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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

Broken Accountability: On the Kolkata Warehouse Collapse

THE HINDU

26 June 2026

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Broken Accountability: On the Kolkata Warehouse Collapse

 **The Hindu**

26 June 2026

GS2

GS3

 Source: ujjyari.com — researched, fact-checked & UPSC-mapped


INTERVIEW ANGLE

"When an under-construction building collapses, the chain runs from owner to contractor to subcontractor to inspector; where should the law place primary liability, and why?"

 Source: [Original editorial](#)
[The Hindu](#)
 **Every fact web-verified against primary sources** (<https://ujjyari.com/how-we-verify/>)

WHY THIS MATTERS NOW

An under-construction warehouse in Taratala, Kolkata, has collapsed, the latest in a grim sequence of Indian building failures. Early indications point to a damning detail: tin sheets used to support a heavy concrete roof, a choice that screams cost-cutting over structural integrity. But the editorial's force lies in moving past the single site to the system. Who is actually accountable when a building falls, and why does the answer keep coming back as "no one"? For an aspirant, this is a governance and disaster-management case study that bridges GS2 (accountability, urban governance) and GS3 (disaster management, infrastructure).

THE CRUX IN 60 WORDS

A Kolkata warehouse under construction collapsed after cost-cutting, including tin sheets bearing a concrete roof. The deeper failure is a fragmented accountability chain: an outdated state-as-builder model, informal subcontracting and corrupt, unlicensed approvals that let capital owners escape liability. Fixing it means non-transferable primary liability, audited digital approvals, an insured construction chain, and municipalities acting as regulators, not builders.

THE ISSUE, DECODED

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CONCEPT	WHAT IT MEANS	WHY IT MATTERS
Accountability chain	The sequence of owner, contractor, subcontractor and inspector responsible for a build	When diffuse, responsibility evaporates and no one is liable
State-as-builder model	Municipal bodies both approve and effectively oversee construction without capacity	Approval becomes a formality, not a safety check
Informal subcontracting	Work passed down through unregistered layers	Dilutes liability and erodes quality control
Structural liability	Legal responsibility for a building's safety	Often unassigned, so victims have no clear defendant
Professional indemnity (https://ujjiyari.com/vocab/indemnity/)	Mandatory insurance for certifying engineers	Aligns financial risk with the certifier's signature

THE ANALYSIS

- 1 The proximate cause is cost-cutting.** Tin sheets supporting a heavy concrete roof is not an engineering accident; it is a deliberate (<https://ujjiyari.com/vocab/deliberate/>) economy that ignored load and structural logic. The choice reveals intent, not just error.
- 2 The systemic cause is diffusion.** Responsibility is split across owner, contractor, a chain of subcontractors and an inspector, so that when the structure fails, each party points to the next and the legal buck stops nowhere.
- 3 The state plays two conflicting roles.** Municipal bodies both grant building sanction and are meant to police it, yet lack the staff and tools to verify what they approve. Sanction becomes a stamp, not a safeguard.
- 4 Corruption monetises the gap.** Unlicensed sign-offs and managed inspections turn safety regulation into something that can be bought, hollowing out the very approvals meant to protect the public.
- 5 Capital escapes, labour bears the cost.** The principal owner who profits from the build is often the furthest from liability, while site workers, frequently informal and uninsured, absorb the physical danger.

- 6 **The pattern is national, not local.** From building collapses to coaching-centre and basement tragedies, the same broken chain recurs across cities, marking this as a governance design flaw rather than a string of unrelated accidents.

DATA AND INSTITUTIONS VAULT

CARRY THESE INTO THE EXAM HALL.

Codes and laws: National Building Code of India (NBC, BIS), Town and Country Planning Acts (state), municipal building bye-laws, Real Estate (Regulation and Development) Act, 2016 (RERA).

Disaster frame: Disaster Management Act 2005, NDMA guidelines, Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030 (prevention over response).

Bodies: Urban Local Bodies (74th Constitutional Amendment), municipal corporations, BIS, Institution of Engineers.

Concepts: structural audit, occupancy/completion certificate, professional indemnity, third-party verification, accountability deficit, regulatory capture.

Governance idea: separating the regulator from the regulated; the state as enabler and auditor, not executor.

THE DEBATE

Argument for stricter, owner-centred liability: Only by fixing clear, non-transferable liability on the principal owner and certifying engineer, backed by mandatory insurance and criminal exposure, can the chain be forced to internalise safety.

Argument against over-regulation: India faces a vast housing and infrastructure deficit; layering on rules raises costs, slows projects, and may simply expand the bribe market unless capacity also grows. Municipal enforcement is genuinely under-resourced.

Balanced verdict: Both are right in part. The answer is not more paper rules but smarter accountability: concentrate liability where the profit and decision-making sit, make approvals digital and randomly audited, and build genuine regulatory capacity so that stricter standards are actually enforceable rather than merely declared.

