

## Natural Disasters in Medieval Kashmir (16<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> Centuries)

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**Abstract:** Kashmir has been the victim of natural disasters since the time immemorial. It is a seismic prone region and has been hit by severe earthquakes. It has witnessed disastrous floods, huge snowfalls, fires, famines and plagues. The available literature on the natural disasters during 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century Kashmir is very scarce. The recent floods and earthquakes underlined the need for collecting information about the natural disasters in the medieval period. The present paper is an effort in this direction to made intensive search of the sources available dealing with the natural disasters in medieval Kashmir. In this paper, attempt has been firstly made to understand the meaning of a natural disaster and then it deals with some of the important disasters and the perception of historians dealing with them.

**Key Words:** Kashmir, natural disaster, earthquake, famine, fire, plague.

### 1. INTRODUCTION:

A 'natural disaster' is a major adverse event resulting from natural processes like floods, earthquakes, fires, drought, epidemic, crop failures, plague and other geo-environmental processes. A natural hazard becomes a disaster only when it causes loss of life or property and typically leaves some economic damage in its wake, the severity of which depends on the affected population's resilience or ability to recover and also on the infrastructure available. A natural disaster can neither be stopped, nor be slowed, and nor be diverted. Hazards are part of our life. Man cannot live totally in a risk free environment. Kashmir valley is seismically active earthquake prone area. It has witnessed earthquakes (big and small) throughout history. Apart from that, majority of the houses in Kashmir were built of wood and they witnessed fires time and again in history which resulted in a huge loss of men and property. Kashmir also witnessed crop failures a number of times and apart from that the Medieval Indo-Persian historians especially Jahangir also mentions of a plague and also some European travelers in their accounts mention of some famines and some serious diseases. Some of the important natural disasters that occurred during the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century Kashmir are as under:-

### 2. Earthquake of September 24, 1501 A.D.

As far as earthquakes in medieval Kashmir are concerned, the Sanskrit as well as Persian sources does not mention about the magnitude and frequency of earthquakes because Geological sciences were not developed to the extent that magnitude of the earthquake could be measured. It was only in the 1930's that Charles F. Richter, a California seismologist, introduced the concept of measuring the earthquake magnitude. However on the basis of damage caused by the earthquakes in medieval Kashmir, we can just imagine how serious the earthquakes occurred. Among the most severe earthquakes in Medieval Kashmir is the earthquake of September 24, 1501. Although we do not have data available about the number of persons died or of the number of houses and other structures damaged but on the basis of available information it is predicted that it was very disastrous and caused huge damage to property and human life of Kashmir. The shocks of earthquakes continued for the next three months which created fear of death among the natives of Kashmir.

Pir Hassan Shah in his *Tarikh-i-Hasan* records that, "On September 24, 1501 A.D. during the reign of Sultan Fateh Shah, a severe earthquake occurred in which the creatures of God lost their lives and houses were razed to the ground. The earth and the sky remained in tumult for a period of three months, then after three months normalcy was restored" (Hassan Khuihami, p. 216; Iyenger, Sharma and Siddiqui, 1999, p. 186).

### 3. Earthquake of September, 1555

Among the earthquakes of Medieval Kashmir, the year 1555 A.D. is regarded as the most terrible year in Medieval Kashmir due to the occurrence of a destructive earthquake which caused huge loss of life and property. This earthquake continued for seven days. It was so terrible that it caused holes in the ground. The houses fell into these holes and people were able to come out of the houses only by breaking the roof. Some houses fell into the river

Jhelum and because they were all made of wood they flouted for a long. Haider Malik says that it brought to mind of the inhabitants of Kashmir, the memory of the “Dooms Day”. Among the most terrible happenings, is a tradition that in Bijbehara of Maraj division, there were two hemlets Hasanpur and Husainpur, which were situated on both sides of the river of the town (*Bihat/ Jhelum*). Both these hamlets changed their sides from left to right and from right to left at midnight, with their houses and residents (Haider Malik, MS., 158ab; Iyenger, Sharma and Siddiqui, 1999, p. 188). Nizamuddin Ahmad also mentions of a Village ‘Mardar’ which is situated below the foot of hill in which sixty thousand people perished due to land slide (Nizamuddin Ahmad, II, 1875, p. 622). *Tarikh-i-Farishta* also mentions this and says that about six hundred people lost their lives due to the occurrence of landslide which was caused by the earthquake (M. Qasim, II, 1865, p. 359; Iyenger, Sharma and Siddiqui, 1999, p.187). Following are the views of the historians about the earthquake of September 1555:

