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Kerala temple fire: A case of flouted rules

BY GAUTAMAN BHASKARAN on APRIL 11, 2016 in ASIA TIMES NEWS & FEATURES, INDIA

Gods in God's Own Country seem to have been displeased by man's callous disregard for others' lives.

A huge explosion in the wee hours of Sunday caused by fire crackers at the Hindu Puttingal Devi Temple in Kerala's Kollam district killed as many as 109 people. The temple was celebrating the religious festival of Meena-Bharani.



Despite a ban, authorities of Puttingal temple in Kollam went head with their plan to display the fireworks

Over 300 people were grievously wounded or maimed. Many houses and shops around a two-kilometre radius were damaged or completely destroyed.

Witnesses said a firecracker meant to explode in the sky misfired and fell on the ground, and the sparks from it ignited a nearby storehouse, which had illegally hoarded huge piles of fireworks.

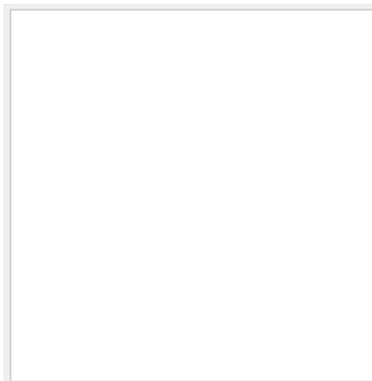
The structure literally burst causing sheer mayhem all around. Electric wires caught fire and the whole area was plunged in darkness. About 20,000 people, who had gathered there to watch the annual festival, found themselves in the midst of a terrible man-made disaster.

Shaken survivors gave graphic accounts of the tragedy. They said they had never seen anything as horrendous as this before. There were dead bodies all over, and limbs had flown in all directions. Some were stuck to the highest branches in the trees around.

The festival had begun on the midnight of Saturday/Sunday. Around 3.30 am, a firecracker called Sunflower lit by one of the two competing groups of men — a ritualistic contest, which has for many years been condemned by residents living around the temple — fell on the ground instead of flying high above, and the large sparks from it led to the bloody calamity.

This disaster was, as they say so often in India, waiting to happen — and strangely nothing is ever done to stop a catastrophe that is all set to come about.

The fireworks display was organized by the temple despite an order by the Kollam district



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collector and additional district magistrate banning the show. The decree was issued on the basis of a petition filed by a septuagenarian woman, Pankajakshamma, whose house is located at a nodding distance from the temple.



Pankajakshamma

Her house is now in a shambles, and for four years, she had been complaining against such dangerous display of fireworks.

But it was only this year that the Kollam administration took note of what she had to say and had prohibited the show. Public announcements about the proscription were made time and again.

Pankajakshamma said that after she had filed her complaint this year, “I was threatened by miscreants, who even threw stones at my house”.

Despite her advancing years, she is still mentally agile and her stints in Singapore had made her aware of what public safety should be.

(Paradoxically, if a woman had been bold enough, despite being repeatedly threatened by anti-socials for raising her voice against a frightfully dangerous practice, it was also a woman, a grass cutter, as legend has it, who many centuries ago saw blood oozing from a termite hill when her sickle slashed it accidentally. Word spread, and the locals constructed the temple around the hill with the Hindu Goddess Bhadrakali as the deity presiding over the Puttingal Devi Temple.)

When the exhibition of fireworks began around midnight — in clear violation of the ban as well as a Supreme Court ruling that firecrackers should not be burst after 10 pm — a huge battalion of policemen stood by, afraid to intervene in a religious festivity, nervous about offending religious sentiments and hesitant to anger the temple authorities.

They knew firecrackers were stored far too close to the display arena and that banned chemicals had been used in the fireworks to raise the decibel levels.

Officials investigating the explosion and fire are almost certain that potassium chlorate, a deadly chemical that has been banned, was used to make the Kollam firecrackers. Two months ago, this chemical was used to make a crude bomb in Bengaluru by Mohammed Rafiq, who was part of the outlawed Students Islamic Movement of India, an organisation which was formed in Aligarh in 1977. The bomb killed a woman outside a city restaurant.

Scientists describe potassium chlorate as “unstable and friction sensitive” and the chemical was hence banned in 1992 by an Act of the Central Government.

