

BEWARE

A Bi-monthly Newsletter of CUTS Safety Watch

No. 4/2004



Kumbakonam Fire Tragedy!

The nation was shocked over the ghastly incident that took place in this temple town of Thanjavur district of Tamilnadu. Nearly a hundred students of the Sri Krishna Saraswathi School in Kumbakonam were burnt to death and several others got injured in a deadly fire accident. Police arrested the school's principal in connection with the blaze but that was too late to compensate for the huge loss made to society.

The above incident is not only shocking, but probably one of the worst cases of negligence as well. The sources say that a violent spark in the kitchen burnt the thatched roof and spread to the main building. The thatched roof on the first floor of the main building broke down on the classrooms engulfing the children to death.

There have been three schools running in the same premises for 54 years. They conduct classes starting from nursery to standard ten while they receive government aid up to standard eight. The school building which is situated nearly sandwiched between two other buildings has one three-storied structure and having thatched roof in a part of the first floor. The building has only one entrance and one very narrow staircase from the entrance. No other emergency exit or fire exit existed.

On this issue, National Building Code formulated by Bureau of Indian Standards which speaks about the rules and regulations regarding fire safety measures to be adopted in educational institutions, has got several provisions to protect school buildings from such dreadful

events. The school buildings should be constructed to ensure students can evacuate the building at the rate of one minute or less per floor. Exit (stairways) of at least half-metre width should be provided for every 25 students. All institutions should have basic fire-fighting equipments like carbon dioxide cylinders, water and sand buckets and should know their right applications. Schools should carry out fire drills in accordance with the fire safety plan at least once every three months. Perhaps the deficient monitoring by the education department allowed the school authorities to run it in such a neglected manner for a long period.

Government announced a whole lot of monetary compensations for the bereaved families and cancelled the license of the school. But that is really no solution either for the distressed parents or panicky people at large. The idea is to ensure strict enforcement of safety norms so that no such accident can happen in future to shatter some other parents. The Education Department should review and tighten its quality standards for schools, keeping in mind the safety aspect.

"I would urge parents associations and residents associations to take it upon themselves to inspect the schools in their area and the schools to which they send their children" - suggests Pushpa Girimaji, a renowned consumer columnist, while stressing on the need for monitoring the implementation strategy of the norms by the government. This signifies the crucial roles parents should play in avoiding such horrendous incidents.



Gruesome Fire Tragedies

- Wedding Hall, Srirangam, January 2004 - A fire sparked off by an electrical short circuit turned a marriage ceremony into a scene of gloom. Toll: 64.
- Agra, May 2002 - A shoe factory caught fire. Toll: 42.
- Yamuna Pusta, Delhi, March, 1999 - A devastating fire engulfed a jhuggi cluster on the Yamuna Pusta. Toll: 30.
- Uphaar Cinema, New Delhi, June 1997 - The audience inside the hall, trapped as a transformer caught fire, died in a stampede or as a result of asphyxiation. Toll: 59.
- Mandi Dabwali, Haryana, December 1995 - 1200 children were celebrating their end of school term with a giant party when the marquee caught fire. Panic ensued, resulting in a stampede. Toll: 441.
- Venus Circus, Bangalore, February 1981 - A fire broke out in Venus Circus. The circus tents were pitched under high tension electric cables. Toll: 85.

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Subscription Rs. 50 per annum

Health Nuggets

EWW! Worms in our Milk

In Mumbai, mainly in Dadar area, consumers lodged a complaint against the toned milk produced by the Mahananda Dairy, a co-operative under the Mumbai dairy department, that they found a bad odour and yellow coloured flotsam in their milk.



An inquiry it was revealed that three senior officials of the Mahananda Dairy had been allowing the use of old and worm-infested milk powder to prepare the toned milk for the last six months. Normally, the dairy keeps only a one-and-a-half months' supply of milk powder. In this case, the dairy purchased a large quantity of the powder, apparently as a favour to a Denmark-based company, even when it did not have the capacity to store it.

A petition was filed by a social activist Vidya Chavan in Mumbai High Court alleging that the dairy was guilty of milk adulteration on a large scale. A division bench has ordered the state to file a report.

