A testimony was also received by the PI team, alleging

that payment of Rs. 500 was demanded by the Government Hospital for conducting CT scans on about 60 such injured people. PI team observed that families were prejudiced on account of the court order delaying the release of the bodies and dignity of the dead has been compromised.

Testimonies also revealed that 108 ambulance services were not made available. As per the accounts of the people, the 108 ambulance services were ordered by the police not to serve the people who were injured during the demonstration. Accordingly people had to avail ambulances from private hospitals such as Nalampalli and TMMK.

Testimonies received by the PI team revealed that the Government Hospital doctors provided support and treatment to the several injured. A great appreciation was noted for the role of the Bar Association, which stepped up its efforts providing free legal aid services and working round the clock to ensure release of detained and arrested persons.

It was reported in the newspapers that the protestors attacked the Sterlite residential quarters. The PI team visited the quarters and could see the car parks in the front section of the building were burnt and the vehicles parked in the ground floor of the buildings torched. The two respondents at the quarters stated that the protestors around 200 in number barged into the quarters' campus after the firing at the District Collectorate. According to them, the protestors were armed with petrol bombs. It was told that the CCTV cameras were destroyed before throwing petrol bombs on parked vehicles. It was added that the protestors were wearing helmets and the identities couldn't be ascertained. The PI team observed that the CCTV cameras were destroyed in the entire campus but the bombs were hurled at the vehicles only parked in the front section of the campus. The testimonies couldn't confirm injuries to the on duty guards and policemen.

Investigations of the PI team with the Fire Department revealed that Fire control room did not get any call when fire started during the rally and by the time they got the information everything was gutted. Meanwhile during the fire at Sterlite later in the day, the fire control room was provided immediate information and could arrive there and effectively control the fire.

During the visit of the PI team with the North Police Station, a sub-inspector, who was not on duty at the North Police Station on May 22, claimed that protestors / miscreants attacked the police station, however on being asked about the damage to the police station, she was unable to confirm the damage.

It was reported that the weapon used in firing is 7.62 Self Loading Rifle, which is not advisable to be used against unarmed people and should not have been used in crowd management. It is further reported that even the people who used the SLR were

plainclothed men and hence cannot be said to be policemen. Law and order matter should not have plainclothed policemen, they should wear uniform, or else they are miscreants.

A fear of reprisals is reported across testimonies. Initially several injured did not visit the Government Hospital out of fear of arrest and many left immediately inspite of going there, on account of the increasing police presence. There are also cases reported of some injured later on not wanting to take discharge on account of fear of reprisals after being discharged from the hospital, considering the continuing police action. People are scared to go and collect their articles or visit the mortuary for fear of arrest. People have testified that the police is continuing harassment and the threat of being implicated in the open FIRS which have upto 2000 unnamed accused persons under various sections, has left them terrorized. Such omnibus FIRS are prone to being misused by the police.

Events May 23 Onwards

Since the morning of May 23, 2018 there has been a sudden and huge deployment of police personnel in Tuticorin district consisting of an Additional Director General of Police, two Inspector General of Police, four Deputy Inspector Generals, 15 Superintendents of Police. This sudden increase lends credence to allegations of continuing reprisals and actions which appear to have no sanction in law.

Testimonies revealed that on the morning of May 23, 2018, groups of people along with the families of those who were dead and injured due to police firing and lathi charge, gathered in front of the Government Hospital, Tuticorin and demanded action against the police. The police resorted to lathi charge to disperse the crowd in front of the Government Hospital. The crowd in order to escape from the police brutality had to flee from that area and ran to the neighbourhood areas and sought refuge in Anna Nagar. Even the family members and patients inside the Government Hospital were attacked with lathis by police who were present on every floor and especially targeting those wearing black shirts or cross across their neck.

Immediately, a huge posse of police personnel were deployed in Anna Nagar who ransacked the houses and other properties in that area while searching for unknown persons. The residents of Anna Nagar were in great shock to see this sudden commotion and locked themselves inside their houses. The police also opened fire at residents of Anna Nagar, and many of them who were just standing near their houses received bullet injuries. One person Mr. Kaliappan, died on the spot from the police firing. Women were also beaten up when the police entered their houses and even a 5-year old boy was stomped on the stomach and his 2-year old sister was assaulted by the police.

