



FIRE DISASTER DUE TO NON-COMPLIANCE OF FIRE SAFETY NORMS IN URBAN PLANNING AND FESTIVE OCCASIONS

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Abstract: A comprehensive fire risk assessment is very important in dense urban areas to estimate the quantum risk. In this article I have calculated the fire risk in two aspects: 1. Urban infrastructure and the vacant space necessary for high rise buildings. 2. Excessive expenditure on festive occasions on pandals and gates by using inflammable materials. Major fire tragedies occurred in India, a brief outline of the incident and the cause of the mishap. The tragedies have been construed as accidents and it ended with regret and compensation. Considering the high-risk urban infrastructure, the position of oil and gas pipes and electricity lines and fire safety analysis of high-rise buildings, the preparation vulnerability map is highly recommended. From the past experience, and the lapses which resulted the tragedy studied scientifically could help decision makers, urban planners, emergency managers and community organizations to plan for providing facilities and minimizing fire hazards and solve some related problems to reduce the fire risk. Moreover, the people and the implementing agencies should follow the fire safety norms meticulously to protect the precious human life.

INTRODUCTION:

National building code of India covers the detailed guidelines for construction, maintenance and fire safety of the structures. National Building code of India is published by Bureau of Indian Standards and it is recommendatory document. Guidelines are issued to the States to incorporate the recommendations of National Building Code into their local building bylaws making recommendations of National Building Code of India as mandatory requirement.

Fire prevention comes under Director General Fire Services, Civil Defence & Home Guards, Ministry of Home Affairs, and Government of India.

The deadly impact of fires cannot be understated: Every year around 2 lakh people die in fires or fire burn injuries. More than 90% of these deaths have been reported from low and middle income countries.

Inadequate planning, infrastructure and construction practices related to fire prevention and mitigation significantly increase the potential for conflagration. Fire risk reduction requires articulated institutional measures such as appropriate legislation for building plan and strict adherence to fire safety regulations.

However, formal regulation alone is insufficient to tackle this menace. Informal settlements where an estimated 25% of the world's urban population live, are often out of formal regulatory scope and particularly at risk due to several factors such as high population density, overcrowding, storage of highly combustible building material and lack of water infrastructure.

Urban planning includes utilisation of available space by keeping an eye on environmental protection, protection of immovable cultural property. Fire protection is realised by adopting suitable fire protection measures

Major Tragic Fire Incidents occurred in India:

01. The worst fire incident occurred at Mandi, Dabwali in Haryana on 23rd December 1995, the fire was caused by short circuit in one of the generators, causing a stampede that claimed 540 lives and injured many.
02. Upahar Cinema, near Green park in New Delhi: During the screening of movie border a fire broke out in Cinema hall that claimed 59 lives and injured more than 100.
03. Amri Hospital, Kolkatta: A hazardous fire and smoke broke out in 2011, where 89 people lost their lives as a result of suffocation caused by carbon monoxide.
04. Meerut Tragedy of 2016: A massive fire broke out in Brand India Fair at Victoria Park in Meerut, that claimed more than 100 lives.

Recently, massive fire broke out when arati was being performed at the pandal amid the celebration of Durga puja at Bhadohi in Uttar Pradesh resulting death of 05 people which includes 03 children.

The horrific fire accident on September 12 in Secunderabad(Telangana), in which 08 guests were asphyxiated, clearly an example of how illegal structures are taking away precious human lives. Every one expressed sorrow over the mishap and the ruling party declared ex-gratia to show solidarity with the victims of tragedy. A similar incident had happened six months ago, when 12 daily wage labourers from Bihar died in a fire accident at Bhoiguda, Secunderabad. It perturbs us, are we really serious to comply fire safety norms? In the September 12, Secunderabad Hotel Incident, fire erupted in the basement of the structure and smoke enveloped the hotel in upper floors and resulting in choking off the guests. The basement as well as the top floor of the building was un-authorised i.e gross deviation of the plan sanctioned by the civic body.

