

Urban Fire Safety in India: Why Residential Areas Remain the Deadliest

June 5, 2026 • vajiramandravi.com



Urban Fire Safety in India Latest News

- On June 3, 2026, a devastating fire at Flourish Stay B&B in South Delhi's Malviya Nagar claimed at least 21 lives.
- A day later, a suspected short circuit sparked a fire in the ICU of a private hospital in Muzaffarpur, Bihar, killing four patients.
- These incidents, along with several similar tragedies reported across the country in recent months of 2026, have once again exposed the persistent fire safety deficiencies in India's urban areas, particularly in residential and mixed-use buildings.

The Scale of the Problem: What the Data Shows

- The Malviya Nagar fire is not an isolated tragedy. It reflects a systemic national failure.
- According to an analysis of the 2024 National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) report:

- 5,888 fire-related deaths were recorded across India in 2024.
- Of these, 3,555 — roughly 60% — occurred inside homes and residential buildings.
- **Six out of every ten fire deaths** in India happen in the very spaces where people **feel safest**.
- Overall fire deaths have been declining over the years. But residential buildings have consistently remained the single largest source of fire fatalities — and that trend has not changed.
- Outside residential buildings, the highest fire casualties in non-residential spaces occur in hospitals and commercial areas like shopping centres.

Why Residential Buildings Are So Vulnerable

• No Basic Safety Infrastructure

- Most residential spaces in India operate without the basics: no smoke alarms, no fire suppression systems, no evacuation plans, and no routine safety awareness.
- These are not luxuries — they are the minimum requirements for any building where people sleep.

• Illegal Conversions and Rampant Violations

- A growing problem in Indian cities is the illegal conversion of residential buildings into commercial establishments — hotels, hostels, offices, and guesthouses — without obtaining proper licences or upgrading safety infrastructure.
- The Flourish Stay B&B is a textbook example. It was built as a home, converted into a hotel, and expanded from 6 to 26 rooms across six floors — all without commensurate fire safety upgrades.
- This pattern repeats across Delhi and other major cities.

• Common Causes of Residential Fires

- Two triggers account for the vast majority of residential fires:
 - **Electrical faults** are the most common. High use of electrical equipment in urban areas — combined with old wiring, overloaded circuits, and faulty connections — creates persistent ignition risks.
 - **LPG gas leaks** are the other major cause. These happen due to pilferage from cylinders, use of non-standard equipment, failure to replace worn hosepipes, leaking O-rings, and improper handling at consumer premises.

• Dense Urban Layout

- Indian urban settlements are densely packed, with narrow lanes and constricted access roads.
- When a fire breaks out, fire engines often struggle to reach the site quickly.
- Once there, the compact layout makes firefighting operations difficult and evacuation dangerous.

Why the Fire Spreads and Kills

- Fires are deadlier than many people realise — not just because of flames, but because of what fire does to the surrounding environment.
- According to the National Institute of Disaster Management (NIDM), most victims in a fire do not die from burns.
- They die from **asphyxiation** — the fire depletes oxygen and fills the space with smoke and toxic gases released from burning materials.

- These gases choke the lungs and cause breathing failure. Additionally, the heat causes expansion of liquids, gases, and metals, often triggering secondary explosions.
- The NDMA classifies fire as a “human-induced disaster” — meaning it is almost always preventable.

The Governance Gap

• Fire Services: A State and Municipal Subject

- Fire services fall under the **State List** of the Constitution.
- Under Article 243(W), fire services have been included as a **municipal function in the Twelfth Schedule**.
- This means primary responsibility lies with state governments and urban local bodies (ULBs). The Centre’s role is largely advisory.

• The National Building Code (NBC), 2016

- The Bureau of Indian Standards published the National Building Code of India in 2016.
- This code contains detailed guidelines on construction, fire safety, smoke management, periodic audits, electrical fire prevention, and sensor-based firefighting systems.
- The problem is not the absence of rules. The problem is non-implementation.
- The Malviya Nagar fire is a direct consequence of regulatory failure — the building had expanded massively in violation of existing norms.

• Resource Constraints

- The **15th Finance Commission** acknowledged that fire services across India suffer from a severe lack of resources and equipment. It recommended Rs 5,000 crore for modernisation and strengthening of fire services at the state level.
- A **2022 Ministry of Home Affairs** report noted a “considerable gap in operational capabilities of fire and emergency services in Indian cities.”
- As cities grow taller, specialised equipment for high-rise firefighting is needed — but procurement remains slow.

Conclusion

- Urban fires in India do not happen in isolation. They are the product of overlapping failures — poor construction, illegal land use, absence of safety culture, weak enforcement, and under-resourced fire departments.
- Cities need a fire plan — where multiple stakeholders are alert and accountable. Until then, the pattern will repeat: a fire, public outrage, a few arrests, and no systemic change.

Source: **IE** | **BE**

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