

Oxygen from Sterlite Copper

April 28, 2021

In News: The Supreme Court on Tuesday allowed Vedanta Limited to operate its oxygen production units at the Sterlite Copper plant in Thoothukudi in Tamil Nadu.

Oxygen in Copper Plant

- The Vedanta Limited plant has two oxygen production units lying idle, with a combined capacity of 1,050 tonnes.
- The oxygen from these units is meant to feed the furnaces of the copper-melting plant.
- These facilities suck in air from the atmosphere, which is processed so that the oxygen-rich fraction of the air is absorbed in the final process.
- The oxygen produced at Sterlite's units is crude oxygen.

Local Concerns

- Sterlite Copper had been facing protests ever since its inception in 1994.
- The local community's concerns include hazardous industrial operations that produce toxins such as lead, arsenic and sulphur oxides, pollution of the environment, and their impact on public health.
- Following a gas leak in March 2013, the state government ordered shutting down of the plant, and the Supreme Court fined Sterlite Rs 100 crore for flouting environmental norms the following month, but the plant was in operation in June again.
- It was shut down again following the violent protests and police firing in May 2018.

The Oxygen Crisis

- There are many suppliers of liquid oxygen in the southern region, including in Sriperumbudur near Chennai.
- A portion of it was used for medical purposes earlier, too, while the bulk went for industrial purposes.
- Data in the public domain shows that the average liquid oxygen capacity of India is 7,200 metric tonnes a day, of which about 800 tonnes was the requirement for medical purposes before the pandemic.
- Demand went up to 2,000 tonnes/day during the first wave around September 2020.