

# Environmental Justice Movements in Tamil Nadu: A Comparative Study on Sterlite and Ennore

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**Abstract:** This article examines two of the most significant environmental justice movements in contemporary Tamil Nadu, the anti-Sterlite protests in Thoothukudi and the ongoing struggle against industrial pollution in Ennore, North Chennai. These movements, though differing in visibility, pace, and outcomes, share a common thread of resistance from marginalized communities against state-sanctioned ecological degradation. Through a comparative analysis, the article explores how Dalit, working-class, and fisher folk communities, particularly women, have emerged as the vanguard of Tamil Nadu's grassroots environmentalism. The Thoothukudi protests against Vedanta's Sterlite copper smelter, culminating in a state-sponsored police firing that killed 13 protestors in May 2018, captured national attention and ignited a broader debate about corporate impunity, environmental regulation, and democratic dissent. In contrast, the struggle in Ennore, shaped by decades of coal ash pollution and toxic industrial activity, unfolds more quietly, through legal advocacy, grassroots monitoring, and sustained community mobilization. Despite differences in tactics and visibility, both movements reflect a shared distrust in the state's developmental priorities and a growing consciousness of ecological and social rights. Drawing on field reports, local testimonies, media coverage, and activist scholarship, the article frames these movements within the larger discourse of "environmentalism from below," highlighting the role of caste, gender, and language in shaping Tamil Nadu's environmental resistance. It also critiques the inadequacies of state responses, the complicity of pollution control mechanisms, and the limits of elite-led environmental narratives. By foregrounding the voices of those most affected, the article calls for a rethinking of environmental justice in India not as an abstract or technocratic pursuit, but as a lived political struggle rooted in questions of dignity, survival, and collective future. The cases of Sterlite and Ennore underscore the urgency of building ecological movements that are intersectional, locally anchored, and democratically accountable.

**Key Words:** Environmental Justice in Tamil Nadu, Sterlite Protests, Thoothukudi, Ennore, Industrial Pollution, Dalit Environmentalism, Caste and Ecology, Fisher folk Resistance, Environmental Violence, Tamil Eco politics, Intersectional Environmentalism.

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

Environmental justice in India has historically been shaped by the friction between industrial development and the rights of local communities to land, water, and clean air. In Tamil Nadu, this tension has given rise to some of the most sustained and militant environmental resistance movements in the country. From the industrial port city of Ennore in the north to the coastal town of Thoothukudi in the south, grassroots mobilizations have challenged the state's model of "development" that privileges corporate interests over ecological sustainability and community well-being.

The struggles against the Sterlite copper plant in Thoothukudi and the thermal power and coal ash pollution in Ennore represent two defining cases in Tamil Nadu's environmental history. Both cases involve marginalized communities primarily fisher folk, Dalits, women, and the working class, rising against powerful industrial entities and complicit state machinery. While Sterlite captured national headlines after the 2018 police firing that killed 13 protesters, Ennore has remained a slower, more silent struggle marked by long-term health impacts and land degradation.

What connects these movements is not just the fight against pollution but a demand for environmental justice, a framework that links ecological degradation with social and economic inequality. In these movements, the right to life, health, and dignity becomes inseparable from access to clean air and water. The protestors are not merely

environmentalists in the traditional sense they are citizens reclaiming their rights, asserting their place in democratic processes, and redefining what “development” should mean.

This article seeks to trace the trajectories of these two movements, analyze their methods, leadership, and impact, and situate them within broader debates around ecology, caste, and state violence. In doing so, it draws attention to the rise of an ecological politics from below a Tamil form of environmental resistance that combines lived experience, political action, and cultural memory.

## **2. STERLITE PROTESTS – THOOTHUKUDI’S UPRISING**

The protests against the Sterlite Copper plant in Thoothukudi mark one of the most intense and violent environmental justice struggles in recent Indian history. Operated by Vedanta Ltd, the Sterlite plant had long been accused by local residents and environmentalists of releasing toxic emissions, contaminating groundwater, and causing severe health issues including respiratory illnesses, skin diseases, and birth defects.