The witnesses have confirmed that there was a massive and unwarranted door-to-door search in several areas. The police personnel forcefully entered into the houses, damaging the properties. According to the people's testimonies, mostly young men were targeted and were illegally arrested and taken into custody. Those who were picked up were neither taken to any police stations nor produced before Judicial Magistrates. All the testimonies corroborated that they have been beaten up mercilessly, tortured continuously, and were kept in the police hours hours for more than one and a half days without providing food, water or any medical relief. Some of the testimonies also stated these young men were then illegally detained at the Varusanadu Firing Range. 30 of them were later found to be minors. Many people have been rounded up and beaten by police. As late as 31st night at 3 a.m. in a village Meelavittan, which has a history of relentless struggle against Sterlite, which is just 1.5 km from the village, 3 young men were picked up by the police in Mufti. The women in this and other villages around the area who are in the forefront of the struggle, went the next day to the Collector to petition for their release. The Collector assured them that they will be released in one hour, however young men are still in Palayamkottai Central Prison.

From the testimonies, it is evident that the police had filed FIRs on unknown persons regarding various incidents on May 22-23, 2018, most of them being false and fabricated, they wanted some persons to be remanded in those cases. Hence, they picked up these people and forcefully made them to sign in statements stating they committed the said offences. As per one of the testimonies, a person who was already in police custody on May 23, 2018 since 1 PM has been falsely charged for torching a police bus in Anna Nagar, though that incident happened at 2.30 PM.

Many young men have been forced to leave from their homes, as they fear for arrest and torture by police even though they were not a part of anti-Sterlite protests on May 22, 2018 nor before. Those who took part in the protests are apprehending arrest as police have filed open FIRs against thousands of unnamed persons. There were even instances where, families altogether fleeing from their homes fearing false cases by police. The PI team witnessed a huge presence of police personnel and observed people still living in terror. Testimonies also stated that the CCTV cameras in Thoothukudi South Police Station were covered with cloth when the persons illegally detained were taken to that police station.

Health

PI team feels that the health concerns faced by villagers surrounding the Plant has played a significant role in mobilising people and sustaining the campaign. PI has observed that there have been a very significant number of narratives in various

testimonies, which clearly present the health hazard being central to this campaign. People have cited cases of cancer, lung and breathing related hazards, which they attribute to Sterlite. Similarly, there is, in fact, a kind of 'skin patch', which is now notoriously called as "sterlite patch". Even Doctors have started using this term at the time of diagnosis; and doctors are asking patients to leave the region. The PI team observes that there requires a focussed health-based study in these villages. People also shared experiences that when they visit hospitals for cancer testing, the doctors would ask them whether they are from "Sterlite region", clearly revealing their knowledge of such cases from the region. Some testimonies indicated that prospective grooms demanded health records of women prior to getting into marriage alliance. The PI observes that the local authorities have done nothing to organise a detailed **health-based study(recommendation)**, which could either prove the same or at least be used to allay the fears of the people, if the health hazard theory were not true.

It is well known among villagers that Sterlite has been fined Rs 100 crore by Supreme Court for polluting the environment. For villagers, clearly environment pollution means immediate health concerns to them. It is about life and death of villagers. Protestors also cited how every successful order against Sterlite got overruled subsequently. They suspect that money is playing a significant role. PI feels that protestors sincerely believe this campaign as a positive campaign- to protect themselves and future generation from health hazards. Further, that Sterlite had to pay Rs 100 crores as fine, and yet they were allowed to continue functioning, was clearly seen as the State prioritising business interest over the public health interest.

Disability

The PI team observes that police has violated principle of right to respect for inherent dignity individual autonomy including freedom to make one choice and independence of persons by resorting not only physical assault but also to denigrate the very presence of persons with disabilities and for taking part in the protest.

The deposition of persons with disability Mr. Pradeep during the inquest has been beaten up on both legs which suffer residual paralysis due to polio mylitis. Section 7 (1) of rights of persons with disabilities has become a complete failure as the state/police/executive magistrates for not securing the persons with disabilities from violence as it becomes inherent duty of the revenue department to protect rescue and rehabilitate victims with disabilities. The team also observes Mr. G. Princeton for having been amputated above the knee in right lower limb. Thereby inducing/precipitating permanent disability. It is again to be noted that despite the news having been published in the print and visual media. The disability department

present in the district collectorate office has not taken cognizance and to provide requisite psychological, physical and other relieves liable to Princeton.

