

On the negligence of fire safety in India

The Hindu

Paper - III
(Disaster management)

The devastating fires, at a gaming centre in Rajkot, Gujarat and a newborn nursing clinic in Delhi within 24 hours of each other, which left over 30 dead, is another grim reminder of one of India's insidious threats: the pervasive nature of the negligence of the fire safety of buildings by a whole range of stakeholders — from builders and proprietors to regulatory authorities. While the Bureau of Indian Standards has set detailed fire safety protocols in its National Building Code of India (NBC) 2016, it is a recommendatory document, as fire services is a State subject, and enforced at the municipality level. The sheer disregard for India's fire safety norms is apparent from the opening lines in the 'About Fire Service – Background' page of the Director General, Fire Services website under the Ministry of Home Affairs. It reads, "The fire services are not well organized in India", adding, "in recent years the requirements for fire safety cover have increased manifold whereas the development of fire service has not made much headway".

The National Disaster Management Authority had recommended to the 13th Finance Commission, an allocation of Rs. 7,000 crore to revamp India's fire and emergency services. But the Commission sought an allocation of almost Rs. 90,000 crore at the municipality level, recognising the need for a tailor-made revamping and restructuring of fire and emergency preparedness. A 2019 Home Ministry response to the Rajya Sabha noted that India had only 3,377 fire stations, when a 2012 national report on fire hazards and risk analysis sought more than double that number. The staff shortage is even more appalling. The entire country had only about 55,000 fire servicemen in 2019, when the requirement was about 5,60,000 seven years earlier. The Centre belatedly set aside Rs. 5,000 crore last July asking States to cough up another Rs. 1,400 crore to modernise emergency services. This follows the 15th Finance Commission's advice to set aside 12.5% of all allocations towards the National/State Disaster Response Funds. With rising heatwaves and extreme weather events nationwide, it is clear that a synchronisation of the 2016 NBC and the Energy Conservation Building Code is required to attempt a holistic approach to address fires, as standards for construction material, electrical wiring, air-conditioning, and a whole range of cooling materials have to be revamped. More importantly, India's polity, bureaucracy, policymakers and entrepreneurs must urgently address this insidious threat.

What are the legal provisions available to ensure fire safety compliance in public buildings?

- ❖ First, the National Building Code of India deals with Fire and life safety. The Bureau of Indian Standards has published it, as a recommendatory document. However, the Home Ministry asked States to incorporate it into their local building bylaws. It makes the recommendations a "mandatory requirement".
- ❖ Second, Fire Safety Committees were constituted. They conduct periodical audits on fire installation, heating, ventilation and air-conditioning, and other electrical equipment in the Union government's hospitals.

- ❖ Third, Health Ministry has also imposed a third-party accreditation for fire safety. It has also formed strict guidelines for a mandatory fire response plan in every hospital.
- ❖ Fourth, The National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) has also provided mandatory requirements for fire safety in public buildings, including hospitals. Such as, maintaining minimum open safety space, protected exit mechanisms, dedicated staircases, and crucial drills to carry out evacuations.
- ❖ Fifth, the Supreme Court has directed all States to carry out fire safety audits of dedicated COVID-19 hospitals.

Guidelines under NBC

1. It provides specifications and guidelines for design and materials that reduce the threat of destructive fires. For example, It specifies fire resistance materials to be used in exterior walls, interior bearing walls, floor, roof, fire check doors, fire enclosure exits, etc.,
2. The Code, classifies all the existing and new buildings by nature of use. For example; residential, educational, institutional, assembly (like cinemas and auditorial), Industrial, etc.,
3. It recommends the location of buildings by type of use in specific zones. This is to ensure that industrial and hazardous structures do not coexist with residential, institutional, office, and business buildings.
4. The code prescribes incorporation of the technologies into buildings to alert in case of a fire and also to fight. Examples are, automatic fire detection and alarm system, automatic sprinklers and water sprays, fireman's lift, fire barriers, etc.,
5. It provides exemptions for various buildings in case of practical difficulty. A local head, fire services may consider exemptions from the Code.
6. Despite, the existence of fire safety rules in every state, the provisions of the Code are ignored in practice.

Expected Question for Prelims

Que. Consider the following statements with reference to National Building Code:

1. The National Building Code of India deals with fire and life safety.
2. Bureau of Indian Standards has published it as a recommendation document.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

- (a) Only 1 (b) Only 2
(c) Both 1 and 2 (d) Neither 1 nor 2

Answer : C

Mains Expected Question & Format

Que.: "Human loss due to building fires in India is the result of collective negligence on the part of Indian society, bureaucracy and policy makers." **Comment.**

Answer's Approach:

- ❖ In the first part of the answer, briefly explain the human loss caused by fire in buildings in India with figures.
- ❖ In the second part, show the collective negligence of Indian society, bureaucracy and policy makers behind this problem.
- ❖ Finally give a conclusion giving suggestions.

Note: - The question of the main examination given for practice is designed keeping in mind the upcoming UPSC mains examination. Therefore, to get an answer to this question, you can take the help of this source as well as other sources related to this topic.