

**[HT Correspondent](#), Hindustan Times**

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# Sivakasi factory violated safety norms, licence was suspended

A day after its licence was temporarily suspended for violation of safety norms, a devastating fire broke out in Om Shakti factory in India's firecracker hub Sivakasi, 500 km from Chennai, charring 36 people. Unofficial figures, however, peg the toll at 54. Around 80 people were injured and admitted to hospitals in Sivakasi, Virudanagar and Madurai.

Om Shakti factory is one of the biggest in Sivakasi with 300 employees.

It is not clear how the fire broke out, but preliminary investigations have revealed that the explosion occurred around 12.30 pm when workers were mixing chemicals for fancy fireworks. Forty of the 48 sheds storing chemicals and firecrackers were completely gutted, police said.

"These are times ahead of Deepavali. So activities go on at a breakneck speed in cracker units," said Najmal Hoda, SP of Virudanagar, under whose jurisdiction the area falls.

The fire quickly spread to other sheds and caused a series of explosions.

According to eyewitnesses, victims could be heard screaming for help while neither police nor fire personnel could enter the premises, as explosions went off one after another for over two hours. Many of the injured were carried on motorbikes and cots to hospitals.

Hoda said search parties had been sent out to arrest the factory owner, Murugesan.

Ironically, some of the dead could be bystanders, as the biggest explosion was in a shed nearest to the gate.

Tamil Nadu chief minister J Jayalalithaa ordered a probe and also told five of her ministers to rush to the spot and help in rescue and relief works. She also announced an ex gratia payment of R2 lakh each to the next of kin of those who died and ₹ 25,000 and ₹ 10,000 to the seriously injured and those with minor injuries, respectively.

The toll could increase as several people sustained over 40% burn injuries and some were said to be in critical condition.

Though firecracker factories of Sivakasi are notorious for employing children, no child was injured in Wednesday's incident.

Congress President Sonia Gandhi expressed grief over the deaths in the blaze that raged through the fireworks factory.

Conveying her condolences, Gandhi said, "My prayers are with the injured people and I wish them a speedy recovery."



■ The scene at the site of a blaze that raged through a fireworks factory near Sivakasi.



### ABOUT SIVAKASI

Sivakasi, also known as 'kutti' or 'mini Japan', accounts for

**90%** of the country's fireworks production

**80%** of matches production

■ The town has more than 700 firecracker factories, employing about 40,000 people and over one lakh indirectly, with an estimated total turnover of ₹2,000 cr.

■ The fireworks industry has often come under fire over illegal factories, lax safety standards and for employing a number of children.

■ During the last 12 years, 237 lives have been lost and 200 people injured due to accidents in 88 fireworks units.

**July 30, 2012:** 32 killed in fire in Tamil Nadu Express bound for Chennai

**Dec. 9, 2011:** At least 73 dead in fire at AMRI Hospital in Kolkata

**Nov. 20, 2011:** 15 died and more than 30 injured when a fire broke out at a community function of eunuchs in East Delhi.

**March 23, 2010:** Around 25 killed in an old mansion in Kolkata

**April 10, 2006:** 64 killed and 80 injured after a fire engulfed the tent at a crowded consumer trade fair in Meerut.

**Sept. 15, 2005:** 35 dead and 50 injured in fire in three firecracker units in Bihar.

**July 16, 2004:** 91 school children were killed in a fire accident at Kumbakonam in Tamil Nadu.

**Jan. 23, 2004:** 49 killed and 40 injured in fire at a marriage hall in Srirangam in Tamil Nadu.

**Aug. 6, 2001:** 28 people were killed at a private mental asylum in Erwadi in Tamil Nadu.

**Dec. 23, 1995:** 442 persons, mostly children, killed in a fire at the annual function of a school in Dabwali (Haryana). The pandal had caught fire due to short circuit.

GRAPHIC: SANJAY KAPOOR