The PI team also observes that number of patients in the government hospital have atleast have one fold probability to develop functional disabilities ranging from temporary to permanent if not provided with proper medical and psychological reinforcement. Standard operating procedure in dealing with disability through rehabilitation department of the hospital to welfare of the differently abled persons absent either ways. Many fearing police action have not accessed hospital and by remaining in their homes without the awareness of higher probability of residual disability if not undergoing medical care.

India being a signatory to the international convention on rights of persons with disabilities, the police and state have failed in their obligation enshrined an article 11 (situations of risk and humanitarian emergencies); article 15 (freedom from torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment; article 16 (4) (freedom from exploitation, violence and abuse)

Recommendations

1. Sterlite should be banned with immediate effect.
2. The Sterlite plant should be dismantled and plant area should be cleared.
3. A memorial for those killed by the police should be created by the TN Government.
4. Establish who ordered the shooting and killing and make them accountable as per the law.
5. Take actions against those who were responsible for the killings, injuries and continuous unlawful search, assault and harassment of the people.



Background

Sterlite Copper is a unit of Vedanta Limited, one of the world's biggest mining and metals company founded by Anil Agarwal, currently living in United Kingdom and its current chairman. The Sterlite Copper plant in Thoothukudi has the ability to produce 4,38,000 tons of copper terminals per annum or 1,200 tons per day. The area of the district is 4621 sq.m. and the population of Thoothukudi was around 17.5 lakh individuals as per the 2011 census.

There have been numerous complaints against the company for harming the environment and violating the environmental regulations. There are several reports which suggest that the company on the strength of its money power and political clout have gotten away with breaking laws and continuing its operations. People of Thoothukudi have been protesting against the plant for more than two decades, owing to the health hazards and environmental impacts of the plant.

In 1994, Vedanta, after being unable to set up the copper plant in Goa, Gujarat and Maharashtra, landed in Tamil Nadu and got no objection certificate from the Tamil Nadu Pollution Control Board (TNPCB) to set up the Sterlite Copper plant. The Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) had issued an Environmental Clearance (EC) in 1995 without even waiting for the Environment Impact Assessment (EIA). The TNPCB granted Vedanta license to operate in 1996, violating their own condition of building the plant 25 KM away from the Gulf of Mannar, as the plant was built within a region of 14 KM from the Gulf of Mannar. Vedanta set up the Sterlite Copper Plant (Unit-I) in the land allocated to them by State Industries Promotion Corporation of Tamil Nadu Ltd. (SIPCOT) in Thoothukudi town of Tamil Nadu state.

Although the Environmental Clearance granted in 1995 was challenged by National Trust for Clean Environment before the Madras High Court, even while the case was pending, the plant started operating on January 1, 1997. Just after the plant started operating, local residents complained, but TNPCB did not take any action and in fact defended the owners of the plant. In just four months, in the year 1997, Tamil Nadu electricity board and manufacturing unit near the plant complained about a gas leak, but Sterlite was given clean chit.

National Environmental Engineering Research Institute (NEERI) submitted studies on pollution being caused by the plant on the directions of the Madras High Court. While initially NEERI reported violations pursuant to which the plant was ordered to be shut down in 1998 for a few days, the plant was allowed to be restarted and NEERI was asked to carry out another investigation. NEERI in its subsequent report changed its earlier stand and suggested the plant be allowed to run at full capacity. According to

media reports, NEERI has been accused of receiving 1.27 crores to give Sterlite clean chit in environment pollution between the period 1999-2007.

In 1999, 11 people of the All India Radio had to be hospitalised due to a gas leak and in 2001 toxic wastewater was released from the plant, polluting the water flowing in the nearby area. It appears that although TNPCB had limited the plant production to 70,000 tons for a year, Sterlite manufactured 1,75,242 tons of copper anode in 2004. In 2004, the Supreme Court Monitoring Committee (SCMC) team had inspected Sterlite and recommended that environment clearance for expansion from 391 to 900 tonnes per day should not be given. However, at the time the new plant had already been built and production units for expanded capacity were constructed without licenses. In an indication of the support from the government to the company owners, within a day of the SCMC's inspection, MoEF issued an environmental clearance to Sterlite for plants it had already begun to construct. TNPCB accused Sterlite in a report that company was doing unlicensed production and in an entire factory complex none of the plants had construction licenses from TNPCB.

