

# SAFETY AT ALL COSTS: ON IMPLEMENTATION OF SAFETY PROTOCOLS IN FIREWORKS INDUSTRY

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Rights Issues - Human Rights and NHRC

The death of four workers on New Year's Day in a blast at a fireworks unit in Kalathur village of Virudhunagar district, the hub of the firecrackers sector in Tamil Nadu, reiterates the need for relentless vigil to enforce safety protocols in an industry that deals with hazardous processes. The blast was said to have been triggered by friction caused by the mishandling of chemicals. Apparently, the workers had come to the unit for a pooja to usher in 2022. Even though the authorities have suspended the unit's licence and filed cases under the Indian Penal Code and Indian Explosive Substances Act, they have not cited violations such as the licence holder leasing out the unit to others and manufacturing products unauthorisedly. Over the years, the district has seen numerous blasts and successive State Governments had formed, at times, committees to study the factors that led to the blasts. There have been improvements in the way the firecracker industry has been functioning. For example, the extent of child labour has reduced considerably. But, with regard to adherence to and monitoring of safety protocols, the track record leaves much to be desired.

There has to be a paradigm shift in the manner an event such as the Kalathur blast is viewed. Generally, any blast is called an accident but such usage unwittingly tends to gloss over the role of those who are responsible for the implementation and the enforcement of safety protocols. There can be no compromise on this count. At the same time, the contribution of the firecracker industry to the country's economy, especially that of Tamil Nadu, has to be acknowledged. The sector employs eight lakh people, directly and indirectly, in a backward region of the State with no assured irrigation. However, this does not absolve the industry of the responsibility to the life and the health of workers and the larger sections of society. In any investigation of the event, the authorities concerned should seriously consider translating into action some of the suggestions made by an eight-member committee constituted by the National Green Tribunal after a blast in the district that killed over 20 people in February 2021. Headed by former judge of the Punjab and Haryana, and Madras High Courts K. Kannan, the panel had suggested that the Explosives Act be amended to make punishments more stringent than now, employing only certified persons for operations including mixing, filling of chemicals and the making of colour pellets, and using drones for surveillance of various units. There is no dearth of ideas to improve the working of the industry but what is required is that the authorities, both at the levels of Central and State Governments, should ensure the enforcement of safety protocols.

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