

## **Lessons from Delhi's Hotel Fire**

### **Why in news?**

Recently, 17 people were killed and three injured after a fire at a hotel in Delhi.

### **What does the incident reveal?**

- 17 people lost their lives to a blaze that swept through a five-storey hotel in Delhi.
- The fire that broke out on the building's first floor quickly travelled upwards and turned the hotel into a death trap.
- A majority of the victims died of suffocation as most of the victims could not figure out a way to exit the hotel.
- Though the Delhi Hotel Association spokesperson claimed that all rules and fire safety norms were followed, preliminary investigations revealed this was hardly true.
- Stairs and corridors were too narrow, the emergency exit was blocked, and there was an illegal bar on the roof.
- The hotel staff were also reportedly not trained enough to handle such exigencies.
- Thus, this episode reiterates that Indian cities, its residents and lawmakers continue to ignore the lessons of the past.

### **What were the similar incidents that happened in the past?**

- In December 2017, 14 people were asphyxiated to death and more than 50 were injured when an inferno engulfed two restaurants in Mumbai's Kamala Mills area.
- The fire escape of the restaurant complex was rendered dysfunctional by construction in defiance of safety regulations.
- Kolkata has seen at least two major fire-related incidents after the death of 73 people at the Amri Hospital in 2011.
- In 2016, 19 critically ill patients were consumed by a fire in a private hospital in Bhubaneswar.
- In 2010, nine people lost their lives to a fire in a multi-storeyed commercial complex in Bengaluru.
- Thus, fire-preparedness is a matter of low priority in most parts of the country.

- The list keeps growing every year, exposing the laxity with which building bylaws are enforced in India's cities.

### **What are the concerns?**

- **Absence of Inspection** - In most parts of the country, a fire-safety inspection is rarely conducted.
- This means that after obtaining a licence, owners of shops, restaurants and other private buildings make changes in the sanctioned layout plans that very often compromise the fire-preparedness of their premises.
- Also, according to the Delhi Fire Services, at least 250 hotels in the capital continue to operate with fire safety "shortcomings".
- Reports also suggest that most nursing homes operate in complete violation of fire norms.
- **Shortage in infrastructure** - The FICCI-Pinkerton "India Risk Survey 2018", draws attention to the "under-equipped fire services in the country".
- A Union Ministry of Home Affairs-sponsored study in the same year came to the same conclusion.
- It found that of the 8,550 fire stations needed in the country, a little more than 2,000 are in place, resulting in a shortage of about 65%.
- It also reveals that urban areas alone require an additional 4,200 fire stations just to meet the minimum standard for response time.
- **Lack of efficient execution** - For example, buildings that exceed 45 metres in height, or roughly 12 floors, are considered "high-risk" in Mumbai.
- Those who do not follow fire safety norms can be imprisoned for six months to three years and fined, but rules are violated with impunity, and punishments are rare.

### **What should be done?**

- A mandatory annual fire safety audit by independent agencies is the need of the hour.
- Also, the National Building Code which has detailed directions on how to prevent fire hazards should be implemented in letter and spirit.
- For this, both the governments at the centre and the state, must have clear provisions in their safety legislation about the methodology and periodicity of such audits.

**Source: The Indian Express, Business Standard**



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