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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