

A Man-Made Tragedy of Errors

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Forest fires in Uttarakhand have made headlines in recent days. But they are not a new phenomenon either in the state or elsewhere in the country. In fact, the establishment of scientific forestry in India was driven in part by rampant forest fires in the country.

After the devastating forest fires in Karnataka's Shimoga district in 1860, a British scientist approached the government to set up a forest department, considering the water and food requirements of a tropical country and also the benefits such a department would bring to the British Raj and its economic agenda which included large-scale infrastructure development. Accordingly, the Imperial Forest Department was set up in 1864, headed by a trained German forester Dietrich Brandis. The Imperial Forest Service, the predecessor of the Indian Forest Service, was constituted in 1867.

Fire, as a management tool, has been neglected in this country especially since independence. Now, with the threat of climate change looming large, forest fires will play a key role, accentuating its malefic effects – a disaster is waiting to happen. This disaster will not only threaten the bio-diversity of the forests and endanger wild animals but also disrupt the water cycle and the supply of other life sustaining resources.

There have been rumours in social media that the forest fires in Uttarakhand are the handiwork of some people who have lost power in the state. Others say the timber mafia is responsible. The truth lies somewhere in between. But the root cause of forest fires are always man-made – negligent staff and policy paralysis. This writer was responsible for setting a national programme for forest fire management during 1998 and 2004, when the BJP-led NDA Government of Atal Bihari Vajpayee was in power.

Forest fires are largely lit by locals. They spread because of a lack of quick response and alertness on the part of forest officials. These fires not only destroy the wild animals, make the soil feverish and burn down trees but also kill the lifelines of the region. A forest fire in Uttarakhand affects not only the state but the entire Indo-Gangetic plain which is the granary of India.

This tragedy of errors is the result of the country's politico-bureaucratic culture of governance, in which public interests are sacrificed at the altar of self-aggrandisement, inflated egos and vested interests. This is a failure of not only the Indian Administrative Service but also the Indian Forest Service which has proven to be unworthy successors of the old foresters.

This writer was the first to rake up the issue of forest fire management with the Vajpayee Government which took the issue seriously. At that time also forest fires were raging in Uttarakhand and both the prime minister and deputy prime minister were concerned.

Upon closely studying the issue, it was found that we were distributing minor equipments for the last 25 years and there were two grounded helicopters in the air operation wing. The lower staff was always for maintenance of helicopters, as it was a source of revenue for them. We convinced ministers in various governments that the Piper Seneca aircraft was not only dangerous to fly but had no utility in Indian conditions. In 1994, Piper Seneca aircraft VT-EOZ, operated by the Union Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change, had disintegrated in air, while on its way to Delhi from Bhopal, upon encountering bad weather. All four occupants on board were killed.

It was clear the India needed country-specific steps and programmes. So, the Piper Seneca aircraft were grounded and an Integrated Forest Protection scheme was started targeting the whole country. According to the Forest Survey of India, a conservative estimate of the loss incurred was about Rs. 370 crore.

The guidelines sent to all states included preparation of an Annual fire management plan by each division before November every year. This plan was to include the establishment of a forest fire monitoring centre, the cleaning of fire lines and assessment of the fuel load.

Also, instead of hiring one or two fire watchers, the states were told to sign agreements with the village forest management committees who would protect the forest from fires for a payment – about 25 per cent of the payment was to be made before December and the rest at the end of fire season.

Each division was also to have early warning system in place. Before being promoted to Inspector General of Forest, this writer and his team ensured that the Forest Service, with the help of NOVA satellite, had set up an early warning system by linking the fire incidents through messages to the fire monitoring centre of each forest division.

Another measure listed in the plan was the revocation of Section 79 of the Indian Forest Act, 1927, so that all those who benefit from the forest shall be bound to help in fire management. We asked the States to empower forest officers to requisition vehicles and manpower like it is done during election time or direct the District Magistrate and Superintendent of Police to help with fire protection. But it took another several years for the Forest Survey of India to get the funds for this plan, as many people in the Environment Ministry played politics.

In the present context, the government must explain if the annual fire management plan and early warning system were in place, and if the joint management committees and van panchayats were taken into confidence.

A forest fire is a man-made disaster and the locals, their leaders and forest officers are responsible. The fires are a clear signal of impending catastrophe that may engulf this country due to climatic vagaries. A study done by the Indian Council of Forestry Research and Education had already warned of forest fires becoming a major problem. The incumbent Environment Minister must take innovative steps to fix responsibility and chalk out a long term strategy of involving people in fire management as envisaged in 1999 guidelines. He must also involve genuine experts in the process.

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