(MD, 06.08.04)

Flying Rules for Heart Patients

Recent researchers say that while travelling by plane, heart patients should follow certain rules like wearing below-the-knee compression stockings, get up and walk around during long plane rides to prevent deep vein thrombosis or blood clots, etc. People suffering from unstable angina, chest pains due to insufficient blood flow to the heart, abnormal heartbeats and heart failure, not well controlled by medication, are advised not to fly. This restriction is also true for certain periods of time after angioplasty, heart stent implant, and coronary bypass operations. But flying is less risky in case of "no post-surgery troubles" heart patients.

(ET, 22.07.04)

Child Obesity: A Problem in US



In the US, childhood obesity is becoming a serious problem, nowadays. A study says that the number of overweight children has doubled

in the past 25 years. This has a severe implication on future health of the citizens in the sense that, the chance of an obese child to become an obese adult suffering from type 2 diabetes and other related problems, is 70 percent. However, the solution to this problem lies in the support system of the families in the form of "acceptance, love, and encouragement to change", as the children are likely to suffer from low self-esteem and depression. The family should encourage healthy food habits, activities like walking, bicycling, etc., and discourage sedentary activities, like watching TV, playing computer games.

(www.healthcare.com, 12.07.04)

Doctor's Dilemma

Doctors are "happy" that the Supreme Court of India has held (August 5, 2004) that a doctor will not be criminally liable if a patient dies due to an error of judgment or carelessness or want of due caution though he can be liable to pay compensation.

The judges said that criminal prosecutions of doctors without adequate medical opinion pointing to their guilt would be doing a great disservice to the community at large. Because if the courts were to impose criminal liability on hospitals and doctors for everything that went wrong, the doctors would be more worried about their own safety than giving the best treatment to their patients.

However, the above judgement has been referred to a larger bench, because the words - "gross, reckless, competence and indifference" - do not occur anywhere in the definition of 'negligence' under Section 304A of the Indian Penal Code.

(TH, 06.08.04)

Multivitamins could Invite Asthma

A research paper, published in the latest issue of *Pediatrics*, the journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics, says that a study of more than 8,000 infants found a possible link between use of multivitamin supplements and the risk of asthma and food allergies. It found an association between early infant multivitamin intake and asthma among infants and an association between early infant multivitamin intake and food allergies in formula-fed infants as well as increased risk of food allergies among all children given multivitamins from the age of three.

According to the report of Children's National Medical Centre in

Washington and other research centres, the reason for the apparent link is unclear. But animal tests have found certain vitamins may cause cell changes that can increase the odds of an allergic response when certain antigens are encountered. More study is needed to find out if the link is a factor in an increase in asthmatic and allergic disease.

(ET, 06.07.04)

Nanoparticles in Sunblock Creams

Britain's Royal Society and the Royal Academy of Engineering conducted a study on the safety of nanoparticles like ultrafine zinc oxide powders currently used



in some Australian sunscreens. A western Australia based company, Advanced Power Technologies (APT), carried out a small study along with a pilot test, based on normal-sized zinc oxide particles, which says that zinc oxide remains on the outside of the skin and did not penetrate across.

But according to the UK working group report nanoparticles act differently from larger particles of the same material. The report recommended treating nanoparticles as "new chemicals" and approval from an independent safety committee is required prior to use in consumer products such as cosmetics.

(ABCSO, 30.07.04)

Cough Drugs - Placebos?

Recent Study on the credibility of cough drugs reveals that the two ingredients commonly used in cough syrup are no better than sugar water which only provides temporary relief to the children suffering from night time coughing & sleep difficulty due to upper respiratory infection. The findings were based on 100 children aged two to 18 with upper respiratory infections.



The two ingredients are dextromethorphan which is the most common nonprescription cough suppressants on the US market and the other is diphenhydramine, an antihistamine.

(TOI, 07.07.04)

Pot Pourri

Smell DDT in your food

The Indian government is working on a National Implementation Plan on Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs). According to a study by Toxic Links in



South Asia these pollutants are well present in our food. Some of them, viz., Aldrin, Dieldrin, DDT and Heptachlor, are available in foodstuffs like oils, spices and meat products.

