

# Trial by Fire: An Eminently Watchable Netflix Series on the Upahaar Cinema Tragedy

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Trial by Fire is Netflix's new series focusing on the Upahaar Theatre fire accident. The series stars Abhay Deol and Rajshri Despande in the lead.

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**T**here was a time the International Film Festival of [India](#) took place in Delhi's Siri Fort, and I used to walk into the nearby Upahaar Theatre because a few movies from IFFI used to be screened there. When the cinema caught fire and 59 people — many children and young adults — died, I shuddered about what would have been my fate had I been in that burning inferno. In fact, a colleague of mine from The Hindu was at the 3 pm show of Border — it was the first day of a highly publicised film — but she was fortunate to have been escorted out by a member of the theatre staff.

But the others were not as lucky; they were caught on the balcony, and could have easily escaped had the exit door been unlocked. A guard had allegedly locked the door and walked out without handing over the key to his reliever! One can imagine the final moments of those who were trapped and suffocated! It would have been a horrible end.

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The incident happened in the middle of 1997, and a [Netflix](#) series, Trial by Fire, is just out; well better late than never. It is a fictionalised version of the horrific incident that has been created with power and punch by Prashant Nair and Kevin Luperchlo. It has been very well made with memorable performances by Abhay Deol and Rajshri Despande. They play husband and wife, Krishnamoorthys, and the seven-episode series is narrated

from their point of view. In fact, it is based on a book they wrote some years ago.

They lost their two teenage children in the fire that was caused by a malfunctioning transformer, which shockingly had been repaired a few hours before the fire. And, there was just about a single fire extinguisher in the entire hall, and the fire brigade was delayed. It seemed that life had conspired to wreak havoc that afternoon.

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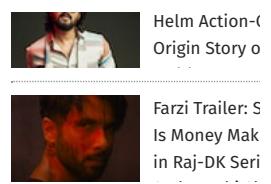
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But let us go beyond fate and fatalism; it was human callousness and the stubborn refusal of owners, Ansals, to take responsibility. The series, co-helmed by Nair and Randeep Jha, has all this and much more, including the fact that Gopal and Sushil Ansal placing an ad in a newspaper saying that they had nothing to do with the fire!

Really, could they not see the devastated face of an elderly man who had lost all seven members of his family – including a month-old baby? Kishan Pal lived in a slum. In fact, he had no money to cremate the bodies and the Ansals tried to buy him through a “fixer”.

What is equally pertinent is the way Neelam and Shekhar Krishnamoorthy began probing by fighting their way into police and investigation records to assemble a group of people who had also lost their dear ones. A protracted legal battle followed.

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Initially, no lawyer wanted to touch the case, because they knew that everyone was connected to the Ansals and their large real estate enterprise. One of them said that the Krishnamoorthys would need an army to fight the Ansals!

Ultimately, advocate K. T. Tulse took up the challenge to face the Ansals, who were represented by a very powerful lawyer (Ram Jethmalani, his name is changed to Keswani).

Many of us know what followed: justice was delayed and when the sentences came, they seemed so small.

Trial by Fire is eminently watchable; do not miss it.

#### PHOTOGALLERY



15 PHOTOS  
Kriti Sanon, Suhana Kha Panday, Deepika Padukone

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**GAUTAMAN BHASKARAN** Gautaman Bhaskaran is a movie critic, commentator and an author, who penned the first ever biography of Adoor Gopalakrishnan, and has been covering ma... [Read More](#)

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