IDENTITIES TO REMAIN CONFIDENTIAL

Whistleblowers to help PCB curb noise pollution

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Calcutta: The West Bengal Pollution Control Board (WBPCB) will rely on whistleblowers in its crackdown on noise pollution during Kali Puja and Diwali, assuring that their identities will be protected.

The board's member secretary gave the assurance at a meeting with a delegation of environmental experts, physicians and activists in the city on Wednesday evening. The delegation included physicians Dulal Bose and Dwaipayan Mukherjee, and public health expert Arunabha Majumdar, among others.

The board also agreed to explore setting up a dedicated WhatsApp helpline for complaints, recognising that fear of retaliation often deters people in rural areas from reporting violations.

"As concerned citizens, we wanted to convey our opinions and suggestions to the state PCB officials, and we are very happy with their response. We expect them to walk the talk," said Bose, former sheriff of Calcutta, after the meeting.

PCB member secretary Ashok Pratap Singh also agreed to write to hospital heads across the state, asking them to ensure that firecrackers are not burst on their premises, which are designated silent zones.

The board will also ask the police to remain vigilant to prevent bursting of firecrackers in and around hospitals. The assurance followed ENT specialist Mukherjee's observation that relentless fireworks disturb patients, including those in intensive care units.



A firecracker being burst in Bhowanipore during Kali Puja last year

"Unfortunately, the patients cannot complain to you," Mukherjee said.

The board also agreed in principle to explore measures to address the plight of 'noise martyrs' — people killed for protesting against firecrackers or excessive noise.

"Our charter includes the demand for setting up a commission in this regard to book violators and also provide compensation to affected families," said environment activist Kunal Sen, who was part of the delegation.

"We are happy that the board has agreed to consider the demand, and, as requested by the member secretary, we will submit a detailed proposal about it," said Biswajit Mukherjee, former chief law officer of the state board, who has been raising the issue for several years.

The delegation also urged the board to ensure that only green fireworks are sold and used. Officials said they had already begun monitoring fireworks markets in Calcutta and would ask district magistrates to carry out similar exercises in the districts, Majumdar said.

He is a former director-professor of the All India Institute of Hygiene and Public Health.

"We also pointed out how fireworks are being openly sold in Serampore and other areas in complete violation of norms. We want the board to work in tandem with civil society representatives working on the ground," said environment activist Goutam Sarkar.

"The role of civil society, particularly environmental experts, is critical in maintaining green norms. We want to work with them in the long term and, therefore, plan to continue this dialogue after Kali Puja," a senior board official said after the meeting.