

Surat Fire Tragedy

What is the issue?

- More than 20 students died in a massive fire in a Surat coaching centre.
- Besides fixing accountability, the tragedy calls for updating the fire safety protocol countrywide.

What are the shortfalls in this regard?

- The Surat fire cannot be completely called an accident.
- As, there are reports of notices having been served to the builder on the risks, but not pursued.
- Two deaths had occurred in another coaching centre in the city the previous year too.
- The earlier tragedies, at least, should have led to a comprehensive review of public buildings.
- But civic officials were largely indifferent to these.

What are the larger concerns?

- India's abysmal record on fire safety is reflected in the death of 17,700 people countrywide in fires (public and residential buildings) during 2015.
- Notable ones are the Uphaar cinema blaze in Delhi that killed 59 people in 1997, and Kumbakonam school fire in Tamil Nadu in 2004 that killed 94 children.
- The latest tragedy highlights the gap between India's dreamy smart cities visions and the worrisome reality of urbanisation and lawlessness.
- None of these had been a strong case for governments to make fire safety the priority it should be.
- The courts too have allowed this to continue without severe penalties.
- The prolonged, aggressive litigation by the affected families in the Uphaar case made no difference.
- The role of administrative machinery and officials who sanctioned unsafe buildings, often in return for bribes, remains largely unaddressed.

What is to be done?

- The present inquiry should go into any deviations from the sanctioned plan for the commercial building housing the coaching centre.

- The role of urban planning officials in allowing it to come up should also be inquired into.
- It is essential now that the judiciary stresses on 'no tolerance' to corruption and evasion in the enforcement of building rules and fire safety.
- Beyond suspending a few officials and filing cases against the building owners, the role of sanctioning and enforcement authorities should also be looked into.
- Mandating compulsory insurance for all public buildings against fire risk and public liability can help.
- With this, the insurer would require a reduction of risk and compliance with building plans.
- It would thus bring about a change to the way architects and builders approach the question of safety.

Source: The Hindu

