



Lack of Fire Safety in India

Why in News

Over the past year, there have been deadly fires in hospital buildings, including those treating [Covid-19](#) patients.

- The [National Crime Records Bureau \(NCRB\)](#) says 330 people died in commercial building fires in 2019, while fatalities for residential or dwelling buildings were much higher at 6,329.

Key Points

▪ Leading Cause:

- **Electrical faults** are cited as the leading cause of fires but **State governments are widely criticised for being lax with building safety laws** and for failing to equip public buildings with modern technology.
- **Hospital ICUs (intensive care units) are a great fire risk** because they are oxygen-suffused, and need to meet high standards.

▪ Provisions in India Related to Fire Safety:

◦ Constitutional Provision:

- The **Fire Services is a State subject** and has been **included as a Municipal function** in the **XIIth Schedule** of the Constitution of India under **Article 243 (W)**.

◦ The National Building Code (NBC) of India, 2016:

- **Part 4 of the NBC** is titled '**Fire and Life Safety**'.

- **NBC, published by the Bureau of Indian Standards**, is a **“recommendatory document”**, and States have been asked to incorporate it into their local building bylaws, making the recommendations a mandatory requirement.
- All **existing and new buildings are classified by nature of use**, such as residential, educational, institutional, assembly (like cinemas and auditoria), business, mercantile, industrial, storage and hazardous.

• The code broadly covers the following areas:

- **Fire Prevention:** This covers aspects of fire prevention pertaining to the design and construction of buildings. It also describes the various types of buildings materials and their fire rating.
- **Life Safety:** This covers life safety provisions in the event of fire and similar emergencies, also addressing construction and occupancy features that are necessary to minimise danger to life from fire, smoke, fumes or panic.

◦ The Model Building Bye Laws, 2016:

- The **Ministry of Urban Development** has devised a circular called **“Model**

Building By Laws 2016” which states the regulatory mechanism and engineering parameters to keep in mind before starting any construction project in India.

- Point-specific responsibility for all fire-related clearance rests with the **Chief Fire Officer**.
- The concerned Development Authority shall refer the building plans to the Chief Fire Officer for obtaining clearance in respect of buildings.
- **Guidelines by [National Disaster Management Authority \(NDMA\)](#):**
 - It has also stipulated **requirements for fire safety in public buildings, including hospitals**, which incorporate elements of the NBC, besides design guidelines on maintaining minimum open safety space, protected exit mechanisms, dedicated staircases, and crucial drills to carry out evacuations.
 - The Central Government has also circulated **‘Model Bill on Maintenance of Fire & Emergency Services 2019’**.
- **Concerns:**
 - **Lack of unified fire services** in some of the states as unified fire services provide all the necessary guidelines and instruction in fire fighting.
 - Proper **organisational structure, training and career progression of its personnel lacking** in most of the fire departments in India.
 - **Inadequate modern equipment** and their scaling, authorization & standardization.
 - Appropriate and adequate **funding is not available**, which inhibits technological progression for fire fighting.
 - **Unavailability of training institutions** impinges real-time environmental understanding.
 - **Lack of infrastructural facilities** - fire stations and accommodation of personnel etc.
 - **Vulnerability analysis** is mostly not done.
 - Lack of Public awareness (DOs & DON'Ts), and **regular mock exercises and evacuation drills are not conducted**.
 - **Lack of Uniform fire safety legislation**.
 - Recently few states such as Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and Kerala were found not complying with the NBC.

Way Forward

- Although in December 2020, the **Supreme Court** directed all States to carry out **fire safety audits** of dedicated Covid-19 hospitals, it has become evident that State forces lack the manpower to inspect and ensure compliance with safety codes, including the NBC, where it is mandatory.
- Therefore one option is to **make heavy fire liability insurance compulsory for all public buildings**, which would offer protection to occupants and visitors and bring about external inspection of safety.

[Source:TH](#)