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# Fire and Sound — On Thrissur Pooram and the Cost of Sacrificing Safety at the Altar of Faith

THE HINDU

25 April 2026

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# Fire and Sound — On Thrissur Pooram and the Cost of Sacrificing Safety at the Altar of Faith

The Hindu

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4 tags



## INTERVIEW ANGLE

*"The Thrissur Pooram fireworks tragedy (15 dead, April 21) is not an isolated accident — it is a governance failure enabled by cultural deference to religious festivals. How should India reform its industrial safety framework for festival-linked manufacturing activities?"*

## THE CORE ARGUMENT

The Mundathikode fireworks explosion of April 21, 2026 — which killed 15 workers preparing crackers for Thrissur Pooram — was not an unforeseeable accident but a predictable outcome of known violations: overcrowded sheds, explosives beyond permitted limits, no segregation between mixing and storage areas, and no fire engine access road. The editorial's central argument, encapsulated in the phrase *"safety is often sacrificed at the altar of faith,"* is that India's enforcement machinery persistently fails to regulate activities embedded in cultural or religious contexts. The cost is borne by the most vulnerable — daily wage workers in fireworks units, not the festival organisers or the state.

## BACKGROUND — THE EXPLOSION

A fireworks manufacturing unit at Mundathikode, Thrissur, preparing crackers for Thiruvambady Devaswom (one of two devaswoms organising Thrissur Pooram), exploded on April 21, 2026 — killing 15 and injuring 40+. The death toll rose as the licensee succumbed to 80% burns. Authorities subsequently decided to conduct Thrissur Pooram 2026 without fireworks and with restricted public entry.

## THREE STRUCTURAL FAILURES

### 1. Regulatory Capture by Cultural Significance

Thrissur Pooram is among India’s most iconic festivals — drawing hundreds of thousands of visitors, featuring in tourism campaigns, and carrying deep political and cultural salience. This significance creates **implicit immunity from inspection**: inspectors are reluctant to disrupt preparations for a nationally celebrated event; political pressure discourages pre-event interventions; and violations accumulate unchecked year after year.

The same pattern was visible in the **2018 Paravur church fireworks blast** (110 killed) — where violations were known but unacted upon before the tragedy.

### 2. An Obsolete Legal Framework

The **Explosives Act, 1884** — 142 years old — carries a maximum penalty of ₹5,000 for violations. In an era of multimillion-rupee festival fireworks contracts, this penalty has **zero deterrence value**. The Act predates the concept of graded enforcement, regulatory impact assessment, or proportionate liability. It was designed for a colonial administration, not a modern risk-governance regime.

### 3. PESO’s Inspection Deficit

**PESO (Petroleum and Explosives Safety Organisation)** has approximately **200 inspectors** for thousands of licensed explosives sites across India — an impossible ratio. Most licences are verified on paper; physical site inspections are infrequent. When violations are found post-tragedy (as in Mundathikode), they reveal not new problems but old ones that inspection would have caught.

## WHAT REFORM SHOULD LOOK LIKE

REFORM	DETAIL
<b>Explosives Act modernisation</b>	Revise penalties (₹5,000 → meaningful deterrent); add risk-based licensing tiers
<b>PESO strengthening</b>	Mandatory pre-festival site inspections; digitised compliance records
<b>Third-party audits</b>	Festival organisers (devaswoms, trusts) must obtain certified safety audits
<b>Liability reform</b>	Organisers and licensees jointly liable — not just the worker
<b>Safety distances</b>	Strict enforcement of 12-18 metre segregation; satellite/drone verification
<b>Culpability chain</b>	State government officials who clear events without safety checks held accountable

## THE BROADER PATTERN — INDUSTRIAL SAFETY IN INDIA

India's industrial safety governance is reactive rather than preventive. The same governance failure appears across sectors:

- **Virudhunagar fireworks blast (2021):** 19 killed; inquiry → inaction cycle
- **Harda factory explosion (2023):** 13 killed; repeat of same violations
- **Mundathikode (2026):** 15 killed; same overcrowding, same violation of safety distances

The editorial calls for an end to the **post-tragedy inquiry-and-forget cycle** — and argues that cultural or religious context should never exempt any production activity from safety standards.

## UPSC ANGLE

PAPER	ANGLE
GS2 — Governance	Industrial safety regulation; PESO reform; Centre-State coordination
GS3 — Disaster Management	Prevention vs response; risk-based regulatory frameworks
GS4 — Ethics	Public servant duty to enforce safety laws even in politically sensitive contexts

**Mains Keywords:** PESO, Explosives Act 1884, Thrissur Pooram, industrial safety, regulatory capture, preventive governance

**Probable Question:** “India’s industrial safety framework is reactive and fails to account for culturally embedded risks. Examine with examples.” (GS2/GS3 Mains)

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