

SMALL BANG THEORY

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

Gifting Recommendations: A Realme for every Indian during Flipkart's Big Billion Days sale

Every year around Diwali, Delhi is enveloped by a toxic haze. Already stressed by the burden of stubble-burning in neighbouring Punjab and Haryana, vehicular pollution and low wind speed, the city's air teems with particulate matter after the festivities. The pollution level exceeded the safe limit by 18 times the day after Diwali last year; the smog remained in the city for more than a month after the festival. This was despite a Supreme Court-directed ban on firecrackers. A similar ban had failed to produce the desired result more than 10 years ago. The court, it seems, has taken cognisance of this failure, and has eased the prohibition this year. On Tuesday, a two-member bench allowed the sale of crackers which have low emission and permissible sound pollution levels. It also asked people to limit their tryst with fireworks to two hours during the festival — between 8 and 10 pm. The court's call for moderation is welcome. There is also no doubt that curbing the pollution problem around Diwali demands restrictive measures. The question, however, remains: Will intervention by the judiciary make people give up a practice that has become virtually synonymous with the festival?

Last year, the apex court suggested that its ban was a "natural follow-up" to numerous awareness campaigns run by civil society organisations which urge citizens to "say no to crackers". There is some justification to this argument. The firecracker ban was in response to a petition by three schoolchildren who pleaded that "their fundamental right to life was at stake due to ill-effects of pollution caused due to crackers". The petition was also supported by the Central Pollution Control Board. However, the failure of the ban also bares the absence of an adequate groundswell of public opinion against firecrackers.

Pollution has become a feature of the festive season in Delhi — indeed several parts of the country — for almost two decades. Yet, last-minute crisis management remains the political response of choice. In spite of several well-meaning interventions by the judiciary, environmental concerns have suffered for the want of sustained action and broader ownership. Individual petitioners and NGOs have ploughed a lonely furrow. By all accounts, smog is an emotive issue, yet it has rarely occasioned political mobilisation in the way that inflation or joblessness does. The [Aam Aadmi Party](#) did have pollution as a part of its election manifesto and it came to office by stressing the need for collective and concerted action to solve environmental problems. However, during every pollution crisis, the party has tried to try to outdo its rivals in issuing sermons about "not politicising the issue". The current festive season is another opportunity for it — and other political parties — to realise that pollution control is more a matter of political action, than legal diktat and coercive controls.

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