

Across City, Safety Left To Chance

With Poor Ventilation And Narrow Staircases, Matchbox Hotels Resemble Death Traps

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New Delhi: Sealed windows leading to a lack of ventilation, narrow staircases next to lifts and inadequate fire safety measures — violations like these are rampant across affordable hospitality hubs like Mahipalpur and Paharganj, making them vulnerable to catastrophes, similar to the one in Hauz Rani that claimed 21 lives.

A reality check across these city hubs by TOI revealed several violations and structural concerns that mirror, and in some cases appear even worse than, the conditions that led to the Hauz Rani blaze.

In southwest Delhi's Mahipalpur, where hundreds of budget hotels cater largely to tourists because of their proximity to the airport, the potential consequences of a fire could be even more severe.

A typical four-storey building houses at least nine rooms on each floor. In multiple hotels, windows are completely sealed and can't be opened, leaving virtually no scope for ventilation or emergency escape. Many hotels feature thick glass facades designed to block outside noise, particularly the sound of aircraft from the nearby airport.

However, in the event of a fire, such structures could trap occupants inside smoke-filled rooms and make rescue efforts difficult. Most of these establishments have minimal visible firefighting infrastructure. Several floors have only a single fire extinguisher and a hydrant despite accommodating dozens of guests. Many rooms are large enough to host entire families, increasing the number of people who could be trapped during an emergency.

Accessibility poses another major concern. The nearest fire station at Vasant Kunj is about 5.6 km away. While the distance is not significant, heavy congestion on the Dhaulia Kuan-Gurgaon stretch and a maze of narrow internal lanes are likely to delay emergency response, fire officials feared.

Residents pointed to low-hanging overhead wires and tightly packed lanes, making



- Sealed Windows:** Guest room windows in multiple hotels were completely sealed shut, eliminating emergency escape routes and natural ventilation
- Soundproof Glass Facades:** Thick, unopenable glass structures installed to block airport noise threaten to trap occupants and smoke inside rooms
- Overcrowded Floor Plans:** Buildings are heavily modified to cram at least nine guest rooms onto a single floor to maximise occupancy
- High Headcount Density:** Rooms are advertised to host entire families
- Deficient Fire Equipment:** High-occupancy floors rely on inadequate infrastructure, featuring just one extinguisher and a single hydrant
- Overloaded Electrical Grids:** Round-the-clock decorative and commercial lighting in dense hubs heavily strains the system, raising short-circuit risks
- Zero Structural Setbacks:** Hotels stand shoulder-to-shoulder with no open spaces between them, allowing flames to jump rapidly from building to building

MAHIPALPUR VILLAGE
Nearest Fire Station: Vasant Kunj fire station
Distance: **5.6km**

21
MINS
Approximate time

PAHARGANJ
Nearest Fire Station: DFS headquarters, Barakhamba Road
Distance: **1.5km**

15
MINS
Approximate time

HAUZ RANI, MALVIYA NAGAR
Nearest Fire Station: Geetanjali fire station
Distance: **3km**
Approximate time



Photos: Jatin Kumar

PLAYING WITH FIRE

KEY HINDRANCES FOR FIREFIGHTING

- Travel time is often underestimated:** While GPS may show a 21-minute travel time for cars, fire tenders are larger and slower-moving vehicles. Officials estimate at least 10 more minutes for a fire tender, with heavy traffic on key routes adding 15 minutes or more
- Low-hanging overhead wires block access:** Although some destinations are located within inner lanes that could serve as shorter routes, fire tenders are often unable to use them due to overhead cables and low-hanging wires
- Illegal and haphazard parking on narrow roads:** Vehicles parked along both sides of roads cause inconvenience to fire tenders to manoeuvre and reach the site quickly
- Abandoned vehicles create bottlenecks:** Fire officials say vehicle owners frequently fail to leave contact numbers, making it impossible to locate them and have vehicles moved during an emergency

it difficult for large fire tenders to enter. When TOI visited one such lane, a small goods tempo took nearly 15 minutes to manoeuvre and turn around. A local said, "If a small vehicle like this takes so long, imagine the difficulty a fire tender will face while navigating its way and reaching the spot of a blaze in time."

