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GENERAL STUDIES 3: ENVIRONMENT

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TOPIC: POLLUTION

The saga of regulating India's thermal power emissions

India's SO₂ Emission Norms: Delayed Compliance and Its Impacts

Repeated Deadline Extensions

- On December 30, 2024, the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC) extended the deadline for thermal power plants to meet **SO₂ emission norms** by three years.
- This was the **fourth extension** since 2015, when new emission norms were introduced.
- The latest extension affects **20 GW of thermal plants** near densely populated areas, previously required to comply by **December 31, 2024**.

Evolution of SO₂ Emission Norms

- In **December 2015**, India introduced stricter emission norms for thermal plants, bringing them in line with global standards.
- Despite India's **low-sulphur coal**, compliance was delayed due to debates around **Flue Gas Desulphurisation (FGD)** technology.
- Though the rules never mandated FGDs, discussions focused on their **cost, supply chain challenges, and increased coal consumption**.

Debates on Need for SO₂ Norms

- Government agencies, such as the **Central Electricity Authority (CEA)** and **NITI Aayog**, questioned the necessity of uniform SO₂ norms.
- Studies commissioned by **IIT Delhi** (2022) and **CSIR-NEERI** (2024) suggested prioritizing **particulate emissions** over SO₂.
- Some experts argued that **SO₂ contributes to secondary air pollution**, making emission norms necessary despite India's low-sulphur coal.

Different Compliance Timelines

- The MoEFCC has diluted some norms and introduced **staggered deadlines** for different emissions.



- **SO2 deadlines** extend well beyond **particulate matter (PM) emissions** deadlines, creating inconsistency.
- Pollution control boards lack transparency on compliance, making enforcement unclear.

Financial and Environmental Costs

- Many thermal plants **already tendered contracts** for FGD installation.
- Electricity regulators allowed **FGD costs to be passed to consumers**, even if the plants do not meet emission norms.
- **22 GW of plants** have installed FGDs, and **102 GW (50% of total capacity)** is in advanced stages.
- However, with compliance pushed to **2027**, plants may **not use installed FGDs**, leading to **higher consumer costs and continued air pollution**.

Conclusion

India's **delayed implementation** of SO2 norms highlights institutional inefficiencies and environmental concerns. While electricity consumers bear **the cost of compliance**, citizens near thermal plants continue to suffer from poor air quality. If this pattern persists, the long-term financial, environmental, and health costs will be significant.

Source: [https://epaper.thehindu.com/ccidist-
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