In 2008, the company proposed expansion of its daily production from 900 tonnes per day to 1200 tonnes per day of copper by putting up Unit-II, and obtained environmental clearance for the same on January 1, 2009. This environmental clearance was granted to Vedanta dispensing with the mandatory requirement of public consultation process based on the company's representation that this Unit-II was located inside a notified area of SIPCOT industrial park, which had received environmental clearance. Under clause 7 (i) 3 Stage (3) (i) (b) of the Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) Notification, 2006, projects located within industrial parks that have received environmental clearance (under item 7 (c) of the Schedule to the Notification) are not required to conduct public hearing prior to issuance of environmental clearance. However Phase II of SIPCOT where this Unit-II was located, had not received environmental clearance and accordingly, the representation made by Vedanta and the environmental clearance granted to it without conducting public hearing on that basis was faulty and illegal. This environmental clearance dated January 1, 2009 for Unit-II, which was originally valid for a period of 5 years, was extended on July 23, 2015 for a further period of 2 years. It was thereafter renewed on March 2, 2016 for a further period of 3 years and was accordingly valid till December 31, 2018. This was done in the following manner.

After coming into power, the present government through the MoEF issued an Office Memorandum on December 10, 2014, interpreting clause 7 (i) 3 Stage (3) (i) (b) of the EIA Notification, 2006, in effect diluting it by issuing a clarification that the exemption from public hearing would extend to projects or activities located in industrial estates and parks notified by the government prior to September 14, 2006 (the date of EIA

Notification, 2006 coming into force), seeking to in effect apply the exemption to projects or activities located in industrial estates and parks which had not obtained environmental clearances or approvals under the EIA Notification, 2006. This notification enabled companies such as Vedanta to avoid the public consultation process, which would involve hearing grievances of local stakeholders who would then expose and object to the setting up of the polluting plant.

This notification dated December 10, 2014 was in dilution of an Office Memorandum dated May 16, 2014 issued by the earlier government just before its exit, which clarified that the exemption from public consultation would be granted only to projects located in industrial parks or estates that had obtained environmental clearance under item 7 (c) of the Schedule to the EIA Notification, 2006. The renewal application of Vedanta was pending before the MoEF under the earlier government, and Vedanta was required to undertake public consultation as per the laws then existing, and as clarified under Office Memorandum dated May 16, 2014, which it had not done.

Meanwhile, on April 29, 2015, the present government issued a draft notification to amend the EIA Notification 2006 to extend the validity of environmental clearances granted under the law from the original 5 years to 7 years and to also enable the renewal process (for a further 3 years). This directly benefited Vedanta who's environmental clearance dated January 1, 2009 for the Sterlite Copper Smelter Unit-II was due renewal on completion of its 5-year tenure. However, with the introduction of this new notification extending the validity period, Vedanta applied for extension of the environmental clearance and on July 23, 2015 got the environmental clearance extended by an additional period of 2 years. Immediately thereafter on March 2, 2016, Vedanta obtained recommendation for renewal of its environmental clearance upto December 31, 2018.

In January 2018, the company announced its plans to further double the capacity of the Copper smelter. People who had already been suffering the ill effects of the plant, were concerned for their health and the environmental implications, and started protests in a small village of Kumarredyapuram. In February 2018, the protests moved to Thoothukudi where they gained momentum and in March 2018, the anti-sterlite protestors could mobilize around 2 lakh people for protest.

In March 2018, the original plant was shut down for 15 days due to maintenance as the plant owners wanted to expand the capacity of the plant, pursuant to which they were not granted license by TNPCB to continue their operations beyond March 2018, due to non-compliance with environmental regulations. Meanwhile the protests continued, with May 22, 2018 marking the 100 days of the protests.

Court Litigations

Several litigations were filed in respect of the I and II Copper Smelters, which are listed below.