Pointing to an electricity pole at the entrance of the lane, Alpna (26), who has been living there on rent for the past two years, said, "During the monsoon, the poles often catch

fire. This pole has so many wires attached to it that it has started leaning to one side. Every day, as more cables are added, it tilts further and looks like it may collapse any moment."

The situation is no different in Paharganj. As one descends from the Desh Bandhu Gupta Road bridge, which spans the railway tracks, rows of hotels line both sides of the road, standing cheek by jowl like matchboxes. Along Dariba Pan Road, the congestion intensifies, with a continuous stretch of ho-

tels standing wall to wall.

Here, the nearest fire station is the Delhi Fire Service headquarters at Barakhamba Road, barely 1.5 km away. Despite the short distance, officials said response time can still stretch from 15 to 20 minutes because of chronic traffic congestion near the railway station, narrow approach roads and the maze-like network of tightly packed lanes inside the locality.

The area remains brightly illuminated throughout the night with extensive decorati-

ve and commercial lighting, increasing electrical load in an already overcrowded neighbourhood. Many hotels feature glass panels instead of proper windows, offering no means of ventilation or emergency escape. Advertisements outside the structures promote three to four rooms on each floor, despite the cramped layout of the hotels and apparent lack of natural airflow.

Sujit (30), who hails from Bihar, has put up at one such hotel for a night after returning from Vaishno Devi. He

said, "We chose Paharganj because it is close to the railway station. My mother is a heart patient and a diabetic, and we needed a place to rest before continuing our journey. After hearing about the fire, we were concerned, but there wasn't much choice. Our room costs just Rs 1,000 a night and staying here helps us avoid extra travel expenses."

The hotel associations of Mahipalpur and Paharganj did not respond to queries regarding the lack of fire-safety measures.

The directions came a day after a devastating fire at a B&B in Malviya Nagar claimed 21 lives. The fire spread through the five-floor narrow building operating without a fire NOC with only one entry-exit point. Preliminary probe has also revealed many serious safety-related shortcomings, said a senior official.

Ordering a detailed probe into the incident, CM said, "All necessary arrangements related to relief, treatment and rehabilitation will be ensured on priority so that every possible assistance can be provided to the affected families."

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"LG asked for a regulatory framework that ensures strict enforcement of building bye-laws, penalises illegal constructions/expansions, and fixes absolute institutional accountability across all municipal zones, to be presented to his secretariat at the earliest," said an official.

In the meeting, MCD also presented its comprehensive monsoon action plan, which prioritised desilting and maintenance of storm-water drains. LG directed that all road repairs and coverage of pavements should be completed before the monsoon.

CM orders safety audit, LG seeks action against unauthorised buildings

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

New Delhi: While chief minister Rekha Gupta on Thursday ordered a special fire safety audit of hotels, commercial establishments and other public buildings in the city, lieutenant governor TS Sandhu directed that the buck would stop at local engineers, technical staff and oversight officials of Municipal Corporation of Delhi for any undetected illegal modifications or ongoing unauthorised construction in the existing residential or commercial buildings across the city.

Gupta said strict action would be taken against those found responsible wherever negligence or violations of rules were found, according to a statement issued by the chief minister's office following a high-level meeting.

Gupta has convened another meeting on Friday to discuss measures to prevent similar fire tragedies and curb unauthorised constructions and violations of fire safety standards. She said govt was fixing the accountability of the departments concerned and officials whose negligence forced govt to face unnecessary difficulties. "We will implement stricter rules to curb illegal constructions."

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Rekha, Sandhu



Rekha, Sandhu

Grilles making buildings death traps? PIL filed in HC

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New Delhi: Citing recent fatal fire incidents in the city, an advocate has moved Delhi High Court seeking directions to authorities to identify and remove hazardous cage-like iron grille enclosures and illegal projections in residential buildings that allegedly obstruct evacuation and rescue operations during emergencies.

