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Fire and Sound — Thrissur Pooram's Silence and the Unseen Crisis of India's Industrial Safety Regulation

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THE EDITORIAL ARGUMENT

When the percussion of the Ilanjithara Melam fell silent on Thrissur's Thekkinkadu Maidan on April 26, 2026 — and the night sky above the Vadakkunnathan temple remained dark for the first time in living memory — the absence was not merely of fireworks. It was the silence of institutional failure. Fifteen people are dead. The Mundathikode explosion of April 21 did not happen despite regulation — it happened through regulation.

WHAT THE THRISSUR POORAM TRAGEDY REVEALS

The fireworks assembly unit at Mundathikode, Thrissur was **legally licensed**. It operated under the Explosives Act, 1884 — a colonial statute now 142 years old. Its workers died not because the state was absent from their workplace, but because the state was present in the worst possible way: issuing a licence, collecting a fee, and then disappearing.

What investigators found at Mundathikode was familiar to anyone who has studied industrial disaster in India:

- Workers far in excess of the permitted number crammed into a workspace designed for two
- Explosives stockpiled in volumes well beyond the licensed quantity
- The mandatory 12–18 metre safety distances between processing zones completely disregarded
- Mixing, drying, and assembly operations conducted in adjoining, unsegregated rooms

None of this is exceptional. The same pattern — licence issued, enforcement absent, disaster predictable — appears in virtually every major fireworks tragedy in India. The 2018 Sivakasi fire. The 2023 Guruvayur blast. And now Mundathikode.

THE STRUCTURAL PROBLEM: PESO'S INSPECTION GAP

The **Petroleum and Explosives Safety Organisation (PESO)**, under the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, is the licensing authority for explosives manufacture, storage, and transport under the Explosives Act, 1884. PESO operates from a national headquarters in Nagpur and a small network of regional offices — wholly inadequate for the thousands of licensed fireworks units spread across India's festival belt from Tamil Nadu to Uttar Pradesh.

The problem is not merely staffing. It is legal architecture. The Explosives Act, 1884 was drafted when industrial explosives meant gunpowder for mining. Its maximum penalty is **₹5,000** — a figure so detached from modern risk that it functions as a licence to violate. When the cost of non-compliance is trivially lower than the cost of compliance, rational actors will violate. That is not a character flaw in the operators. It is a design flaw in the statute.

THE CULTURAL HERITAGE ARGUMENT — AND ITS LIMITS

There is a genuine tension here that requires honest acknowledgement. Thrissur Pooram's fireworks are not mere spectacle. They are a centuries-old tradition attributed to the Sakthan Thampuran of Cochin — a complex, choreographed dialogue between two competing devaswoms using sound, light, and percussion as language. Generations of craftsmen in Thrissur and Sivakasi have built an entire artisanal economy around it.

To ban fireworks is to silence something irreplaceable. The Kerala government's decision for 2026 was the right one given the circumstances. But a permanent ban — the demand being heard from some quarters — is not the answer. The answer is to make the activity safe. The choice is not between heritage and safety. It is between reforming the regulatory system and accepting that disasters will continue.

WHAT REFORM REQUIRES

The immediate priority is to amend the Explosives Act. The 2025 Explosives (Amendment) Bill moved the penalty ceiling to ₹5 lakh — still modest, but a significant step if enacted. The harder challenge is PESO's structural reform: mandatory third-party safety audits for all fireworks assembly units, compulsory insurance that creates market incentives for compliance, and expanding PESO's inspection cadre to levels commensurate with the risk landscape.

But there is a deeper question about who bears the burden of heritage. The Thrissur Pooram's fireworks are a public good — admired by millions — but the workers who produce them have no public protection worth the name. The Explosives Act does not even require that unit operators carry workers' compensation insurance. The spectators watch. The workers burn.

UPSC RELEVANCE

PAPER	ANGLE
GS2 — Governance	Regulatory bodies; licensing gaps; PESO; industrial safety architecture
GS3 — Disaster Management	Industrial disasters; preventive regulation; penalties and deterrence
GS1 — Art & Culture	Intangible cultural heritage; temple festival traditions; tension between heritage and safety

Mains Keywords: Thrissur Pooram, Mundathikode explosion, PESO, Explosives Act 1884, industrial safety, regulatory failure, cultural heritage, fireworks regulation

Prelims Facts Corner

ITEM	FACT
PESO under	Ministry of Commerce and Industry (DPIIT)
Explosives Act	1884; max penalty ₹5,000 (original)
Mundathikode explosion	April 21, 2026; 15 killed
Festival held	April 26, 2026 — without fireworks; no public entry
Thekkinkadu Maidan	Festival ground, Thrissur city
Two main devaswoms	Paramekkavu Devaswom + Thiruvambadi Devaswom

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