

Violation of Building Codes is the Price We've Paid for Development

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The fire in a private hospital in Kolkata is only another example of callous violation of building codes with officials in charge looking the other way. News reports state that permission for building the basement was given for only a parking lot. This space was instead converted into a pathology laboratory entailing the storage of chemicals under unsafe conditions, which in turn caused the fire. The hospital owners had been warned only a couple of months ago about rectifying this but whether an official notice was served on them or not is yet unclear. The authorities themselves proved negligent in giving the owners time to rectify the violation, without putting additional requirements and strictures in place. Who is to blame? Can anything be done to prevent such accidents from becoming disasters in the future?

What has not been pointed out so clearly by the media — outside of the oversights involved and the 'horror'

response to the event resulting in the loss of life of more than 90 patients—is that in protecting the rights of the private owners of the hospital (by giving them a short period of time to get their act into shape), the authorities have sacrificed the rights of the patients to medical care in a safe environment.

What is even more important is bringing to task the ones responsible for granting this permission and overlooking its subsequent violation. While it would be impossible and irrelevant to find the individuals who took a bribe to look the other way (for bribe would certainly have been involved), by focusing undue attention on the owners, we are allowing the larger system which aids and abets them, to go scot-free. At least in terrible and avoidable disasters like this one, all perpetrators from hospital owners to government or state authorities, must be held liable for penalties as well as prosecution.

Gross violation of building codes have proved to be a bane for the ordinary citizen. For example, when the Mantri Mall (touted as the largest mall in Asia) was built at a crowded, overburdened and narrow street in Malleswaram in Bangalore, there was a hue and cry about how the permis-



sion had been granted to the builders without adequate care being taken about entry and exits which should ideally flow in a smooth manner without disrupting traffic flow outside. Later some cosmetic changes were made, but the situation remains problematic with traffic snarls a common experience through the day.

In addition to the daily travails that such buildings openly flouting building norms cause us, when fire breaks out, these building violations show up the deep flaws of the planning where low attention has been paid to the safety of the people using the facility, whether shoppers, cinema goers or indeed, patients. Each of these violations then results in trauma and death, making a disaster out of what should be a containable emergency situation, if handled well by the police and fire brigade. In the Kolkata hospital case, apparently even the fire brigade didn't land up until a couple of hours later. Surely, an investigation must be made of this delayed response of our emergency services.

Adding to the delayed response was the narrow street access to the hospital. Of course, outside of a few 'good' addresses in our metros, almost all

Indian cities and towns have narrow streets and lanes meant for individual houses and families, and few automobiles. This is the price we have paid for rapid development: without the benefit of town planning for modernity, we are superimposing modern architectural structures and their concomitant lifestyle on traditional spaces, and are surprised when they don't fit.

Given that we cannot, indeed may not want to, raze an entire old town to plan it from scratch again, (unless an autocrat comes to power as chief minister and we would then applaud him for his contributions to 'development'), we have to ensure that at least access to these medical facilities are smoothed. How many times have we seen ambulances carrying patients stuck in traffic jams and no place to give way to them, even if one wanted to? Perhaps we need to examine our resistance to zoning laws which would result in the segregation of services such as shopping malls and hospitals in areas separate from the residential ones. This would at least have the benefit of easy access in times of emergencies like the one in Kolkata.

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