

NO FIREWORKS: ON NGT BAN ON SALE AND USE OF FIRECRACKERS

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Environmental Pollution - Air, Water, Soil & E-waste

In the year of the COVID-19 pandemic, it should surprise no one that the [National Green Tribunal has prohibited the sale and use of firecrackers during Deepavali](#) in the National Capital Region of Delhi and in urban centres that recorded poor or worse air quality in November last year. The directions expand on Supreme Court orders issued in the past, and provide some concessions to cities and towns that have moderate or better air quality, by allowing “green crackers” and specified hours for bursting. These stipulations are to extend to Christmas and New Year if the ban continues beyond November. The NGT took note that Odisha, Rajasthan, Sikkim, Chandigarh, the Delhi Pollution Control Committee and the Calcutta High Court had already responded to deteriorating environmental conditions by banning firecrackers this year. The tribunal’s reasoning giving primacy to the precautionary principle in sustainable development over employment and revenue losses is understandable. As the impact of COVID-19 became clear in March, and there were fears of a case surge during the winter, it was incumbent on the Centre to work with States and resolutely prevent the burning of farm stubble [ahead of Deepavali](#). This annual phenomenon unfailingly fouls the air across northern and eastern India, and imposes heavy health and productivity costs. In the absence of pollution from agricultural residue, there might have been some room for a limited quantity of firecrackers, although climatic conditions at this time of year, of low temperature and atmospheric circulation, would still leave many in distress. Only damage control is possible now, including steps to address the concerns of the fireworks industry.

Even without the risk of a COVID-19 surge, it should be evident to policymakers that their measures under the National Clean Air Programme, which seeks to reduce particulate matter pollution by 20% to 30% by 2024, must be demonstrably effective. By the government’s own admission, there were 148 days of poor to severe air quality during 2019 in the NCR, down from 206 days the previous year. Many other cities have a similar profile, but get less attention. With 40% of all pollution-linked deaths attributed to bad air quality in leading emerging economies and some evidence from the U.S. on higher COVID-19 mortality in highly polluted areas, it is time governments showed a sense of accountability on the right to breathe clean air. Tamil Nadu, where 90% of firecrackers are produced, has legitimate concerns on the fate of the industry this year, which, producers claim, represents about 2,300 crore worth of output. A transparent compensation scheme for workers, and suitable relief for producers may be necessary, although the longer-term solution might lie in broad basing economic activity in the Sivakasi region, reducing reliance on firecrackers.

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