



A century of disasters; famine, earthquake and floods in late nineteenth century

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Abstract

The history of Kashmir is full of disasters in the shape of floods, famines, fires, epidemics and earthquakes. In the late nineteenth century within a short time period of 17 years three massive disasters occurred which put both a long term as well a short term impact on the history of Kashmir. The present paper looks into the primary sources of the said period to find out the course of the; famine of 1877-78, the earthquake of 1885 and flood of 1893. It then focus on the impact of these disasters on the Kashmir; the lives lost and the economic impact of these disasters in the shape of damage to structures, cattle wealth, revenue loss. It then focusses on the response of the state *viz a viz* these disasters. Finally the researcher looks in what ways these contributed positively in the history of Kashmir i.e. how the loss caused by these disasters made State to take concrete steps to contain the damage that might be caused by the recurrence of similar events.

Keywords: famine, earthquake, flood, Kashmir, disaster

Introduction

Kashmir has a long history of calamities and disasters. Right from the very beginning these events took place and indeed they are an inseparable part of Kashmir History. The causes for these disasters are both natural as well as anthropogenic. The shape, size and position of valley make it prone to earthquakes, floods, famines, fires and epidemics. Though every century witnessed these types of disasters but what was interesting that in a period of only 17 years 1877-1893 Kashmir witnessed three massive disasters which occurred in a sequence; Famine in 1877-1880, earthquake in 1885 and flood in 1893. Though earlier too such events had taken place but never had such a devastation taken place within a short span of two decades. Another important point to note is that it was the same time when British were pressing hard on Maharaja to let them enter Kashmir and establish the Residency in Kashmir. This meant not only was continuous pressure to do more on state and administration but also more knowledge was now available to confront disasters.

The Famine of 1877-80.

The weather was behaving quite unusually in these years. There was first scarcity of rainfall in 1877, it was followed by a continuous cloudy and wet period and then a continuous rainfall for 110 days right at the harvesting time, accompanied by an untimely snowfall^[1]. Thus the cultivators were beaten by weather but there was an even bigger cause of this famine and it were the anti-peasant policies of the State and the administrative mishandling of the calamity^[2]. There was delay in harvesting the crop and it was because of the State policy that peasant could not cut and stack the crop unless it was measured by officials^[3]. The officials would delay this measurement as they wanted to make some money out of this in the form of bribe and this thing led to delay in measurement^[4] when crop was lying in the field proved detrimental when an unusual rainfall and untimely snowfall occurred. The peasants could only shift their crop when massive

devastation to crop had already occurred and it coupled with the situation that crop was gather right when rain was falling and it remained in this shape for a long time rotting it to bottom^[5].

In the winter of same year animals began to die and next Spring,^[6] at the time of sowing seed for Kharif crop of 1878 season, seed was nowhere available and at the same time Wazir Panno, the infamous governor of Kashmir made his infamous order of house to house search for crop^[7]. Such was the trust deficit that the peasant instead of handing over the crop thought it better to dump the crop with their own hands and made an act of self-destruction^[8]. Thus when no crop was sown, there again was unusual act of weather in the shape of extreme dryness due to which Rabi crop and fruits were damaged and in the same summer people began to die for the want of Crop^[9]. It first started with upper areas and in the second phase people from the lower areas, of the Srinagar city began to die^[10]. Those who wanted to escape the death and run to other parts of India, were stopped from doing this under the rule of Rahdari, thus people died everywhere; in their houses, in streets, near administrative centers, in crop fields and on mountains^[11].

The situation remained same as the administration did not let any sort of information diffuse to the rest of world. But somehow it got diffused and the British began to take interest^[12] and meetings were held with Maharaja and food began to be imported from Punjab. But the greedy administrators did not let it function smoothly and tried their best to make money even out of this relief work^[13]. Though Maharaja travelled to Kashmir in June 1880^[14] but till then the damage was done. Steps were taken to sow crop on unusually bigger area^[15] but the loss of man power and effect on psyche did not let famine to disappear. It continued to reign high and only showed the exhaustion by March 1880^[16]. This famine is a landmark in Kashmir history and it caused immense damage to Kashmir primarily in the shape of human lives. Estimates vary but even if the lowest figure is taken still it

was a massive disaster. The secondary impact of disaster were the economic loss and agriculture and trade came to a standstill and employment opportunities became very less. The disaster put a permanent mark on history as the unavailability of grain was the main cause so a New Settlement under Walter Lawrence took place which corrected the earlier disastrous measures of the State viz a viz subjects [17]. Then the road connectivity began to be looked for seriously and the construction of Jhelum Valley road started which made import of food very easy and though scarcity did occurred even after this many times but the road connectivity did not let these turn into disasters.