“We warned the Kerala government, fireworks manufacturers and district authorities several times about the lapses,” a former chief controller of explosives, Prakash Chandra Srivastava, told Firstpost.

It must be mentioned here that potassium chlorate is being used on the sly even in Sivakasi, the firecracker capital of India in Tamil Nadu. However, the Kerala manufacturers reportedly have lesser expertise in handling this deadly chemical.

In fact, every rule in the standard operating procedure (SOP) in Kerala was flouted. The rules — widely publicized on the internet — state that illegal storage (as was the case in the Kollam temple) and unauthorized manufacturing as well as use of firecrackers are the main causes of accidents. The rules call for the strict implementation of the Explosives Act of 2008, and they have been written by the Institute of Land and Disaster Management, a wing of Kerala State Department of Revenue and Disaster Management.

The SOP is clear that “carelessness, negligence and ignorance among organizers of events and fireworks handlers could cause fatal accidents...The firecrackers must be stored in a safe place away from the public and care must be taken during their display.”

Lokanath Behera, director-general, Kerala Fire and Rescue Services, told AT over phone that

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“most of the rules were not followed by the temple authorities as the first reports indicate. A one-man commission with Krishnan Nair has been constituted to probe the mishap”.

He added that such tragedies were “easily preventable if only regulations are strictly enforced and followed”.

But Kerala temples have been reportedly violating laws and regulations with impunity. Any attempt to enforce rules is viewed as interference in the freedom of a religious community, and temples have been known to ignore them with the active connivance of politicians, bureaucrats and the police (who stood as mute spectators at Kollam).

Dinesh Unnikrishnan wrote in Firstpost: “The larger and more worrying issue here is that competitive fireworks are the dominant aspects of most temple festivals in Kerala — especially in the middle part of the southern state. They are not mere displays but mini-battles structured and guided by aggressive competitive spirit between two temples, two factions or two adjacent geographies, on the pretext of entertainment or displays.”

The victims in the blood sport, if I may say so, are the helpless devotees and bystanders.

And, mind you the culprits invariably escape punishment. We saw that in the 1997 Uphaar Cinema fire in the heart of Delhi where 59 people died of suffocation and 103 were seriously wounded in the resultant stampede. It was proved that the theatre owned by two brothers, Sushil and Gopal Ansal, had flouted fire safety regulations.

It was only in April 2015 that the Ansals were finally convicted for a mere two years. But since both were old, the Supreme Court asked them to pay a fine of Rs 60 crores and allowed them to walk free.

Neelam Krishnamoorthy, whose two teenage children died while they were watching the Bollywood film Border there, told NDTV the other night that fire safety was still a major issue in many theaters across India.

Earlier, in an Indian Express article, she expressed her sheer frustration over the terrible state of India’s judicial system: “Looking back, I think I made a mistake. I should have picked up a gun and shot the culprits, pleaded insanity in court and I might have been out by now. Maybe, that would have been justice”.

One is sure that there may be several people who had lost their loved ones at the Kollam temple sharing Krishnamoorthy’s sense of justice.

Gautaman Bhaskaran is an author, commentator and movie critic, who has worked with The Statesman in Kolkata and The Hindu in Chennai for 35 years. He now writes for the Hindustan Times, the Gulf Times and Seoul Times.

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Ilmunc Makesuill · 13 hours ago

Let's understand dear this is new India. Who goes to these festivals, urban poor with tie to the areas. I don't know about Kerala but I know there will some festival in Karnatka or AP and all the workers who are from that area will go there. Normally they go there once or twice a year and I don't begrudge them. These poor people uprooted from their village live in squalid conditions in city with no running water, toilet, or basic amenities. Twice or thrice a year they go back to their native places normally to attend these functions with their family and I can tell you that is what keeps them happy and working.

No one can take it away middle class has to realize that. We need to help these people, not take away their things. To me these accidents are happening more and more because more people are earning better and they can afford to take vacation with their children. Their vacations unlike middle class revolve around visiting such temples or functions. That is why these temples are like tourist spots teeming with new India. I think few such crazy incidents will turn things around in safety. One thing Modi does effectively he can fix administration and I am hoping he can find a good solution and fix it for most of these poor people. God bless them.....

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