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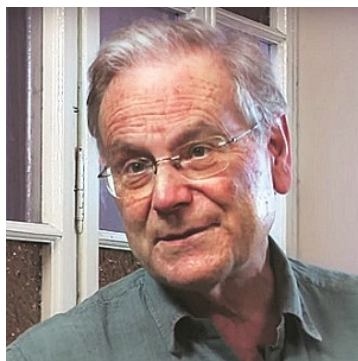
Sterlite protest: How it began; what next

There is no need to look for conspiracies by local or international troublemakers

Joan Martinez-Alier

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On May 22, 2018, as people protested against the Vedanta-owned Sterlite copper plant in Tamil Nadu, police opened fire on a rally which marked the 100th day of demonstrations. A total of 13 people were killed and many more were wounded. The protests are against the waste produced by copper smelting.

Vedanta, the company that was operating the plant, was famously stopped in 2013 from bauxite mining in the Niyamgiri Hills in Odisha – at that time the decisive instrument was consultations in the local adivasi villages.

Industrial economy requires raw materials of different kinds. It also produces waste. In technical terms, we say that the economy is not circular, it is “entropic”. Copper is recycled only to a small extent compared to the needs of a growing economy for this metal. Meanwhile, the fossil fuels (gas, coal, oil) are not recycled at all. There are conflicts at the point of extraction through transport and manufacturing, and in the disposal of final waste. The growth of the Indian economy is causing many environmental conflicts in the extraction of materials and energy and also in the processing of these inputs. There is no need to look for conspiracies by local or international troublemakers. Movements for environmental justice are a universal phenomenon.

The EJAtlas (www.ejatl原因.org) records almost 2,500 cases of different sorts of environmental conflicts around the world. The cases from India number 280. The cases including deaths of activists or other protesters are about 12 per cent worldwide. Coincidentally this is also the percentage for India, a country less violent (as regards deaths in environmental conflicts) than Brazil, Philippines, Peru, Mexico, Colombia, Honduras and far more violent than European countries or Japan. Such data on deaths

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from the EJAtlas are corroborated by Global Witness, a source independent from the EJAtlas.

Unfortunately, the events in the Sterlite-Vedanta copper smelter in [Tamil Nadu](#) have many parallels around the world. Locally they have a long background. The 'Anti-Sterlite People's Committee' protested against the company since March 2013. Following the protest, the [Tamil Nadu Pollution Control](#) Board issued a notice directing Vedanta to close the plant. Seven years earlier, in 1996, the smelter had begun operations. Protests against the plant began almost immediately, with hundreds of fishermen blockading

the port with their boats, in order to prevent the ships carrying copper ore from unloading in March and October of 1996.

In March of 2013, sulphur dioxide levels were more than double the permitted concentration. This protest resulted in temporary shutdown of operations of the plant. However, the Supreme Court eventually permitted the plant to restart operations under the condition of a payment of Rs 1,000 million to compensate for polluting the surrounding land and water sources.

Since 2017, the plant was set to expand operations to double the smelter's capacity from 400,000 tonnes per year to 800,000 tonnes. Vedanta-Sterlite proudly stated that this expansion would make the Tuticorin smelter one of the world's largest copper smelters. Protests re-emerged since residents called for a dharna and hunger strike on February 12, 2018. Eventually, around 250 people began an indefinite fast and over 500 people, including many women and schoolchildren, blocked the company gates until they were rounded up and arrested on February 14. Protests continued day and night in the villages surrounding the plant. On March 24, 2018, the movement escalated with over 15,000 participants demanding not only the halt of any further expansion of the project but also called for a shutdown of existing operations.

Meanwhile, a protest was held outside the home of Vedanta chief Anil Agarwal in Mayfair, London, in solidarity with the protesters in [Tamil Nadu](#). This was organised by Foil Vedanta, Tamil People in UK, and Parai — Voice of Freedom. British Tamils armed with traditional Parai drums shouted slogans, "*Kekudha Kekudha, Tamizhar kuralkekudha?*" (Can you hear? Can you hear? The voice of the Tamils?) on the streets of London.

On March 26, 2018, DMK asked the [Tamil Nadu government](#) to order Sterlite Industries to shut down its unit in Tuticorin district if it continued to pollute the area. The unfortunate events of May 2018 can be explained mainly by the insistence of Vedanta to continue operation despite all the protests over the last 20 years, and its failure to correct the environmental effects. The authorities (political and judicial) have not acted competently. On 28 May, 2018, the [Tamil Nadu government](#) ordered the permanent closure of the Sterlite plant. How "permanent" this will be, is in doubt.

The author is professor of Economics & Economic History, & senior researcher at ICTA, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

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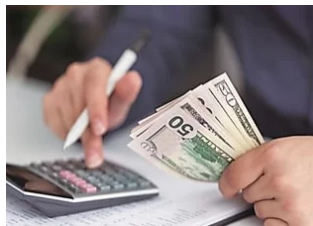
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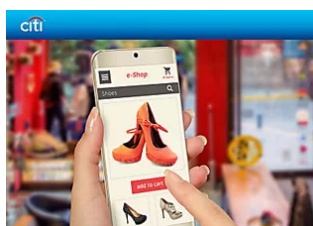
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