Earthquake of 1885

Not more than half a decade had passed after the disaster of 1878-80 Kashmir was struck by another massive disaster in the shape of a massive Earthquake. Unlike other disasters earthquake gives very short time to people to run away and respond, thus within a fraction of seconds thousands were dead and enormous property raised to ground. The causes of earthquake are natural and Kashmir is situated in Zone V of geological classification of earthquakes which is prone to disastrous earthquakes [18]. Another important factor which contributed in making it a massive disaster was the too much rainfall that had occurred in months prior to the earthquake thus soil had too much water in it and it made it loose which made it easy for the earthquake to raise down the buildings [19]. Further addition to damage was made by Kangris/fire pots which turned upside down by the shock and caused the houses to catch fire [20]. It occurred on 30th May, 1885. Its epicentre was near the Tantripur village at latitude 34.7' and longitude 74.35'25" [21]. It occurred on 15th Shaban, Shab-e-Barat at 3 O' Clock [22]. It lasted for seven seconds [23] and there was total chaos and confusion and at the very first jerk all the houses in Sopore, Baramulla, Bangil and Krohen collapsed, besides land in these areas cracked due to severe floods. At some places green sand and green water appeared [24]. Arthur Neve writes that on a cold drizzly dawn, a slight shock was followed by a most severe rocking and twisting movement. Even after one and a half minutes noise and shaking continued making it louder due to cracking of roofs, windows and doors. The sun had not yet made its appearance, there were screams of anguish from thousands of voices in city [25]. It was accompanied by a number of aftershocks and for some time their frequency per hour was increasing and gradually it started decreasing but continued for about a year [26]. The earthquake was very disastrous in nature and as there was no way to communicate and know the exact extent of damage it came to be known only after a few days had passed and it was known that it had done immense devastation to the northern parts of Kashmir though shocks were felt all over the Kashmir. The news was that entire Baramulla and Sopore towns had been wiped out [27].

Table 2: The reading at Shergarhi flood gauge daily around 8:30 A.M from 18th – 31st July 1983.

Date	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31
Gauge Level (feet)	13.5	14.3	24.3	26.9	26.0	25.7	24.1	19.8	18.0	14.9	14.7	13.9	13.0	12.6

Source: A.A.R.1893-94, p. 96.

The earthquake also caused great damage in city the Royal palace at Srinagar, army barracks in the cantonment also came down burying many army men and 60 cavalry horses [28]. Large landslips occurred at the village of Ladura, near Baramulla [29]. At Pattan an old temple in ruins was completely destroyed. There was a large fissure on ground near Pattan [30]. No exact information about the damage caused by it is known and the figures provided by sources vary. Hassan writes that some 35,000 lives were lost, out of which there were 1500 humans, rest were horses, cows and oxen [31]. Dr. Mitra gives a figure of 3390, besides 60,000 houses and huts were destroyed, and large number of sheep and cattle were killed [32]. Neve estimated that over 3000 persons perished, 10,000 houses were wrecked and 40,000 more cattle and sheep killed [33]. Jones gives a figure of 3000 [34]. Thus it seems that the earthquake may have taken around 3000 lives. The earthquake led to total administrative failure and it was seen nowhere as roads were blocked and even government buildings were damaged so people resorted to self-service and would themselves dig and lift roofs to release victims [35]. People temporarily migrated to open areas and erected temporary shelters in plains [36]. Such was the devastation caused by Earthquakes that when missionaries like Neve and Hinton Knowles went out to help the affected they could not find a single building which was not damaged and they too erected temporary shelters to work [37]. After the earthquake a sum of Rs. 20,000 were allotted by Maharaja as relief to people and it was paid both in cash as well as kind for repair and maintenance of households. As damage had occurred in the northern areas so there was a tax exemption of two lakh rupees. In the same way the tax on timber was also exempted in the Baramulla and Sopore areas [38].

Flood Of 1893

After a gap of 8 years after the earthquake of 1885 another massive disaster struck Kashmir it was the flood of 1893. The flood was caused on account of a continuous rainfall of 59 hours from July 18, Tuesday 4 A.M to July 21, Thursday 3 P.M. The rainfall was quite heavy on 21 and there was also snow melt which generated enormous amount of water and drowned many areas all over the Kashmir. The flood like situation occurred on 20th and next day there was a massive disaster. The total rise being 27 feet above the lowest water mark at Shergarhi flood gauge or to the highest of 5210 feet above the sea [39].

