Recognising the Human Environment

What is the issue?

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- There was widespread protest in Tuticorin, TN against Vedanta’s copper smelter recently.
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- The incident calls for a broader understanding on the issues related with environment and business projects.
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What is the problem in Tuticorin?

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- The Vedanta subsidiary promised world class community engagement, environment management and CSR.
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- But the proposed copper smelter was located close to human habitation.
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- It generated about 400 MT of chemical gases like sulphur dioxide every day.
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- These are gases that can travel for miles as in the case of Bhopal’s Union Carbide.
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- Resultantly, people are suffering from various ailments.
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- They wanted to halt the construction of the new 1200 MT copper smelter and demand a closure of the existing facility.
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What are the recent developments?

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- The Labour Party in the UK asked for Vedanta Resources to be delisted from the London Stock Exchange.
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- Earlier, the Church of England had withdrawn from Vedanta.
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- As Vedanta had failed to respect the human rights of local people in setting up a bauxite mine in Odisha.
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- The Dongria Kondh tribals protested against taking away of their hill of worship in Niyamgiri, Odisha.
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- In all, investors are becoming wary of companies that are seen to be environmentally irresponsible.
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- High standards of social governance are gaining significance in companies.
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What are the larger concerns?

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- **Human environment** - There is predominance of a forest department outlook in the environment ministry.
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- It leads to a narrow interpretation of the environment for only its physical side - water, air, land/forests.
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- Nonetheless, human beings are fundamental to any discourse about the environment.
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- Divorced of this, the environment has no social value.
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- **EPA** - The Environment (Protection) Act, 1986 came after the UN Conference on the Human Environment.
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- Under it, India pledged to take steps for protection and improvement of the human environment.
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- Unfortunately, the EPA has only a passing mention of the human being.
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- **Clearance** - In most cases, environment clearance is pushed through as an ease of doing business proposal.
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- The company's presentation of strong CSR credentials results in overlooking the environmental impact.
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- **People** - No significant social impact study is undertaken, nor is people's consensus ensured.
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- There is little opportunity for people to put forward the concerns in future implications of the project.
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What should be done?

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- **Government** - It must mandate a social impact study prior to the public hearing.
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- This should include the likely impact on health of people in the influence zone of the project.
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- It should consider the nature of the likely effluents and the already existing health sensitivities.
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- Quality of available water and impact of the expected discharges should be accounted.
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- The methodology of waste disposal and its impact on water and air should be studied.
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- Government should ensure that public hearing takes place only after the general consent of all villages.
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- **Company** - Company must define the affected zone of the project.
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- It should include villagers whose land is being acquired and who will be under the environmental influence.
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- It should reserve 15-24% initial shareholding for villagers who are in the affected zone.
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- This portion could be allocated as social/sweat equity.
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- The company should announce benchmarks for water, air and soil quality.

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- It should also commit to pay compensation for any breach of these.
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- Companies must re-examine their entire CSR framework.
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- They can recruit village-level representatives to engage better with the villagers.
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- In all, there is a need for a bottom-up approach of social and civic engagement, with prime focus on the human environment.
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Source: Business Standard

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