## **3. A HISTORY OF DISCONTENT**

Since its establishment in 1996, the Sterlite plant had faced multiple allegations of pollution and violations of environmental norms. Despite court cases and brief shutdowns, the company continued operations, aided by weak regulatory enforcement and political support. The Tamil Nadu Pollution Control Board (TNPCB) issued notices, but they often failed to lead to long-term accountability. The plant's location near densely populated areas and its proximity to the Bay of Bengal made the environmental risks even more severe. Fisher folk, small farmers and Dalit communities bore the brunt of the pollution. Years of simmering anger finally coalesced into a mass movement in 2018.

## **4. THE 100-DAY PROTEST AND STATE VIOLENCE**

In early 2018, the movement gained momentum as Sterlite sought to expand its capacity, further provoking public outrage. Local organizations, students, workers, and women mobilized in what would become a 100-day protest demanding a complete shutdown of the plant. On May 22, 2018, the 100th day of protest, tens of thousands gathered in a peaceful march to the District Collector’s office. What followed was state brutality, police opened fire on the crowd without warning, killing 13 people and injuring dozens. The images of young protesters shot in broad daylight shook the conscience of the nation. The Thoothukudi firing was not just an environmental flashpoint but a revelation of how state institutions respond to dissent, especially when it emerges from the working class, coastal, and Dalit communities. Many questioned whether such lethal force would have been used in elite, urban protests.

## **5. WOMEN AND GRASSROOTS LEADERSHIP**

A notable aspect of the Sterlite movement was the visible leadership of women, many of them from fishing and Dalit backgrounds. These women challenged both environmental degradation and patriarchal control, asserting their right to speak, march, and resist. They became the moral voice of the protest linking maternal concern with militant defiance. Local church groups, small traders, student unions, and cultural activists also played a vital role in sustaining the momentum. Tamil folk songs, slogans, and art were used to mobilize and inspire.

## **6. AFTERMATH AND LEGAL STATUS**

Following the police firing and national outrage, the Tamil Nadu government ordered the closure of the Sterlite plant. However, legal battles continue in various courts. Vedanta has pushed for reopening, and communities remain vigilant, fearing a quiet re-entry of the polluting industry. The movement succeeded not just in forcing a shutdown but in redefining environmental protest in India. It showed that industrial pollution is not just a technical issue it is a human rights issue deeply tied to caste, class, and political power.

## **7. ENNORE – THE SILENT STRUGGLE IN NORTH CHENNAI**

While the Sterlite protests erupted in spectacular fashion, the environmental crisis in Ennore, located in North Chennai, has been a slower, more insidious struggle. More than the past two decades, communities living in and around Ennore have suffered from industrial pollution, particularly due to thermal power plants, coal ash dumps, and petrochemical industries.

## **8. A TOXIC LANDSCAPE**

Ennore, a coastal area with a large population of fisher folk, Dalit communities, and working-class residents, has long been a hub for industrial activity. It houses the Ennore Thermal Power Station (ETPS), Kamarajar Port, and various coal and oil storage facilities. The Chennai Petroleum Corporation Limited (CPCL) and Ash Pond dumps from ETPS have severely contaminated air, water, and land in the region. According to studies conducted by environmental groups like the Coastal Resource Centre (CRC) and Poovulagin Nanbargal, fly ash and effluents have choked the Kosasthalaiyar River, damaged the Ennore Creek, and disrupted marine ecosystems. Local fishing communities have experienced a drastic decline in catch, leading to loss of livelihood, while health issues such as asthma, cancer, and skin disorders have risen alarmingly.

## **9. RESISTANCE FROM BELOW**

Unlike Sterlite, Ennore's crisis has unfolded gradually, and so has the resistance. Activists, community leaders, and fisher folk have engaged in legal battles, fact-finding missions, RTI campaigns, and direct action such as boat protests and highway blockades. Their struggle rarely makes headlines, yet it is persistent and strategic. Groups like Save Ennore Creek Campaign, Arappor Iyakkam, and Vanam have played a pivotal role in raising awareness. The community has also engaged urban youth and journalists, bridging the urban-rural divide and drawing attention to how pollution disproportionately affects the poor.