Further to this, there are signs of high level of DDT in dried fish from Bangladesh which reveals the fact that this pesticide is used as a preservative after drying fish. Other things like breast milk, fat samples and human blood samples are also seen to contain high levels of DDT, Aldrin, Dieldrin, Doxin etc. According to experts, though the Government has signed the Stockholm Convention in 2002, it is not yet ratified.

(TH, 14.08.04)

Fairer Equals Better?

Mama Amina, 33, believes in "light skin" as nobody pays attention to someone with dark skin. This is the concept of good skin that most of the women in Africa, Asia, as well as in African-American community in the US holds, supporting the statistics that lightening and fairness creams account for 10-15 percent of the cosmetic industry.

To make youngsters beautiful, in Kenya, traders use a mixture of three gels and a cream. All four products have been banned in Kenya since 2001, as they contain the deadly mixture of steroids and hydroquinone (legal only in prescription products), causing thin skins and damaged internal organs. However, Kenyan women are becoming more aware of the dangers. But it has been seen that education plays a key factor as lower-income, less educated groups use most of the banned products.

(FT, 17.08.04)

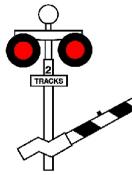
Safeguarding Railway Level Crossing

Anti-collision devices on more routes, manning of unmanned crossings where high volume of rail traffic is present and provision for Train Actuated Warning Device (TAWD) at select level crossings are planned by the railways to avoid frequent train accidents.

More importantly, field methods to

test continuous welded tracks are to be developed so that remedial action may be taken before any unwanted happenings take place.

Apart from this, the Railway Minister announced in the current budget that an Institute of Rescue and Medical Relief would be set up, at the cost of rupees 10 crore, to gear up training in disaster management. Even priority has been given to upgrade signaling systems, rehabilitating and strengthening of old bridges, etc.



(ET, 07.07.04)

Novel Technique for Rail Safety

Researchers in the UK's University of Warwick have developed a novel noncontact method of using ultrasound to detect and measure cracks and flaws in rail tracks. Conventional contacting ultrasonic techniques have limitation that they can not be used without disrupting the network. This new technology makes use of a particular form of ultrasonic signal to produce a crack testing technique for locating cracks that works at high speed and could transform every train in the country into part of a 24 hour network of rail crack detectors without touching the rail.

The technique can also ascertain the exact depth of the crack and could be used to get some sense of the change in microstructure and stress levels of a section of track, identifying sections of track that are more likely to crack or fail. But more testing is required on a greater range of rails before they can be sure of this additional benefit of the technology.

(www.engineeringtalk.com, 07.07.04)

(TOI, 22.07.04)

Fly Safe only to Land in Danger

The landing system and aircraft assistance - which guide an approaching plane towards the runway at all the international airports in India have not undergone their mandatory calibrations and checks for almost a month now. Airports Authority of India admitted that the calibrations were pending due to lack of pilots required to operate the test aircrafts with the latest calibration equipments.

(TOI, 22.07.04)

Padded Cars Hail Crunch-free Future

Researchers at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology have designed a padded car that would leave pedestrians unharmed in an accident and could allow motorists to drive in city traffic with bumpers touching. Packed full of electronic gadgets, the car would guide motorists away from traffic jams, change colour when approaching a hazard and find the nearest parking space.



Covering the metal frame there will be a "skin" made of hundreds of air-filled plastic pads formed from the material Ethylene Tetrafluoroethylene (ETFE). Researchers believe the pads will prevent damage if vehicles bump into each other, so cars could be driven closer together, maximising the use of road space.

The safety measures are timely because car manufacturers in Europe have been ordered by the European Commission to provide protection for pedestrians through improved front-end design. The designers believe their "soft car" could be on the road by the end of the decade.

(www.timesonline.co.uk, 15.08.04)

Products Recalled in US

Whirlpool Corp. of Benton Harbor, Michigan, US, has recalled freestanding ranges, double ovens, and oven-microwave combinations. All of the appliances use faulty wiring, which can overheat, melt through the insulation and cause a short circuit. They may pose a shock hazard to consumers if the appliance is not properly grounded.



Aviva Sports, of Osage Beach, China, has recalled Astroslide Inflatable Water Slides. These water slides have an excessive length of rope attached to the safety mat that presents a risk of entanglement in the water. This poses a drowning hazard to users. Aviva has received one report of a child being tangled on the rope in the water. No injuries have been reported.



