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No Blanket Ban: The Supreme Court Takes Up Pellet Guns and Crowd Control

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No Blanket Ban: The Supreme Court Takes Up Pellet Guns and Crowd Control

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The Supreme Court, hearing a petition on July 30, 2026, declined to order a blanket ban on the use of pellet guns for crowd control, observing that forces may use them in exceptional circumstances under existing police guidelines. The bench issued notice to the Centre and the Inspector General of the Rapid Action Force, directed preservation of RAF ammunition logs, and sought the Delhi Police standard operating procedure, with the Chief Justice indicating that the petitioners should seek judicial guidelines rather than a blanket prohibition.

WHAT THE COURT ACTUALLY HELD

ELEMENT	DETAIL
Hearing date	30 July 2026
Relief sought	Blanket ban on pellet guns for crowd control
Court's decision	Declined a blanket ban
Bench	CJI Surya Kant , Justices Joymalya Bagchi and V. Mohana
Court's reasoning	Forces may use them in exceptional circumstances under existing guidelines; Justice Joymalya Bagchi asked the petitioners to show whether a graded-response use of pellets could be allowed when even bullets are used in some situations
What the Court did instead	Issued notice to the Centre and IG, RAF ; directed preservation of RAF ammunition logs ; sought the Delhi Police SOP and the governing regulations
Related scrutiny opened	The Delhi RAF firing during the July 20 march
Originating event	The 'Sansad Chalo' march, 20 July 2026 , protesting the NEET-UG 2026 paper leak

THE “LESS-LETHAL” CATEGORY PROBLEM

The Court’s stated reasoning, that a weapon less lethal than a firearm cannot logically be barred when the firearm itself is permitted in extreme cases, has an intuitive appeal. But it rests on a comparison that does not survive close inspection at the level of a crowd.

A pellet gun is typically a 12-bore pump-action shotgun firing cartridges that disperse **several hundred metal pellets**, with reported figures ranging from around 450 to 600 per cartridge, over a wide cone. A rifle bullet is aimed; the officer firing it selects a target and is accountable for that selection. A pellet cartridge, by design, cannot discriminate between the specific individual an officer intends to stop and the people standing near, behind, or beside that individual.

WEAPON	DISCRIMINATION CAPABILITY	ACCOUNTABILITY IMPLICATION
Rifle / service firearm	Aimed at an identified individual	The decision to fire at a specific person is reviewable
Pellet gun	Disperses several hundred projectiles across an area	No individual targeting decision exists to review; bystander injury is a design feature, not a malfunction

The practical consequence, documented extensively in India’s own experience with pellet-gun deployment, is a distinctive injury pattern: multiple upper-body and facial wounds, with **ocular injuries causing permanent partial or total blindness** being the signature harm, frequently to people who were not themselves engaged in violence.

THE CONSTITUTIONAL FRAME

PROVISION	RELEVANCE
Article 19(1)(b)	The right to assemble peaceably and without arms, subject to reasonable restrictions under Article 19(3)
Article 21	Right to life and personal liberty, encompassing bodily integrity
Proportionality doctrine	Requires that a restriction on a right be suitable, necessary, and proportionate in the narrow sense, using the least restrictive means available
Existing police standing orders	Crowd-control escalation ladders, including the Bureau of Police Research and Development advisory permitting use in exceptional circumstances, which the Court has now called for

The proportionality test is the analytical core here. A measure fails the “least restrictive means” limb if a less rights-invasive alternative would achieve the same legitimate objective. The question any future guidelines will have to answer is whether, given the availability of water cannon, tear gas, and controlled baton deployment, an indiscriminate multi-projectile weapon can ever satisfy that limb in a crowd containing non-violent participants.

THE SEPARATION-OF-POWERS QUESTION

By declining a blanket ban while asking the petitioners to seek judicial guidelines instead, the Chief Justice has pointed the litigation toward a specific institutional question: if the Court eventually frames such guidelines, is it legislating? The conventional answer is that in the absence of [statutory](#) or executive standards governing a rights-affecting practice, the Court may issue binding guidelines that operate until the legislature acts, a power exercised in a well-established line of cases where a legal vacuum coexisted with a demonstrated rights violation.

The counter-consideration is that operational crowd-control doctrine involves technical and situational judgments that courts are institutionally less equipped to make than police leadership and the executive, and that judicially-authored protocols can prove rigid when applied to circumstances the Court did not anticipate.

UPSC RELEVANCE

GS Paper 2: Fundamental Rights, particularly Articles 19 and 21; separation of powers; [judicial review](#); police reforms; government policies and interventions.

Prelims pointers:

- Hearing on **30 July 2026**; the Court **declined a blanket ban**, issued notice to the Centre and the IG, Rapid Action Force, directed preservation of ammunition logs and sought the Delhi Police SOP.
- Bench: **CJI Surya Kant**, Justices **Joymalya Bagchi** and **V. Mohana**.
- Trigger event: the ‘**Sansad Chalo**’ march, **20 July 2026**, over the **NEET-UG 2026 paper leak**.
- Pellet guns are typically **12-bore pump-action shotguns**, cartridges dispersing **several hundred metal pellets** (reported figures range from around 450 to 600 per cartridge).
- **Article 19(1)(b)**: right to assemble peaceably and without arms; restrictions under **Article 19(3)**.
- **Proportionality doctrine**: suitability, necessity, and proportionality in the narrow sense.

 FACTS CORNER, KNOWLEDGE PEDIA**THE RULING:**

Supreme Court hearing 30 July 2026; declined a blanket ban on pellet guns for crowd control.

Bench: CJI Surya Kant, Justices Joymalya Bagchi and V. Mohana.

Reasoning: forces may use them in exceptional circumstances, as bullets are permitted in extreme cases.

Issued notice to the Centre and IG, RAF; directed preservation of ammunition logs; sought the Delhi Police SOP.

THE WEAPON:

Typically a 12-bore pump-action shotgun; cartridges disperse several hundred metal pellets (reported at around 450 to 600) over a wide cone.

Signature harm: ocular injury causing permanent partial or total blindness, often to bystanders.

CONSTITUTIONAL FRAME:

Article 19(1)(b): right to assemble peaceably and without arms.

Article 21: right to life, encompassing bodily integrity.

Proportionality doctrine: suitability, necessity, least restrictive means.

ORIGIN: THE 'SANSAD CHALO' MARCH OF 20 JULY 2026 AGAINST THE NEET-UG 2026 PAPER LEAK.

Sources: Supreme Court of India, LiveLaw, Ministry of Home Affairs

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