Sterlite Issue

Why in news?

The Madras High Court has refused to allow the reopening of the Sterlite copper plant at Thoothukudi, Tamil Nadu.

What is the story behind?

- The plant was closed in 2018 after 13 people were killed by the police.
- The police fired on protesters demonstrating outside the factory premises against environmental pollution.
- The merits and demerits of the Sterlite case have been extensively discussed in courts.

What was the company's response to the Madras HC order?

- The company has moved the Supreme Court against the order.
- The issue will be further dissected when the SC takes it up again.
- Ultimately, the apex court will have the final say in the matter.
- The whole discussion, thus far, has been on the alleged environmental impact of the project in and around the region.
- The other key issues have been deliberately avoided.

How did the factory found refuge in Tamil Nadu?

- The project was driven out by Maharashtra and Goa for various reasons.
- Surprisingly, it found refuge in Tamil Nadu.
- The initial culpability should rest with the State government of the day that allowed the project to come into the State in the first instance.
- The State has been under the dispensation of either of the two Dravidian parties, all through the development of the Sterlite plant.
- There were intermittent protests against the project all these years.
- But the project went from strength to strength.
- With close to 4,000 direct and 20,000 indirect jobs, the project helped the region around the port to prosper.
- It also helped India become a copper-exporting nation.

What are the impacts of the closure?

- With the closure of the plant, India has been forced to become a net importer of copper after nearly 18 years.
- The closure resulted in the complete evaporation of livelihoods in the entire region.
- The Covid-19 pandemic has only worsened the misery.

How did the problem assume significance?

- State leaderships of all hues let the project continue all these years, despite the intermittent anti-Sterlite sentiments.
- All of a sudden, the problem assumed a magnified proportion when the company proposed an expansion.
- It took an ugly turn when police fired on protesters.
- In this instance, the government ordered immediate closure of the plant after the police firing outside the plant premises.
- Sterlite has now become a reference point – for all the wrong reasons – for any prospective manufacturers to set up plants in Tamil Nadu.
- Sterlite was the alibi when a rifle project was moved to Amethi by Russia.

What is needed?

- In a socioeconomic context, a trade-off is an inevitable necessity in the debate between development and environment.
- With a population of over 130 crore, the issue of development cannot be wished away.
- This calls for a responsible **political leadership**.
- It also needs **professionalism** from assorted government agencies like the Pollution Control Board.

Source: The Hindu

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