A report by the Regional Fire officer pointed out several irregularities such as:

01. No set-back space
02. Non availability of escape route
03. Defunct firefighting equipment
04. Spiral staircase
05. Basement illegally used for commercial purposes
06. Absence of smoke management and emergency lighting

The building is in existence since 8-9 years and under protection offered by the Building Regularization Scheme(BRS),2015. Since 1998, the BRS has become a boon for the deviant builders to circumvent norms and become a means for the successive governments to mint money under "Saba Kshama" by regularizing the deviations with blind eye which enables the builder to go scot-free in case of any eventuality and the innocent occupants of the building suffer for no fault of theirs. This BRS announced by the Telangana Govt. was challenged in High Court, in 2016. The process then came to an abrupt

halt and just before the court's intervention, 1.13 lakh property owners submitted their application seeking regularization. The owner of the ill fated building at Secunderabad, where fire occurred, was one of the applicants to the scheme. Though the process has been since stalled, the authorities have not taken any action against the deviations except charging the owners double the normal amount of property tax and power bills.

SEEKING OF SAFETY CLEARANCES

Applicability of fire safety norms is another gap through which several builders escape. As per the Telangana Fire Service Act, 1999, only residential buildings above 18 meters height and commercial buildings above 15 meters height are obligated to seek fire safety clearances. Almost all commercial establishments where fire mishaps took place in recent past did not fall into the category. The Secunderabad building, inclusive of all deviations does not come under safety clearance category, so it was never inspected by the fire services until accident.

A 2016 clause introduced into the building norms was instrumental in preventing several fire mishaps in the making, by stipulating mandatory 10 % mortgage of the constructed space of any multi- storeyed building with the municipal authorities as indemnity for compliance with rules. The clause, if extended to all commercial buildings irrespective of their size, could save many lives in the future.

Enforcement is another key aspect with failure by the civic authorities. Much fanfare preceded the launch of the Enforcement, Vigilance and Disaster Management (EVDM) wing four years ago, as a adjunct to Great Hyderabad Municipal Corporation(GHMC).

However , Continuance of such greedy individuals/builders in connivance with concerned officials by incentivizing frequent regularization offers put a big question mark on the very relevance of building norms.

In the year 1997, In Odisha, near Baripada, where scores of worshippers gathered to seek blessings of their Guru Late Nigamananda , fire swept through a cluster of thatched-roofed-makeshift buildings leading to death of more than 200 people. More than 12000 devotees were congregated at Madhuban ground on the outskirts of Baripada for several days. For the staying of the devotees thatched roof huts were built thereat, Swami Nigamananda has been dead for many years, but his followers, mostly in eastern India, worship his memory and continue to seek his blessings. The organizers had built one huge hut as their prayer/meeting hall and several other sheds of straw walls and thatched roofs to serve as temporary shelters. Fire broke out at around 3.30 p.m. when many of the devotees were napping in the living quarters(thatched huts) to escape the afternoon heat. The exact cause of the blaze couldn't be ascertained, it is presumed that the fire sparked from the explosion of a Gas Cylinder used for cooking. Because of the thatched walls and the thatched roofs, the fire engulfed through the entire Madhuban Ground and more than 200 people lost their lives in the tragedy due to violation of major fire safety norms.

The fire that broke out in a 'Pandal'(structure built of bamboo) at Mandi Dabwali on 24 December 1995, and there after the whole burning structure collapsed over the people attending the annual function of DAV School that killed more than 300 people.

2018, Tragic Train accident in Amritsar, which killed over 50 people due to negligence, the politicians of ruling Congress party have gone to the extent of defending their acts by shifting blame on the train and railway authorities. Navjot Sigh Sidhu and his wife have shown their arrogance at a time where they should have helped the injured and family of the deceased people. The whole incident occurred during the Dusherra Celebration, where the Congress had organized the event close to a railway track. Navjot Singh Sidhu's wife was called as the chief guest of the function. But the ruling Congress party has not sought permission from DC or the local administration and had not spoken to the railway authorities alerting of the event. While Ravan effigy was lit by Sidhu's wife, people started running towards the railway track which was only 70-80 feet away to escape the fire crackers. People did not hear the horn of the train and did not realize the approaching of train and kept running towards the track to escape

unhurt from the fire of the crackers and around 50 people were crushed to death by the running train. Here moot point is: - Are such festivals required to be held at such places where no other escape routes exist. Though nobody has done it deliberately, but there is big negligence on the part of the administration and lack of foresightedness on the part of the organizers.

