



P.L.RAJ IAS & IPS ACADEMY

Building Bureaucrats Since 2006

5. Fire Safety Governance In India – National

Recent fire tragedies — the Delhi B&B fire (2026) revealing operation without mandatory fire clearance with far more rooms than permitted, and the Muzaffarpur hospital fire (2026) demonstrating vulnerability of patients during emergencies — have once again exposed persistent shortcomings in fire safety compliance and enforcement in urban India. These incidents follow a troubling pattern including the Uphaar Cinema fire (1997) exposing overcrowding and blocked exits, and the Arpora nightclub fire in North Goa (2025) highlighting unsafe occupancy violations. Fire service being a State subject under the Constitution has resulted in fragmented standards and uneven enforcement across states.

1. India's Major Fire Accidents Over Last Three Decades

1. **Uphaar Cinema fire (1997)** – Overcrowding, blocked exits, inadequate emergency preparedness; 59 killed
2. **Arpora nightclub fire, North Goa (2025)** – Violations of safety norms, unsafe occupancy levels
3. **Delhi B&B fire (2026)** – Operating without mandatory fire clearance; far more rooms than permitted
4. **Muzaffarpur hospital fire (2026)** – Vulnerability of patients, particularly elderly and critically ill, during emergencies

2. Fire Services in India

Constitutional Position

1. Fire Service is a State subject
2. Included as Municipal function in 12th Schedule of Constitution under Article 243(W)
3. Results in variation in legal, institutional framework across different states
4. No uniform national fire safety standards enforceable across all states

Key Legal Framework

1. **National Building Code (NBC), 2016** – Issued by Bureau of Indian Standards; most comprehensive document on fire safety; deals specifically with fire and life safety; lays down technical guidelines for building design, construction, fire protection systems
2. **State Fire Service Acts** – Govern implementation, enforcement at state level; empower fire departments to conduct inspections, issue NOCs, take action against violations
3. **Disaster Management Act, 2005** – Implemented by NDMA; integrates fire incidents into broader disaster management framework; strengthens preparedness, response mechanisms
4. **Sector-specific laws** – Factories Act 1948, Explosives Act 1884, Petroleum Act 1934 — regulating fire safety in industrial, hazardous environments

Special Provisions for High-Rise Buildings

1. Installation of fire lifts for firefighter access
2. Refuge areas for temporary shelter during evacuation
3. Pressurized staircases preventing smoke infiltration
4. Facilitating safe evacuation, firefighting operations



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3. Institutional Framework

Central Level

1. Directorate General of Fire Services, Civil Defence & Home Guards under Ministry of Home Affairs
2. Responsible for – Policy formulation, training, modernization of fire services
3. Advisory and capacity-building role (NOT enforcement)

State Level

State fire departments responsible for –

1. Implementation of fire safety regulations
2. Conducting inspections
3. Issuing certifications (NOCs)
4. Responding to emergencies

4. Fire Safety Certification (NOC)

Process

1. Mandatory for – High-rise buildings, commercial establishments, hospitals, schools, other public buildings
2. Steps –
 1. Submission of building plans
 2. Inspection by fire department
 3. Verification of compliance with safety norms
 4. Issuance of certificate
3. Periodic renewal required ensuring continued compliance

5. Structural Causes Behind Recurring Fire Accidents

Weak Enforcement of Safety Norms

1. Poor inspections, inadequate monitoring allowing violations to persist for years
2. Fire departments understaffed, under-equipped for comprehensive enforcement

Unauthorized Modifications and Overcrowding

1. Many establishments exceeding approved capacities
2. Unapproved structural changes compromising evacuation, firefighting efforts
3. Blocking emergency exits, corridors

Regulatory Loopholes and Evasion

1. Businesses exploiting land-use, licensing exemptions bypassing safety requirements
2. Continuing unsafe operations through legal ambiguities

Cost-Cutting

1. Fire safety systems, compliance measures frequently neglected to reduce operational costs
2. Sprinkler systems, smoke detectors, emergency lighting treated as unnecessary expenses

Lack of Institutional Accountability

1. Regulatory agencies rarely facing consequences for enforcement failures
2. Officials granting NOCs without proper inspections not prosecuted
3. Allowing negligence to persist without deterrent



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Weak Safety Culture

1. Fire safety frequently treated as compliance formality rather than public safety imperative
2. Low awareness among building owners, occupants about evacuation procedures

6. Key Issues in India's Fire Safety Governance

Fragmented Regulatory Framework

1. Fire services being State subject resulting in varying standards, enforcement capacities
2. No uniform minimum national standards binding all states
3. High-capacity states (Maharashtra, Delhi) vs low-capacity states divergence

Compliance-Centric Approach

1. Focus remaining on obtaining NOCs rather than ensuring continuous compliance
2. One-time certification becoming license for perpetual non-compliance
3. Renewal processes often cursory

Capacity Constraints

1. Many fire departments facing shortages of -
 1. Personnel (firefighters, inspection officers)
 2. Equipment (modern fire trucks, aerial platforms, thermal cameras)
 3. Modern firefighting technologies
2. Urban expansion outpacing fire service capacity growth

Limited Risk-Based Inspections

1. Inspections often reactive and incident-driven rather than preventive
2. High-risk establishments (hospitals, hotels, schools, malls) not receiving priority inspection
3. Absence of data-driven risk profiling

7. Way Forward

1. **Harmonized national standards** - Move toward minimum national fire safety standards while respecting federal structure
2. **Technology-enabled monitoring** - Smart surveillance, sensor-based compliance tracking, third-party audits
3. **Mandatory periodic audits** - Fire safety audits and mock drills for hospitals, hotels, schools, malls, public buildings
4. **Enhanced accountability** - Both owners AND regulatory authorities facing consequences for violations
5. **Modernize fire services** - Greater investment in equipment, training, emergency response systems
6. **Safety culture promotion** - Awareness among citizens, businesses, public institutions
7. **Risk-based inspection system** - Prioritizing high-risk establishments for frequent inspections
8. **Central coordination** - Strengthen DGFS role in setting minimum standards, capacity building

Conclusion

fire tragedies from Uphaar (1997) to Delhi B&B and Muzaffarpur hospital (2026) reflect systemic failures in India's fire safety governance — weak enforcement, unauthorized modifications, regulatory loopholes, cost-cutting, and institutional non-accountability — demanding harmonized national



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standards, technology-enabled continuous compliance monitoring, mandatory periodic audits, and genuine accountability for both violators and enforcement agencies.

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