



# Fire Safety



## BUILDING A 'FIRE SAFE' INDIA

AS WE RACE TOWARDS A POPULATION OF 1.5 BILLION AND AN ECONOMY OF \$ 5 TRILLION, FIRE SAFETY AND PUBLIC SAFETY ARE FACTORS THAT WE MUST IMPROVE UPON

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When the Grenfell Tower in London caught fire in June 2017, claiming 72 lives, there was a significant message for all – the developed countries can be as susceptible as others to fire accidents and hence need more constant vigil. With more than 20,000 deaths and many more injuries from fire alone, India has a long way to go when it comes to ensuring the fire safety of its citizens.

Public safety should be considered as an important index of the quality of developmental journey of a country. Even as we

are building a better India with significant initiatives like the Smart Cities, Digital India and Make in India, we must also work towards a safer India.

### WHY FOCUS ON FIRE SAFETY?

As a nation, we are urbanizing very rapidly but with inadequate provisioning for public infrastructure, especially the safety infrastructure like fire stations and emergency services.

Higher population densities, rise of high-rise buildings and the induction of newer materials of construction are enhancing the fire risks many folds across India.

In parallel, the energy consumption densities are going up, with better availability of electricity and cooking gas all across. This definitely is welcome news but demands better precautionary measures and awareness by all concerned to avoid fire mishaps.

### HOW CAN SMART CITIES BE 'FIRE SAFE' CITIES?

The Smart Cities initiative can be seen as a smart way of moving towards planned urbanization in India. The norms cover major aspects like civic services, transportation, utilities and health. Going forward, there is a pressing need to emphasize

safety infrastructure, especially fire stations, emergency response facilities, medical facilities and trained manpower. A study conducted in the year 2012 by RMSI indicates that India needs about 9000 fire stations and about 39000 appliances and vehicles. The reality is that we have only a fraction of what we need. The Smart Cities projects can make a difference by adding Fire and Emergency Response to their agenda.

### FIRE SAFETY INFRA-STRUCTURE MUST BE IMPROVED

As stated earlier, given the fact

that the fire safety infrastructure needs large scale upgradation, it will be necessary to have a concerted approach to investments in hardware with the authorities at the centre, state and city level putting the heads together. Again, investments in hardware alone do not enhance safety by themselves. We need rigorous training of personnel as well as constant updation of practices.

### ENHANCED AWARENESS IS A MUST

In a major fire incident that occurred in a metro city recently, it was found that the safety exits were locked, pre-

venting many from escaping suffocation and sure death. The situation becomes more complex in buildings with multiple ownerships and tenancies and with mixed occupancy where there is no identified 'occupier'. Better awareness can be spread only by a joint effort between the administration, the building occupants and the related industries like fire equipment manufacturers and of course, the insurance companies.

### SAFETY ENGINEERING & RESEARCH A MUST

While there is a wealth of information available in the area of fire research from other countries, the need for India centric research cannot be overstated. We need to be better at knowing why fire incidents occur through scientific forensic investigations, and that knowledge must then feed into the codes and standards. Also, specific climatic conditions and usage patterns must be factored in.

### BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER

Multiple agencies must come together to enhance the safety of our citizens and property. It is

heartening to note that cities like Delhi and Mumbai have taken several steps in recent years to enhance their fire safety preparedness. One city to watch closely will be Bengaluru, where in addition to the regular upgradation efforts undertaken, the Karnataka Fire Services has collaborated with a local NGO to develop a 5-year plan for a 'Fire Safe' Bengaluru.

Major steps recommended in the 5-year plan include adoption of technology for approving building plans, fiscal incentives and disincentives, interdepartmental coordination for enforcement and developing a volunteer force for emergency response is the practice in other countries. Public Private Partnerships to establish new fire stations is another idea proposed. A similar approach may be adopted by major cities to bring focus to the issue, empowering the local city administrations in the process.

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Title: BUILDING A 'FIRE SAFE' INDIA

Source: Economic Times (Pg. No. 18) Mumbai Edition

Link:

<https://epaper.timesgroup.com/Olive/ODN/TheEconomicTimes/shared/ShowArticle.aspx?doc=ETM%2F2018%2F11%2F16&entity=Ar01910&sk=0E720A5D&mode=text>

Date: 16-11-2018