S.N.	Case	Parties	Forum	Details / Status
1.	W.P.15501-15503/1996	National Trust for Clean Environment - Petitioner	Madras High Court - PIL	Challenged the Environmental Clearance granted by the MoEF and Consent orders under Air Act and Water Act granted to Unit-I by TNPCB
2.	W.P. 5697/1997	V.Gopalaswamy- Petitioner	Madras High Court - PIL	Seeking a direction to Sterlite to stop operating the plant- inter alia
3.	W.P. 16861/1998	CITU- Petitioner	Madras High Court - PIL	On the issue of failure to take safety measures in the 1 st Plant leading to many accidents
<p>By a common order dated 28.9.2010 all the Writ Petitions listed at 1, 2, 3 above were decided and the plant was ordered to be shut down by a Division Bench of the Madras High Court.</p> <p>The Closure Order was stayed by SC on appeal (See below) by Sterlite on 01.10.2010</p>				
4.	Civil Appeal- 2776-2783/2013	Sterlite Industries- Appellant	Supreme Court of India	In 2013, Supreme Court set aside the order dated 28.9.2010 of the Madras High Court. While acknowledging the large scale pollution and also the misrepresentations of the Appellant-Sterlite ordered to pay damages of 100 crores however allowed to continue operations.

5.	WP	Patchamma I- Petitioner	Madras High Court - PIL (Madurai)	On slag dumping near water bodies in Pudukottai village, Tuticorin Taluk. (Status Not Known)
6.	Appeal No. 23/2013 and 24/2013 dated 01.04.2013	Sterlite- Appellant	National Green Tribunal (Southern Zone)	Against the closure order of 23.03.2013 of TNPCB pursuant to the gas leak.
		Fatima- Intervenor	NGT	Impleaded in the above appeal by Sterlite
		V.Gopalswamy- Intervenor	NGT	Impleaded in the above appeal by Sterlite
7.	Appeal No 57 and 58/2013	Sterlite – Appellant	NGT	Above matter transferred from SZ to Principal Bench, New Delhi
		On 08.08.2013, NGT verdict in favour of Sterlite, after an expert committee conducted an inspection and submitted a favourable report.		
8.	SLP Civil Appeal 8773 to 8774 of 2013	TNPCB- Petitioner	Supreme Court of India	Against the above NGT Verdict, on technical grounds that NGT ought not to have entertained the appeal, as the rightful forum for the appeal was the Appellate Authority constituted under Air and Water Acts.

9.	W.P. 13810/2009	Pushparayan- Petitioner	Madras High Court - PIL	<p>Seeking to challenge the environmental clearance granted on 01.01.2009 for Unit-II with 1200 tpd capacity on the ground that EC was obtained without Public Consultation wrongfully invoking an exemption from public hearing clause that applied only to units proposed to be located within notified industrial estates.</p> <p>Dismissed on 28.04.2016 because all Respondents represented that the proposed smelter would be within the existing notified SIPCOT Industrial Complex</p>
10.	WP Number Not known	Muthuraman- Petitioner	Madras High Court - PIL	Seeking to cancel the lease deeds issued by SIPCOT to Sterlite
11.	Appeal No. 36 and 37/2018	Sterlite – Appellant	Tamil Nadu Environment Appellate Authority	<p>Against the order dated 09.04.2018 of TNPCB wherein the consent to operate for Unit-I was not renewed.</p> <p>Fatima, V.Gopaldaswamy and others have impleaded themselves in this.</p> <p>Case is pending.</p>
12.	WP (MD) 9283 of 2018	V.Gopaldaswa my- Petitioner	Madras High Court - PIL	Seeking a direction to not extend any license or clearance to Sterlite and close down existing operations of Sterlite.

13.	WP (MD) 11220/2018	Fatima- Petitioner	Madras High Court - PIL	Challenging the environmental clearance dated 01.01.2009 (extended on 15.07.2015 and 02.03.2016) to Unit-II. The court granted an interim order on 23.05.2018 directing Sterlite to stop all activities at the second smelter and also asked the MoEF to consider the application for fresh clearance by sterlite within 4 months with a mandatory public hearing.
14.	SLP	Ramasubbu	Supreme Court of India	Against NGT order regarding slag dumping along Uppar river. Admitted and notice issued.

Recently, vide a Government Order dated May 28, 2018, the TN Government has endorsed closure of the Sterlite Copper plant by TNPCB in larger public interest. Further, SIPCOT has passed an order cancelling the land allotment made in favour of Sterlite for the expansion of Unit-II.