Table 1: Rainfall registered at Srinagar during week preceding the flood of 21st July 1893.

Month/July	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	Total
Rainfall in Inches	0.3			.72	.92	2.12	1.30	5.09

Source: A.A.R.1893-94, p. 96.

64,804 in land revenue alone and 25,426 acres of land under crops were submerged [41]. The flood caused no damage to life in lower areas but crops were damaged. In hills damage was done to human as well as animal life. The flood mainly washed herdsmen

and shepherds who at night time gather their sheep and cattle near streams. 32 men lost lives, out of which 21 died by drowning, 5 lost life by falling of a tree above Gulmarg and 6 were killed by the falling of a house. Among those killed 17 were from Srinagar. A total of 2225 houses were destroyed and no accurate estimate of sheep and cattle killed in upper areas was made. The total loss of horned cattle was 329. In Kashmir 2225 houses were destroyed^[42]. Floods also destroyed lake gardens around Dal, on around 40 acres^[43]. Great pains were taken by Revenue Member, Settlement Commissioner and Governor to carefully investigate and ascertain the quality of damage caused to cultivation. Thus through their hard work a most accurate statement of remissions and suspensions of land revenue was prepared^[44]. Maharaja Pratap Singh after returning from Gurez reached Srinagar on 25th July and on 31st July a meeting was held. On August 16, State Council sent minutes of meeting, decisions arrived to Resident^[45]. Maharaja sympathised with people and asked administration to focus on plugging breaches, estimate the cost to rebuild Srinagar bridges^[46] and the services of Mr. Price, assistant engineer were also made available. People were made to work on embankments and were paid for this work^[47]. Police was put on the job to make list of damaged houses and forest

department was asked to make people wood available and raise restrictions for two months As flood had destroyed the vegetable gardens so Mir Behri cultivators were exempted from *Begaar* to work on these gardens. There was also the price rise as food items became difficult to acquire^[48].

Relief, Rehabilitation and Reconstruction

The post flood activities of State remained confined to connectivity and thus preference was given to reconstruct the bridges washed away by water. Machinery and experts were called to do this job at the earliest hour but still it got delayed. The State had also to revise the budget. The original budget estimate sanctioned for the year amounted to Rs. 1, 72, 609. But it increased to Rs. 2, 30, 322 in Kashmir division. Also for the Jhelum Valley road amount of Rs.1,87,700 were sanctioned, thus the revised budget for Kashmir was Rs. 5, 28, 212^[49]. To construct six City bridges Rs. 30, 000 were also sanctioned for construction. These were constructed within one year and total expenditure was Rs. 44, 346^[50].

Following Table No. 3 gives the remission of land revenue that State took as a step to relieve people of some burden flood had put on them.

Table 3: Remission of land revenue

S.no	Tehsil	Area submerged acres	Revenue remitted [rs. Imperial]	No. Of houses destroyed	No. Of cattle killed	R
1	Cherat	520	238	115	14	
2.	Ullar Vehu	748	685	239	2	
3.	Dachanpura	126	6	47		
4.	Deosar	60		21	113	
5.	Anantnag	111	22	91		
6.	Sri Ranbir Singh Pura			10		
7.	Sher Khas with Mir Behri	3944	12638	944	17	17
8.	Donsu	600	1562	14	8	
9.	Ichh Nagam	753	1683	34		
10.	Lal with Naid Khai	10110	25468	595	68	
11.	Behru Magam	1969	5278	92	6	
12.	Krihum	2438	5004	8	17	
13.	Hamal Zaingir	3270	10881			
14.	Uttar Machi Pura	744	1339	15	84	
	Total	25, 426	64, 804	2, 225	329	

Source: *G.O.I, Extl. B, Jan, Nos 360-362, p.375.*

Conclusion

Within short span of 17 years three massive disasters struck Kashmir, further there was ranging the Cholera epidemic all these years. It put tremendous pressure on State exchequer. Not only was there enormous loss to life but all the economic activities came to standstill for a long time in all these years. The modern period of Kashmir is thought to have begun in this same time. Continuous occurrence of disasters gave State all the experience to look for the means to overcome the disasters. Thus steps were taken to connect the Valley to outside Sub Continent, so that food could be made available. A meteorological observatory was made to work in 1893 and in 1902 the Seismological observatory began its work with latest equipment, a seismograph was made available^[51]. In the Same way steps were taken to save City from floods and greater attention was given to embankments and then a major step was taken to construct a flood spill channel to take water safe off Srinagar and save city from floods^[52].

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