



Fires in ancient Kashmir

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Abstract

Fires have been one of the earliest disasters that Kashmiris witnessed. The researcher looks into primary sources to know about the fires, causes, impact and the places in which these fires would frequently take place. The researcher gives a chronological description of fires in ancient Kashmir. Further, it demonstrates that fires were the result of the building material used and the cold climatic conditions in Kashmir. Sometimes deliberate human act too would cause fires, as many a times fire was used as a weapon. The researcher demonstrates that sources only discuss those fires which took place around the seat of power.

Keywords: fires, Kashmir, ancient, wood, disaster

Introduction

Fires occur through the process of combustion. Combustion is an exothermic, self - sustaining chemical reaction usually involving the oxidation of a fuel by oxygen in the atmosphere. A fuel is a material that will burn. In most environments carbon is a constituent element. Two agents are needed for fire oxidising agent [oxygen] and reducing agent [fuel]. Further, heat is needed to raise the temperature of the material to its ignition-point, or the lowest temperature at which it will burn. Ignition can occur from a variety of natural and human sources ^[1].

Three factors- fuel, oxygen and heat, also called as fire triangle are necessary for fire to begin ^[2]. For self -sustaining combustion to occur a fourth factor, a chain reaction must be added [this causes the fire to spread]. In most cases either the action of a person or an act of nature such as lightening or earthquake are required to start. In Kashmir it has been the human action either deliberate or accidental which has caused fires.

Fires are spread due to transfer mechanisms, which are of four types. First convection - heat transfer within fluid, in most fires this occur within air. Secondly, Conduction - heat transfer between two bodies in direct contact with each other. Third, a combination of conduction and convection occur between a solid and a fluid at their boundary. Fourth, Latent heat transfer. Latent heat is the heat that is involved in the change of state of a substance - like water used as an extinguishing agent will be converted to steam, absorbing large quantities of heat energy as it changes from liquid into gas ^[3]. Conflagration is a fire that spreads over some distance, a portion of a city or a town. In Kashmir conflagration would occur mostly because of haphazard house pattern and building materials used. Fire can be prevented by attacking each leg of the fire triangle. In past it was almost impossible in Kashmir, because of the building material and housing pattern. Thus every fire would result in destroying hundreds of houses.

Because it was thought to be impossible to stop fires before 20th century.

Materials and Methods

This research is based on primary sources. The researcher adopted a chronological and geographical approach. The insights were taken from disaster management studies on how to study fires.

Results and Discussion

The sources give information about nine major fires which occurred in Ancient Kashmir. Among these, the fires in Ucalla's and Sussala's time were a chain of fires i.e. a single fire resulted into number of fires.

The first fire mentioned by Kalhana is a mythical one that occurred in Nara's time when he attacked a Naga daughter. Her father approached Naga King which resulted in destruction of Narapura an ancient city of Kashmir. Kalhana writes that to this day the tale is remembered by the people when they behold close to Cakradhara, the town destroyed by fire ^[4].

Hassan writes that when Parvarasen settled the city of Srinagar. It is said that there were 36 lakh people inhabiting. Suddenly due to fire half of the city towards north of Koh-i-maran was reduced to ashes. According to Hassan at present people dug (writing in 1880's) up to depth of 5-6 yards to obtain red coloured samples of soil ^[5].

In the reign of Abhimanyu (958-972) there arose a terrible conflagration from the neighbourhood of Tungeshvara market, the fire reached as far as Bhiksukiparaka and great buildings were burnt. The fire as it were purified the land, by burning the great buildings which had been touched by Dombas and Chandals ^[6]. Hassan writes most mohallas of the city were destroyed due to fire. Raja Nand Gupta by making constructions resettled the city ^[7].

During Kalasa's time (1063-1089) his unnatural son in his

envy caused fire to be laid to their residence by night. By this fire the town of Vijayeshwara was laid to ashes along with the stores of king. Soldiers even lost their clothes to fire as they had gone to sleep at night. The king lost everything and it seemed that he had also lost his senses as Kalhana writes that when king saw fire he rejoiced in joy. The queen had to sell a linga made of jewel to get food and clothes for their servants and repaired houses by the wealth recovered from the site of burned palace ^[8].

There was again a great fire during the reign of Uccala (1101-1111). The whole town of Andikshetra which had been burnt down was built anew. From the details narrated by Kalhana it seems that city was destroyed by five fires caused by Kayasthas (royal relatives and obnoxious ministers) ^[9].

Sussal's reign (1121-1128) was marked by a number of fires mostly either directly set by Damaras or indirectly caused by their disturbances. Once when people had taken refuge in a temple owing to threat of Damaras suddenly one of the Damaras set on fire the wooden gate of temple as he wanted to burn a personal enemy who was inside and foolishly set on fire that place; located near Vijayeshwara, Vijbor. Huge number of people perished in fire. Kalhana writes that there arose a mighty cry on all sides. The sky was obscured by the masses of smoke, such was the intensity of fire that when fire was consuming women their brothers, husbands, parents and sons had closed their eyes from fright. Kalhana's description of this event points towards that it was a multiple disaster. Large number of people were killed and adding the killings done by Damaras; a hundred channels flowed forth the effluvia of dissolved blood, marrow and fat and the horrible stench spread for many Yojnas. At Chakadhara such sufferings were caused by fire that it resembled the end of the world. Kalhana writes that thousands of towns and villages became deserted. Many corpses were thrown in Vitasta and many which could not be carried were burned ^[10].

Again in Sussal's reign in a fight against Damaras one official of the state named Sujji Damara set on fire houses on the bank of Vitasta ^[11]. Lavanyas too repeatedly burned houses in city ^[12]. When the great fight commenced against Damaras, the Damaras set on fire the houses at Kasthula (on left bank of Vitasta between Katkhul and Shergarhi). Whether this fire was fanned by the wind or whether it arose from lightning it spread unchecked and in a moment set the whole city on fire. Such was the fire that neither the earth nor the horizon nor the sky could be seen. The water of Vitasta was heated by the flames which again and again fell into it. Kalhana writes that with in an instant the whole city resembled like a burned forest. The condition of King was such writes Kalhana that one could ever have looked upon him without tears ^[13]. As all the grain stores were destroyed by the fire, a hard and terrible famine struck the whole land. This is only kind of example in Kashmir when famine was caused by fire. The savings of people were exhausted and outside city Damaras cut their supply line to city. Even nobles had to perish in this famine as they could get no help from royal household. Such a large number of people perished that people crossed at that time the bridges over streams holding their noses on account of stench produced by the decomposing corpses which had become swollen by lying in water. The ground turned white by skulls

and bones. The famishing people who could scarcely walk and whose tall bodies were emaciated by the sun heat appeared like scorched wooden posts ^[14].

Conclusion

Kashmir has a long history of fires. The prime cause being the building material used i.e. 'wood' because of its easy availability and earthquake vulnerability. The sources mostly refer to fires of Srinagar city and the vulnerable area historically we come to know is 'Sheri Khas' area. Fires have occurred in Kashmir mostly because of human interference either directly or indirectly. Being a cold area, the use of fire for heating purposes would cause fire. In the same way in case of fighting wood being vulnerable would catch fire. Also the use of fire as weapon would cause fires in Kashmir. There was no concept of fire management in Kashmir and fires once set were impossible to stop and thus would gut entire areas.

References

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