

UNDER THE LENS

Ola, Bhavish Aggrawal, and the mystery of the fire that disappeared without smoke

By Manu P Toms Dec 12, 2023, 04:00:00 AM IST



Photos by Manu P Toms.

Synopsis

It's been a month since a newly bought Ola Electric scooter went up in flames in Nelamangala near Bengaluru. The stoic silence of the company about this incident raises questions on how fire incidents involving Ola Electric scooters are being dealt with.

November 14, 2023

A couple of minutes past midnight, the Adarsh Nagar neighbourhood of Nelamangala woke up to some unusual noise. Then they heard their neighbour, an elderly woman, crying for help from the upstairs of her rented house. Her husband and sons were fighting a fire downstairs.

It was only a few hours after everyone went to bed after Diwali festivities in this housing colony in the town 40km off Bengaluru. But it turned out to be a nightmarish Diwali for the big family of nine members, including an elderly couple, their three sons, daughters-in-law, and two toddlers.

Vinod Kumar, (name changed as the family requested not to reveal their identity as they fear for their safety and peace), a 30-year-old youth who runs a small business with his dad, bought an Ola S1 Pro Second Gen from **Ola Electric**'s Nelamangala showroom on November 5. Little did he know that it would cause untold misery to his family just a week later. He, in fact, noticed some trouble with the vehicle on the day he brought the scooter home. Some strange noise was coming from the vehicle, and he raised the complaint with the people at Ola Electric's Nelamangala outlet. Four days later, they attended to his issues.

It is not clear what problem the Ola Electric service team found in the vehicle, but it seemed the issue didn't get resolved entirely. According to several accounts of Kumar, his neighbours, and his family, at midnight, Kumar's freshly bought Ola scooter, which was in idle position, went up in flames. The soot emanating from the burnt scooter turned the entire porch and surrounding areas black. Worse, the fire spread to three other two-wheelers parked nearby and burnt them. The fire reached the front door of the house and left some burn marks. Several tiles from the wall came off. A gas cylinder kept in the narrow, grilled corridor close to the porch also caught fire. The regulator and rubber pipe of the gas cylinder started burning. Luckily, the neighbours promptly responded to Kumar's mother's cry and put out the fire in 15-20 minutes. It could have been much worse but for the neighbours' immediate action.

But the family's troubles were far from over. One of Kumar's brothers who vigorously worked to put out the fire and save his family inhaled thick black smoke had to be admitted to VP Magnus Hospital Nelamangala with inflated lungs. The other brother, while running from home to hospital to police station for two exhaustive days and sleepless nights, sprained his leg. The women folk in the house underwent mental agony.

The financial, psychological, and physical problems that followed the scooter fire were several. Kumar and family, with the neighbours who forcefully opened the front grille by breaking its latch, fought the fire. But there was no help from Ola Electric. Throughout the harrowing night, Kumar made seven calls to the Ola Electric customer-care desk. Each call lasted five minutes to 16 minutes. They promised to attend to the issue, but never came or took any further steps.

On November 14, around 10 am, or some 10 hours after the incident, it reached Twitter and caught the attention of many Ola Electric owners. In fact, the photos and videos of the incident have been spreading through various WhatsApp groups of Ola scooter buyers since the wee hours of November 14. A former Ola Electric executive said many of such groups were initiated by the company's sales teams to create communities and social-media chatter and events around their scooters, but they turned into overflowing complaint boxes.

The local channels rushed to the scene. They **captured the site of the incident** and interviewed Kumar.

Here's the summary of his first-person recount:

I parked the vehicle around 9.30pm. At about 11.55pm, a spark came out of the scooter. By 12.02am there was a blast. It damaged everything, including other two-wheelers parked in the surrounding area. My brother tried to put out the fire. My mother went upstairs and cried for help. Several people rushed to the scene. The grille was locked from inside and neighbours broke it open. I called Ola Electric customer care several times. Each time they said, "We will assist you, sir" but nobody came. Policemen from the local Nelamangala Town police station came immediately after the incident. They took video and photographs. They were preparing a *mahazar* (the preliminary scene report).

When ET Prime reached out to inspector Shashidhar SD on the same day afternoon and sought details of the incident, he said, "There is no complaint." When further asked, he admitted that the policemen visited the area but insisted that they did not receive any complaint. "We are requesting them [the customer] to file a complaint. A preliminary inquiry is going on." He did not answer several follow-up calls. Neither did he respond to a WhatsApp message to a query on why a first information report of the incident was not made.

