

Fires

Missed Lessons

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- **Ever since independence, accidents in buildings, mainly from fires, across the country have caused extensive loss of life and property. Yet hardly any long term safety measures have been put in place. A look at some of the major incidents over the past four decades.**

Madurai – 4 April 1964

- Saraswathi Vidyasala Higher Elementary School; 4th April was a holiday. 190 girls in 11- 13 age group had come for special classes
- A portion of the superstructure collapsed just when the girls were about to disperse for lunch.
- 35 girls dead; 139 injured seriously
- Superstructure of collapsed building made of brick and mortar on the granite compound wall of a samadhi (tomb)

Madurai – 4 April 1964

- Engineers say – No attention paid to load and pressure of walls; basic safety measures ignored
- Town Planning authorities had refused permission to build school – Yet the building was completed.
- First appeal submitted by School Authorities was rejected
- Second appeal was pending when the building collapsed.

Tuticorin – 29 July 1979

- Touring cinema at Lourdammalpuram
- 46 adults and 32 children killed; 88 people injured.
- Fire broke out at 4.30 pm when matinee show was on.
- Thatch roofed cinema with wooden poles and rafters reduced to ashes.
- Fire broke out in women's section: most victims were women and children.

Tuticorin – 29 July 1979

- In December 1976 TN Government issued a notification calling for installation of fire extinguishers in all cinema halls.
- South Indian Film Chamber of Commerce resisted this on grounds of high cost.
- The Government succumbed to their pressure and reduced the number of extinguishers it wanted installed.

Dabwali – 23 December 1995

- Market town of Dabwali (Sirsa)
- Over 500 people killed, mostly children and their parents; over 300 injured.
- Fire broke out around 2 pm in Rajiv Marriage Palace, a private marriage hall used for Annual Day function of DAV school.
- 1200 children, their parents and teachers attended the function.

Dabwali – 23 December 1995

- Blaze swept through the entire pandal, which was covered with a synthetic sheet.
- Casualties were higher because of the stampede: there was only one small gate as the exit.
- Fire caused by electrical malfunction.
- Subsequent instructions have made it mandatory for buildings holding such functions to have at least four gates, so that people can escape in case of an emergency

Baripada – 23 February 1997

- Madhuban locality, Baripada town, 275 km from Bhubaneswar
- 176 persons, including 26 children and 4 women burnt to death. 500 seriously injured.
- Accident occurred at 3.30 pm when devotees of Swami Nigamananda gathered for a 3-day religious conference.

Baripada – 23 February 1997

- Fire started in a temporary shed with thatched roof
- 40 cottages made of straw and bamboo were constructed for the conference
- At least 5000 people were in the area when the fire began – last day and the local unit was distributing prasaadam
- Victims got caught at the exit point.

Thanjavur – 7 June 1997

- Brihadeeswara Temple
- Casualties: 40 persons, including 31 women and 5 children; 85 persons injured.
- Fire broke out in Yagashala (sacrifice hall) of the temple.
- Most victims died after inhaling carbon monoxide; some were killed in a stampede

Thanjavur – 7 June 1997

- Inflammable material like ghee, condiments, thatched roof helped the fire spread fast
- Only one fire tender near the pandal could be pressed into service
- Only entrance on the eastern side had a very narrow gate; many fell and died.

Delhi – 13 June 1997

- Location – Upahar Grand Cinema
- 60 died; many injured
- Cinema hall capacity 1053 people; packed when fire broke out around 5.00 pm
- Started in ground floor parking lot; spread to the upper floors

Delhi – 13 June 1997

- Many in rear and front stalls escaped; those on balcony and upper lounge were trapped; many died of asphyxiation
- Fire caused by short circuit in a transformer in the parking area and spread through the air conditioning ducts
- License for cinema halls is issued by Delhi police; but Delhi Fire Service must certify periodically that the premises are safe from fire hazards and fire alarm systems are in place.

Erwadi, 6 August 2001

- Location: Moideen Badusha Mental Home, a pilgrim centre 27 km from Ramanathapuram
- Out of a total of 43 mentally ill persons 23 were charred to death; 3 died subsequently
- Fire began at 5 am when a kerosene chimney lamp fell in the shed;
- Mental home was thatched; entire shed gutted in 10 minutes – before fire tenders reached the spot

Erwadi, 6 August 2001

- Charred bodies fettered in chains were all that remained: 'divine chains' were put around the feet of the mentally ill so that they couldn't escape.
- Ramdas Enquiry Commission concluded:
 - inmates died because they had been fettered and tied to poles; and immediate fire aid was absent. Caretaker concentrated on retrieving their personal belongings, without taking steps to rescue the patients by breaking their chains... fire engines had to come from Ramanathapuram and Keelakarai... Had the Erwadi fire brigade come immediately the death of the inmates could to some extent have been averted.

Agra – 24 May 2002

- Location: shoe factory
- 42 persons burnt alive; 10 injured
- Following fire, a two storey building collapsed
- 100 workers in the premises

Agra – 24 May 2002

- Fact finding team of National Labour Commission indicted factory owner – had ignored safety norms and violated labour laws
- Factory area – like a ‘tinder box’ with hardly any fire or safety equipment in place.

Srirangam – 23 January 2004

- Location: Padmapriya Marriage Hall
- 62 killed, including bridegroom, 23 women, 4 children; 45 injured
- Fire broke out owing to intense heat generated by video flashgun which set on fire the decorative material on thatched roof of the pandal.

Srirangam – 23 January 2004

- Fire fed by thatch, plastic chairs, clothing material; spread within minutes engulfing the whole hall
- Stampede – as guests tried to flee through the narrow staircase; many dead could only be identified by the jewelery they wore
- Subsequent to the tragedy, fire safety measures were made compulsory in marriage and community halls

Kumbakonam – 16 July 2004

- Location: Sri Krishna High School
- 75 children burnt alive; 18 died in hospital
- Fire started in a small corner of the kitchen where the mid day meal was being cooked

Kumbakonam – 16 July 2004

- Fire initially did not cause worry; strong wind (Aadi) breathed new life into the fire and caught the thatched roof.
- Teachers locked the doors from outside; assuming children would be safe inside
- Entrance and exit to building was a narrow door that led to a narrower stairway.

In breach of norms

- There is no dearth of rules for ensuring safety

But...

- Why are schools, temples, sheds in marriage halls permitted to function with thatched roofs?
- Why are pre-primary and primary classes conducted on first and second floors?

In breach of norms

- Why are kitchens of the noon-meal centres situated close to the thatched roof of a school?
- How can 3 -4 schools function from one building?
- Why are basic norms of selection of site, orientation of building, size of doors, windows, height of rooms, ventilation, etc. not observed?