In his PIL, 52-year-old Ashish Jain has argued that repeated residential fire tragedies in Delhi expose a serious safety concern, with the loss of life not only because of the fire but also because of smoke-filled buildings, enclosed balconies, iron grilles and blocked escape routes preventing timely evacuation and rescue.

The plea cites several fire tragedies, including the Vivek Vihar blaze on May 3, in which nine people died after being trapped inside a residential building filled with flames and smoke, and the Palam fire in March that killed nine members of a family. It argues that the widespread enclosure of balconies and ventilation openings with permanent iron grilles has transformed many residential buildings into potential "death traps".

Referring to Wednesday's fire, Jain told TOI that sealed balconies and service areas severely limited escape options during fires. The PIL seeks directions to Municipal Corporation of Delhi, Delhi Fire Service and Delhi govt to also keep service lanes accessible for emergency vehicles and formulate citywide guidelines for the installation of safety enclosures in residential buildings.

Mayor's office receives bomb threat message

New Delhi: Panic gripped after the mayor's office received a bomb threat on Thursday. According to officials, the message warned of attacks at multiple locations across Delhi and Haryana. Security agencies launched a probe to verify the authenticity of the message. Sensitive and high-footfall areas have been placed under surveillance, while intensive checking operations are on. TNN

DFS proposes mandatory smoke detectors, sprinklers in buildings

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

New Delhi: Delhi Fire Service (DFS) has proposed making smoke detectors and sprinkler systems mandatory in all buildings in the capital to strengthen safety measures and help prevent tragedies.

Speaking to TOI, AK Malik, chief fire officer of DFS, said the department has sent a proposal to Delhi govt seeking mandatory installation of smoke detectors and sprinkler systems in all new buildings.

"All buildings constructed in the future should be required to install these systems. The cost involved is not very high, but the benefits are immense. Established data shows that nearly 97% of lives can be saved if such safety systems are in place," Malik said.

For existing buildings, DFS has proposed that they be brought under the mandate over the next three years. "We have recommended that existing buildings also be covered within the next three years. We have suggested that owners who install these systems in their buildings should be given a rebate in

house tax," he added.

The move comes in the wake of deaths reported in fires over the years. In 2016, there were 65 recorded deaths, which rose to 70 in 2017 and slightly increased to 72 in 2018. The number of fatalities rose to 85 in 2019 before dropping back down to 70 in 2020 and reaching a low of 56 in 2021.

The number of deaths spiked again to 82 in 2022, dipped to 59 in 2023, and shot up to 116 in 2024. The following year, 2025, saw 76 deaths, and for the current year, 2026, the toll stands at 61.

Referring to the fire at the B&B in Hauz Rani, fire officials said the department never received any inspection report or request from MCD. Former DFS director Atul Garg said that the process for granting clearances to hotels and guesthouses is done through a portal. MCD sends requests to DFS for inspections. DFS inspects the premises to assess compliance for fire safety. Once the inspection is done, it uploads its findings on the portal. Based on the report and other requirements, MCD takes a call on the NOC.



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Notice Inviting e-Tender

DSIIDC on behalf of the Managing Director Re-invites online Percentage rate e-tender in two bid system through Delhi Govt. website <https://govtprocurement.delhi.gov.in> for under mentioned work from the agencies/contractors registered with CPWD, Central Govt. and its undertakings, the agencies registered with any of the Delhi Govt. Deptt. like MCD, I&FC, DJB and other State Govt. departments are allowed to participate in the tendering process in DSIIDC as per their appropriate class of registration for the following works with **opening date 09.06.2026**

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Interested bidders can see other details / information on website <http://govtprocurement.delhi.gov.in> and website www.dsiidc.org. DSIIDC reserves the right to accept or reject any or all tenders without assigning any reason thereof.

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