The festive season in India have started with the celebration of Dussehra and Deepavali. Dusshera is widely celebrated throughout India to mark the victory of good over evil. Dussehera is celebrated enthusiastically to honour the victory of goddess Durga over the evil demon king Mahishasura. In view of the festivity, which slowly attending it's crescendo this year after 03 years of COVID restrictions, there has been massive congregation at Puja Mandaps and huge crowd in the vicinity. Despite of Government ban on Thermo cool, it is used in making of Gates because of it's low cost and light weight. In other Gates Bamboo and wood Ply is used. Basically the materials used for decorating these make-shift palace like structures and the gates have high affinity towards fire. In addition to this, excessive congregation makes it really impossible to make a safe passage for the people in case of any eventuality. Sometimes it is perturbing, are such huge structures to boast one area's supremacy over other is one of the components of Durga Puja. Government has instructed the Puja Committees to make fire proof arrangements.. All Puja committees are asked to install fire extinguishers, make available waters and sand arrangements along with Carbon dioxide container and dry chemical powder besides emergency exits in pandals in a bid to avoid any on toward incidents like electrical disaster or fire. There should be ample water arrangements inside and outside pandal to avert fire that breaks out from spreading. Fire re-retarding materials must be used in the preparation of pandals. Electrical wires must be inserted in concealed PVC pipelines. Each and every puja panadals must have their separate fuse and circuit brakers. At least three entry and exit point are essential in each and every pandal and it should be spacious.

Even though administration issues guidelines to adhere strictly the fire safety measures for Puja Committees , everything goes fine in pain and paper and in case of any eventuality, when it is thoroughly examined, lapses found at each point. Question arises, at 21st Century, when the world is thriving through lots of menaces, do such type of celebrations, which enthrall large crowd are necessary. Can't we restrict it to Puja only instead of boasting of our so called monetary strength? We should observe the rituals and maintain the traditions in a healthy and natural way.

Year after year people are dying on account of fire relate incidents that are termed as accidents but those disasters are actually human made and could have been averted. It seems as if we have learnt a little from the above mentioned tragedies. After shocking train accident in Punjab, where while burning Ravana effigy, a running train crushed more than 50 people who ran towards the rail track to save themselves from the crackers fire. These burning of effigies to show the victory of Dharma/Good over the evils can be done symbolically not with so much fanfare. Even today, administration is granting permission to perform such type of effigy burning of demons on Vijaya Dashami in a grandiose manner in Odisha.

Urban Planning and fire safety are important aspects when it comes to building habitations. But seeing the Secunderabad incident, it seems it is not enforced strictly. Man's greediness has no limits. In the words Mahatma Gandhi, nature has abundant bounty (resources) for human civilization's need for forever but very little for it's greed.

The fire safety non-compliance is basically due to:

01. Bureaucracy-Mafia nexus: Let us take the example of water crisis in Delhi. This acute water shortage in Delhi is due to nexus between the unscrupulous officials of Delhi Jal Board and the truck owners.
02. Bureaucracy- Corporate nexus: India, since Independence has faced rapid urbanization and development. High rural to Urban migration have caused certain restrictions. Regulations in any sector, be it urban planning, safety regulation or Disaster management require adequate policy regulations suited to area specific zones.

- 03.Improper Implementation of policies.
- 04.Haphazard Road and Urban planning
- 05.Additional Floors added on buildings beyond sanction plan leading to congestion in space.

According to National Crime Records Bureau(NCRB) data: 330 people died in commercial building fires in 2019 while the fatalities for residential buildings were much higher at 6,329.From this data it seems fire safety regulations are not working properly. Some of the reasons for the non-adherence are:

- 01.Regulations are not frequently updated and loopholes in the regulation are exploited.
- 02.Poor enforcement of regulations due to inadequate staff.
- 03.Frequent regularization of unauthorized structures emboldens illegal construction.
- 04.Weak Urban Governance: Overlapping of jurisdictions and weak accountability mechanisms.
- 05.Allegation of nexus between bureaucracy and violators of norms.
06. Delay in judicial proceedings to punish untoward incidents weakens the deterrence. Upahar Cinema Fire Judgment published after two decades of occurrence in 2017
- 07.There is lack of skilled man power and technology to tackle the mishaps..
- 08.Rapid urbanization, land scarcity and sky rocketing real estate prices coupled with disregard for rules result in illegal construction.

CONCLUSION:

Indian cities are fast urbanizing, hence there is a need for futuristic and safe urban planning. The Government initiated smart cities can lead the way in this regard. Considering the high risk urban infrastructure, the position of oil and gas pipes and electricity lines and fire safety analysis of high rise buildings, the preparation vulnerability map is highly recommended.

Now with high level of technological accessibility, the administration should implement the fire safety guidelines in much effective manner so that no such fire related tragedy should occur in future, actually our past failure and frustration should act as a foundation for strong future devoid of fire tragedies, where people should care more for human lives and values.

References:

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