## **10. FEMINIST AND CASTE DIMENSIONS**

As in Thoothukudi, women have been central to the movement. Often tasked with collecting water, caring for the sick, and managing household sustenance, they are the first to feel the impact of ecological degradation. Dalit and Irular communities, already dispossessed, face the brunt of state neglect. Yet, these voices often remain underrepresented in environmental discourse dominated by upper-caste, urban-centric narratives. The Ennore struggle exposes the need for an intersectional ecological lens that considers caste, gender, and class as central to environmental justice.

## **11. STATE INACTION AND GREENWASHING**

Even after multiple reports and warnings, government bodies have failed to enforce environmental regulations effectively. In many cases, pollution control boards have either ignored complaints or provided retroactive approvals to polluting industries. Public hearings are often held without proper notice or participation. In recent years, state officials have touted “green” industrial corridors and eco-friendly infrastructure plans, but on the ground, there is little change. Community trust in government processes is eroding, and there’s a growing demand for accountability, restoration of damaged ecosystems, and community-led monitoring.

## **12. ENVIRONMENTALISM FROM BELOW – A TAMIL PERSPECTIVE**

The environmental justice movements in Tamil Nadu, as seen in Thoothukudi and Ennore, are not merely ecological in nature. They are deeply political, cultural, and social. They represent what scholars have called “environmentalism of the poor”, where marginalized communities resist extractive and polluting industries not only to save their environment but to assert their rights, identities, and dignity. In the Tamil context, this form of activism is shaped by a unique history of anti-caste, rationalist, and regionalist politics.

## **13. ECOLOGY, CASTE, AND RESISTANCE**

In both Sterlite and Ennore, the frontline communities are predominantly Dalits, coastal fisher folk and working-class people. These are communities historically excluded from decision-making, often living in environmentally risky zones due to patterns of caste-based segregation and economic marginalization. For them, pollution is not just about toxins it is about erasure of homes, livelihoods, rivers, and dignity. Environmental degradation becomes a new form of caste violence, where the lives of certain people are deemed dispensable for the benefit of capital and urban comfort. The fact that state violence (such as the police firing in Thoothukudi) is most often unleashed on these communities underscores the structural inequality embedded in environmental governance.

## **14. THE ROLE OF WOMEN AND FEMINIST PRAXIS**

Tamil Nadu’s environmental struggles are also sites of feminist praxis. Women in these movements are not just victims of pollution but active agents of resistance. Their leadership challenges both patriarchal norms and state

narratives that render them invisible. In Thoothukudi, women led street marches, confronted police, and gave testimony in public hearings. In Ennore, they organized water protests and led efforts to document health impacts on families. This grassroots feminism is distinct from elite, NGO-led environmentalism. It arises from embodied experiences carrying water from distant bore wells, nursing children with skin diseases, watching fish populations decline. Their protests are also acts of care, rooted in everyday labor and intergenerational memory.

## 15. TAMIL LANGUAGE, CULTURE, AND MOBILIZATION

One striking feature of these movements is their use of Tamil language, folk idioms, songs, and protest literature. Slogans like “*Sterlite veliyeru!*” (*Sterlite, get out!*) or “*Vazhi theriyum; aana vazhiya vida maatom*” (“We know the road, but we won’t be pushed”) carry cultural resonance and assert a sense of Tamil identity.

Cultural forms like *kavadi chindu*, street theatre, and video testimonies in Tamil dialects have been used to counter official narratives. Environmental justice here is not abstract; it is woven into the politics of language, region, and memory.

## 16. COMPARATIVE REFLECTIONS AND EMERGING MOVEMENTS

The Sterlite and Ennore movements represent two contrasting but complementary expressions of environmental justice in Tamil Nadu. While Thoothukudi’s Sterlite protest culminated in a spectacular and tragic confrontation with the state, Ennore has witnessed a more prolonged, less visible resistance. Together, they reveal not only shared patterns of exploitation and resistance, but also the diverse forms of protest cultures that have emerged from Tamil soil.