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS (TRANSFERABLE SKILL)

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For any disaster question, write two layers, the proximate cause (the tin sheet, the spark, the breached wall) and the systemic cause (the broken approval, the diffuse liability, the capacity gap). Marks come from showing that the visible failure is the surface of an invisible governance flaw. This “proximate then systemic” reading transfers to industrial accidents, stampedes, dam failures and urban floods.

DIAGRAM-IN-WORDS

Profit motive -> cost-cutting (tin sheet under concrete roof) -> informal subcontracting dilutes liability -> municipal approval as formality -> corrupt sign-off -> collapse -> capital owner escapes, worker bears cost -> reform: fix primary liability + audited digital approvals + insured chain + regulator-not-builder

THE WAY FORWARD

- ① **Fix non-transferable primary liability** on the principal owner and the licensed structural engineer, with mandatory professional indemnity insurance.
- ② **Digitise and randomly audit approvals**, with geo-tagged, time-stamped inspections to defeat paper sign-offs.
- ③ **License and register the whole chain**, including subcontractors, so informal layers cannot hide liability.
- ④ **Separate regulator from builder**, shifting municipal bodies toward credible oversight and third-party structural verification.
- ⑤ **Mandate** (<https://ujijari.com/vocab/mandate/>) **independent structural audits** at defined construction stages before occupancy certificates are issued.
- ⑥ **Modernise and enforce the building code**, aligning bye-laws with the National Building Code and Sendai prevention principles, and prosecute violations swiftly.

THE TAKEAWAY BOX

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Use as a flagship example that “disasters” are often governance failures; argue for accountability design rather than only post-event relief.

“A collapse is the visible failure of an invisible system; when liability is shared by everyone, it is borne by no one, except the worker beneath the roof.”

National Building Code (BIS), RERA 2016, Disaster Management Act 2005, NDMA, Sendai Framework, 74th Constitutional Amendment, occupancy certificate.

The moral hazard (<https://ujjiyari.com/terms/moral-hazard/>) of diffuse responsibility; how regulatory capture and corruption convert public safeguards into private commodities.

Connects to GS3 questions on disaster management and the role of community and institutions, and GS2 questions on accountability and urban local governance.

Urbanisation and smart cities, corruption and regulatory capture, labour safety in the informal sector, building-code reform.

Sources: The Hindu (<https://www.thehindu.com>), The Hindu Opinion (<https://www.thehindu.com/opinion>), The Indian Express (<https://indianexpress.com/section/opinion>)

Source: Broken Accountability: On the Kolkata Warehouse Collapse — Ujjiyari.com | Free UPSC & State PCS Editorial Analysis

KEY ARGUMENTS AT A GLANCE

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The Taratala warehouse collapse is not a freak accident but the predictable result of a fragmented accountability chain where corruption, unlicensed approvals and cost-cutting let the real owners of capital escape liability.


SUPPORTING

- Cost-cutting choices, such as tin sheets supporting a heavy concrete roof, point to a design and supervision failure, not mere bad luck.
- An outdated state-as-builder governance model and reliance on informal subcontracting diffuse responsibility until no one is clearly liable.
- Unlicensed or corrupt sign-offs mean regulatory approval becomes a paper ritual rather than a safety guarantee.


COUNTER

Tighter rules risk paralysing construction and raising costs in a housing-short economy, and enforcement capacity in municipal bodies is genuinely thin.


WAY FORWARD

Fix primary liability on the principal owner and licensed professional, digitise and audit approvals, license and insure the construction chain, and modernise the building code regime.


MAINS ANSWER FRAMEWORK

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QUESTION

Building and construction failures in Indian cities reveal a broken accountability chain rather than isolated accidents. Analyse the structural causes and suggest reforms to fix liability and prevent recurrence. (250 words)

INTRODUCTION

The collapse of an under-construction warehouse in Taratala, Kolkata, has once again turned a human tragedy into a question of governance. Such failures recur not because the engineering is unknown but because accountability dissolves across a long, informal chain of owners, contractors, subcontractors and inspectors.

BODY

The proximate cause here, reportedly tin sheets pressed into supporting a heavy concrete roof, is a textbook instance of cost-cutting overriding structural sense. But the deeper cause is institutional. India still runs a state-as-builder governance model in which municipal bodies issue approvals they lack the manpower to verify, so sanction becomes a formality. Construction is then executed through layers of informal subcontracting, where the principal owner of capital contracts out work, the contractor sub-contracts further, and liability is diluted at each step until the worker on site bears the physical risk and no one bears the legal one.

Corruption completes the circuit: unlicensed sign-offs and managed inspections convert safety regulation into a saleable formality. The result is a predictable accident wearing the mask of misfortune.

Reform must therefore target the chain, not the symptom. The law should fix non-transferable primary liability on the principal owner and the licensed structural engineer, mandate professional indemnity, digitise and randomly audit approvals, and shift municipalities from being builders and approvers to being credible regulators.

CONCLUSION

A collapse is the visible failure of an invisible system. Until India replaces its diffuse, informal accountability chain with clear, insured, professionally certified liability, every new structure carries the same buried risk, and the next collapse is only a matter of time.


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