ET Prime visited Nelamangala the next day, saw the charred **Ola Electric scooter** and other remnants of the fire that happened 34 hours ago. Kumar's family had begun cleaning up the place.



Special Arrangement.

12.40pm, November 15

Two individuals walked into Nelamangala police station. A man in a blue blazer and grey trousers walked in the front and the other person followed him. They were joined later by a third person who stood outside the police station. This third person sparingly participated in discussions inside and in the front yard of the police station.

The first two people mentioned took charge of the situation. They went inside the

police station and came out after a few minutes. They then began talking to Kumar, his brother, and friends who had gathered in the front yard of the police station. This duo introduced themselves as employees from a particular department within Ola — law enforcement. The man in the blue blazer said he was a former cop with Delhi Police. The other had previously worked in the fire and rescue departments of luxury hotel chains. We have withheld the identity of these executives as they were in the place of the incident on orders from their managers. One of them — a regional manager, law enforcement at Ola, according to his LinkedIn profile — said he had gone home to Delhi for Diwali but had to rush back to Bengaluru following this incident.

This brings to the fore this less-known department within Ola, curiously named “law enforcement”. One of these two told those who had gathered at the police station that this department was led by a former IPS officer and a brigadier. But it turned out it is headed by a person who previously worked in the security department of PVR at a senior level.

At Ola, the law enforcement department, according to several sources, has its origins in the flagship cab business. It was formed some eight years ago to deal with law-and-order problems involving cab drivers on its platform. Be it safety issues of the users or strikes by drivers in front of Ola offices, this department gets active to bring the situation under control. The existence of this wing became useful when founder Bhavish Aggarwal started Ola Electric. Besides safety and security at the manufacturing plant and Aggarwal’s own security, it handled fire incidents involving Ola scooters and dealt with customer protests at Ola showrooms and facilities. The same duo present at Nelamangala police station is said to have gone to Thiruvananthapuram after an Ola scooter caught fire there.

Unanswered questions

Now, almost a month since the fire incident in Nelamangala, several questions remain unanswered.

- What was the response of the cops at Nelamangala Town police station to a fire incident in their jurisdiction?
- Was there any investigation by police or fire force on the cause of the scooter blast?
- Why did Ola Electric officials spend several hours in Nelamangala Town police station on November 14, 15, and 16?
- How did Ola Electric respond to the incident?

This was a terrifying incident and the first known case of an Ola Electric fire which caused hospitalisation of people involved. But there is no clarity on how it was dealt with.

Last week, ET Prime sent a detailed questionnaire to Ola Electric seeking its response.

- Have you come across a fire incident involving an Ola Electric scooter on the midnight of November 13/early hours of November 14 in Adarsh Nagar, Nelamangala?
- According to you, what was the cause of the fire?
- How did you resolve this complaint of fire raised by a buyer who purchased this new Ola S1 Pro New Gen scooter just a week prior to the incident?
- Based on all evidence and public statements, this buyer contacted Ola customer care several times during the night following the blast and fire. Why didn't Ola Electric respond to this immediately?
- Why did two executives from Ola Electric visit Nelamangala Town police station on November 14,15, and 16?
- What help did you provide to the buyer whose scooter was fully charred?

The company did not respond to the queries.

After many days, the situation has come to a point where there is no trace of a scooter fire in Nelamangala at all. There is no statement from Ola Electric despite several buyers demanding an explanation from the company. The police, as mentioned earlier, continued to insist there was no case. This was quite unlike how police in Kerala approached a fire incident involving an Ola scooter in Nedumangad near Thiruvananthapuram in July this year. As ET Prime reported earlier, the police then promptly put out an **FIR** with details of the fire episode.

After multiple failed attempts to talk to the inspector at Nelamangala police station, this reporter **tweeted** late evening on November 16.

Curiously, the response came not from the police but Ola Electric. This reporter received multiple calls from one of the Ola Electric executives from its law enforcement wing between 10.55pm and 11.05pm that night. Why should they call a reporter when he tweets to the police department?

While that question remains unanswered, it is clear that, in the background of several fire incidents involving products of India's largest electric-scooter seller and rising EV adoption, three points are imperative to safeguard Indian consumers' life, health, property, and vehicles, and to foolproof India's ambitious EV programme:

- Rule of law
- Thorough and independent investigation
- Transparent communication