(www.cpsc.gov)

Fire safety not high on buildings' priority list

By K. Kannan

NEW DELHI, AUG. 2. Uphaar, a mall in the city, and now Kumbakonam. Fire safety needs to be high on the agenda of the country. There is no exception. A majority of the schools in the country into a fire-bomb, says Soumi Home Roy, a researcher with CUTS Safety Watch, a premier consumer orga-

Call for strict enforcement of National Building Code on

MONDAY 2 AUGUST 2004 KOLKATA

Business Standard

New Delhi, August 5: A press conference has called for strict enforcement of safety regulations

Though the Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS) that governs design hardly followed, said Soumi Roy, a researcher with CUTS Safety Watch.

CUTS safety

Consumer Unity & Trust Society (CUTS), a non-governmental organisation, has published a book, "Is It Really Safe?", on consumer safety issues. The Safety Watch centre of CUTS has urged the government to make the National Building Code mandatory for all buildings.

Working on consumer safety rules and stricter

the National Building Code for buildings, they were Consumer Unity and

Holistic fire safety call

By OUR CORRESPONDENT

Kolkata, Aug. 1: The Asian Age's prescription of fire safety in schools' buildings is that structures with non-combustible material cannot singularly check fire in the educational institutions.

Concerned over fire safety in educational institutions after some 90 students perished in the Kumbakonam

fire, a Kolkata-based NGO, Consumer Unity and Trust Society, has urged the state government to formulate the National Building Code charted out by the Bureau of Indian Standards.

Soumi Home Roy of CUTS, that has been working on consumer safety for more than a decade, said, "Many schools are in dilapidated buildings

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Karnataka's Daily Diary, Roy

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THE TELEGRAPH CALCUTTA MONDAY 23 AUGUST 2004

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Feedback

Campaign on Sec. 134 of Motor Vehicles Act, 1988

Is It Really Safe?

Complement for the Excellent Depiction

I was going through the material left by yourself in which an excellent analysis of Section 134 of Motor Vehicles Act has been carried out. In this connection we have already issued a circular to the Principal Secretary/Secretary to all States/UTs. Further, we have carried out newspaper campaign by taking out half page advertisement in colour, highlighting this aspect.

Alok Rawat,
Joint Secretary
Ministry of Road Transport & Highways
New Delhi

Useful Publication

Thank you for kindly sending me the useful publication of your - 'Is It Really Safe?'. I shall certainly share the information contained with my friends and enlighten/warn others on the safety issues discussed. You have done a good job!

Sujay Basu, Ex-Director
School of Energy Studies
Jadavpur University, Kolkata

Request for a Book

Ours is a non-governmental consumer organisation working on consumer related issues. We have learnt while going through your bi-monthly newsletter "Beware" no. 2/2004 that a book named "Is It Really Safe?" was released recently. We request you to please dispatch three copies of the above book as early as possible.

K. Damodara Aithal, Convenor
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Consumers' Forum
Udupi, Karnataka

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SOURCES

MD: Mid Day, ET: Economic Times, FT: Financial Times, ABCSO: ABC Science Online, TOI: Times of India, TH: The Hindu

Praiseworthy Effort

The material you have sent on road safety and accidents is very useful indeed. The effort your organisation is making to publish and disseminate the information is praiseworthy. My new film is still taking shape. I shall keep your suggestion of a traffic message in mind.

Rajkumar Hirani
Film Director
Mumbai

Published by Consumer Unity & Trust Society, (CUTS), 3, Suren Tagore Road, Calcutta 700019, India, Ph: 91.33.2460 1424,

Fax: 91.33.2440 7669, Email: cuts@vsnl.com, cuts-calcutta@cuts-international.org, Website: www.cuts-international.org, Printed by Aman Printers, Calcutta.

CUTS offices also at Jaipur, Chittorgarh and New Delhi (India); Lusaka (Zambia); Nairobi (Kenya); and London (UK).

The news/stories in this Newsletter are compressed from several newspapers. The sources given are to be used as a reference for further information and do not indicate the literal transcript of a particular news/story.