## 17. SHARED THEMES: POLLUTION, MARGINALIZATION, AND RESISTANCE

Both movements arise from the environmental degradation of coastal and working-class communities. Whether it is the copper smelter in Thoothukudi or the coal ash pollution in Ennore, the state’s prioritization of industrial growth over public health and ecological balance remains consistent. In both cases:

- Affected communities are largely Dalit, working-class, and fisher folk
- Women play leading roles, redefining what leadership and activism look like
- State institutions fail in enforcement, and in some cases, become complicit in the damage
- The resistance is deeply local, yet it connects to larger national and global discourses on environmental justice.

## 18. CONTRASTS IN FORM AND VISIBILITY

Despite these commonalities, the movements differ in tone, visibility, and public reception:

- **Thoothukudi was dramatic, fast-paced, and explosive:** It ended in bloodshed, galvanized national attention, and sparked public debates about state repression.
- **Ennore is quieter, slower, and legalistic:** It involves community monitoring, environmental assessments, and long-term organizing rather than large-scale marches.

The media’s treatment of these events reflects this contrast: Sterlite drew mainstream coverage and celebrity attention, while Ennore remains underreported, even though its equally dire consequences.

## 19. NEWER MOVEMENTS AND THE EXPANDING LANDSCAPE

Inspired in part by Sterlite and Ennore, younger and more tech-savvy movements have emerged across Tamil Nadu:

- **Neduvasal:** Protest against hydrocarbon extraction
- **Koodankulam:** Anti-nuclear protests in southern Tamil Nadu
- **Methane and ONGC protests in the Cauvery Delta:** Farmers and students uniting against oil exploration
- **Save Pulicat Lake campaign:** Opposing Adani’s port expansion near Chennai

These new waves of activism increasingly make use of social media, drone footage, citizen journalism, and translation of scientific data into local languages. The environmental discourse is no longer elite-dominated it is being shaped from the margins, in Tamil, by people who are experiencing the crisis firsthand.

## 20. TOWARD AN ECOLOGICAL JUSTICE FRAMEWORK

Together, these movements indicate the need to move beyond the conventional discourse of “sustainable development” and adopt a justice-based framework. Such a framework must:

- Address caste and gender as central axes of environmental harm
- Recognize community knowledge and consent in development planning
- Shift the legal and moral burden from communities to corporations and complicit governments

Environmental justice in Tamil Nadu today is not just about saving nature it is about reclaiming voice, space, and future for those denied it.

## 21. CONCLUSION

The environmental justice movements in Tamil Nadu, particularly the protests against the Sterlite copper plant in Thoothukudi and the ongoing struggles in Ennore, represent more than isolated battles against pollution. They mark a paradigm shift in how environmental politics is being reimagined from elite spaces of conservation to grassroots terrains of resistance rooted in caste, class, and gender realities. These movements reveal that environmental harm in India is not equitably distributed. It is borne disproportionately by the working poor, fisher folk, Dalits, and women communities whose lives are routinely sacrificed at the altar of industrial development. Yet, these same communities are no longer silent victims. They have emerged as agents of transformation, crafting a new political language of resistance, often articulated in Tamil, through folk forms, protests, testimonies, and legal battles.

The violent suppression of the Sterlite protests and the state’s neglect of Ennore serve as reminders that democracy and environmental justice are deeply intertwined. When the right to breathe clean air or drink safe water becomes a matter of protest and bloodshed, the ecological crisis is no longer just environmental it is political, moral, and constitutional. As new projects continue to threaten ecosystems across Tamil Nadu from the Cauvery delta to the Pulicat lagoon the legacy of these movements offers a roadmap. It is a roadmap shaped not by top-down sustainability agendas but by lived experience, local knowledge, and collective struggle. To imagine a just ecological future, we must listen to these voices from below not as victims but as visionaries.

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