

Curbing fire incidents from sky lanterns

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An increasing number of sky lanterns have been flying in the Dhaka sky since the past few years. While it is enthralling to watch hundreds of sky lanterns floating on the new year's eve, we must remember 'What goes up must come down'.

Sky lanterns can easily get stuck on electric wires, trees, and even thatched houses and cause fire incidents. In just one night of new year eve celebration, it has been reported that at least seven fire mishaps took place in Dhaka City. The hospitals have reported children suffering from burns and eye injuries being too near to a naked flame and wax.

The fallen lanterns were seen floating on some lakes of Dhaka. Undoubtedly some have ended up in open drains, worsening the already dreadful clogging

situation of the city. Wildlife and domestic animals are also endangered when sky lanterns drop on the ground or water bodies. The wireframes left behind by the lamps trap wild birds, which are also at risk of ingesting sharp debris. Unruly sky lanterns can potentially cause plane crashes if they get pulled into an aircraft's engine. Furthermore, the waste is non-biodegradable, polluting the environment. Despite all these adverse effects, people choose to fly sky lanterns.

The recent high demand for sky lanterns, coupled with an unregulated market, leads to the production of low quality lanterns. The popular response to this problem, around the world, has been to apply regulations such as licences or bans. Many countries in Europe and Americas, including parts of the UK and 29 states in the United States have all outlawed sky lanterns. However, regulations and bans require a strong law enforcing capacity, which is not yet present in Bangladesh. Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) imposed a ban on floating lanterns in Dhaka in 2018, but clearly the ban is yet to be properly enforced. Providing limited licences might instead give rise to second order problems of corruption-producer buying the permission for uncontrolled production using bribes.

Thus, we need to try more innovative approaches. The strength of our country lies in community-based informal channels, which we could mobilise to combat the issue.

An example of community-led actions can be seen in California where local firefighters have taught the community on how to prevent fires from happening and act as first responders to fire outbreaks. The idea is, if youths are actively engaged in firefighting, they will withdraw from engaging in hazardous activities from a sense of ownership. In Bangladesh, we have examples of volunteer communities actively participating in cleaning of public spaces, donating blood, and other charities. If we can make the youth more active, it will have a domino effect on the overall community. We can also train volunteers to become first fire responders. They can dissuade their community members from risky activities like flying sky lanterns. A trained volunteer base will also help combat the delayed arrival of firefighters and the inability of fire trucks to access certain areas.

We can also design community or school-based junior firefighter programmes. Programmes like this already exist, such as the 'National Junior Fire Fighter Programme' of 'National Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC)' in the USA, which works with volunteers for firefighting, emergency medical service, and rescue operations. Programmes like these encourage the youth to be more responsible and disseminate the knowledge and training they receive among their peers.

In most cases, we already know the events that entail the highest use of sky lanterns such as in new year's eve. This knowledge could be worth more than we credit. We can design public announcements and audiovisuals illustrating the dangers of using fire lanterns to educate the youth about it. Social and mass media and other promotional platforms can be used to alert the public of the dangers that a moment of enjoyment can cause. Creating awareness through posters or public announcements (miking is still very popular in the peri-urban areas around the country) the week before can also be effective. For this, we could ask help from community leaders or reliable members of the community such as imams, teachers, and priests. A clear announcement is important, with information on where and how to use sky lanterns, along with a warning of all the hazards that it could entail.

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