The Sanskrit Chronicler Suka in *Rajtarangni* mentions, “In the month of *Asvina* of the year 30, (The year 30 is *Laukik* year used in *Rajtarangni* and the month *Asvin* corresponds to September, the corresponding year is 1555 A.D.) there occurred frequent earthquakes on account of the wicked acts of the King as if the earth suffered from the flatulency. The planet which causes calamity is assuaged by various acts, by gifts of land to independent people, by giving back to men their properties which had been robbed, and by like deeds. Now there occurred an earthquake at the second watch of night when all men were asleep, and it destroyed many people. It caused holes in the ground, and travelers going on their way were misled at every step. Houses fell into these holes at night and people, anxious to get out of their houses in the morning, issued by breaking through the roof. On this occasion many wooden houses fell into the water of the *Vitasta* (Jhelum), and when they had floated down for seven *kroshas*, (one *krosha* is equal to two miles) the people who were in them awoke and came out. The confusion caused by earthquake in two towns of Hastinapura and Hosainpura, situated at some distance across the river, can be seen even to this day. Pitiably cries of lamentation of the much afflicted people were then heard calling “O father!” “O mother!” “O friend!” “O brother!” in different places, which made the heart feel as it were struck by the thunderbolt. At this time the sky appeared terrible with claps of thunder, the movements of the stars were stopped, and the land was agitated like a ground on the waves. The mind of the people became troubled with the fear of the earthquake, and they felt no affection for sons or friends or wives or for good men or for kind hearted people or for any object whatever...The earth quake continued for several days, occurring several times every day, and all the people lived under canvas” (J.C.Dutt, III, 1887, pp. 380-82).

Nizamuddin Ahmad in *Tabakat-i-Akbari* mentions that, “In the year 962 H/ 1555 A.D. there was a great earthquake in Kashmir and many villages and towns were destroyed... In a village called Mardar situated at the foot of a hill, owing to the land slip about thirty thousand people perished” (Nizamuddin Ahmad, II, 1875, p. 622). Mohammad Qasim Ferishta in *Tarikh-i-Ferishta* says that, “In the year 962 H/ 1555, A severe earthquake occurred in Kashmir, many villages and towns were destroyed. On this occasion the hamlet of Nilu and Adampur situated on the side of the river *Bihat* with their bulidings and trees were being transported and appeared on the other side of the river and the village of Mawar which is situated below the mountain, due to falling of the mountain over it about six hundred people lost their life” (M. Qasim, II, 1865, p. 359).

Haider Malik Chadura in *Tarikh-i-Kashmir* narrates that, “During the reign of Habib Shah in the year 960 H. An extraordinary and unique earthquake occurred. It brought to mind the memory of the “Dooms Day”. Of the many uncommon occurances of this earthquake is, sinking of many houses under the ground. The residents of these houses came out through the openings of roof with which the people of Kashmir are accustomed. On all sides the ruins and debris of the houses were visible due to the shock of the earthquake. Among other extraordinary happenings, whose authenticity is on the narrator of this event, is a tradition that in Mauza (village) Bilarah (Bijbehara) of Maraj division, near the pass of NandMarg, there were two hemlets Hasanpur and Husainpur, which were situated on both sides of the river of the town (*Bihat*). Both these hamlets changed their sides from left to right and from right to left at midnight, with their houses and residents. Husainpur which was situated on the right side of the river in its place Hasanpur was transported and Hasanpur which was situated on the left side of the river (*Bihat*) in its place Husainpur was transported. Still the residents of the left side though reside on this side (right) cultivated their fields on the other side (left). Besides this reports of other earthquakes have also been reported from Kashmir in the same way. If the entire description is mentioned here it will appear like an exaggeration. The earthquake continued for seven days” (Haider Malik, MS., 158ab).

The later Indo-Persian historians like Narain Koul Ajiz, Khawaja Muhammad Azam Diddamari and Pir Hassan Shah also have the same narrative about this great earthquake. It looks they have consulted the works of previous authors and does not provide any new information. However, Khawaja Muhammad Azam Diddamari and Pir Hassan Shah verified the authenticity of this event narrated by 17<sup>th</sup> century historians by the cross cultivation of Hasanpur and Husainpur. Pir Hasan Shah writing in the 19<sup>th</sup> century says that even today the people of Husainpur cultivate their land in Husanpur and that of Husanpur cultivate their land in Husainpur (Hassan Khuihami, II, p. 243; Narain Koul, MS. 75b, 76a; Diddamari, MS. f. 94a).

#### 4. Earthquake of 1560-61

There is a passing reference in Suka *Rajtarangni*, who mentions that in 1560-61, during the reign of Ghazi Shah who ruled for two years only, "The King saw conflagrations in different directions and there occurred earthquakes" (J.C.Dutt, III, 1887, p. 387). Although it does not give us exact details of how many earthquakes occurred and how much damage does they caused. However, on the basis of information given in *Rajtarangni* it can be assumed that a number of earthquakes may have occurred throughout the year.

#### 5. Earthquake of 1569-77

Suka also mentions of an earthquake during the reign of Ali Shah (1569-77), with no specific year mentioned, it is stated, "The world showed symptoms of a calamity and trembled, as if unable to bear the weight of a famine..." (J.C.Dutt, III, 1887, p. 394). From this statement of Suka, it is assumed that famine may have been the cause of the earthquake.

#### 6. Famine of 1597

In 1597, a severe and devastating famine broke out. Father Xavier writes about the gruesome effects of the famine and says that, "The mothers were rendered destitute and having no means of nourishing their children, exposed them for sale in the public places of the city, moved to compassion by the pitiable sight, the father brought many of these little ones, who soon after receiving baptism, yielded up their spirits to their creator. A certain Saracen (Muslim), seeing the charity of the father towards these children, brought him one of his own; but the father gave it back to the mother; together with a certain sum of money for its support; for he was unwilling to baptize it; seeing that if it survived, there was little prospect of its being able to live a Christian life in that country. At day break, next morning, however, the mother knocked at the door of his lodging, and begged him to come to her house and baptize the child, having first obtained the consent of its father. The later, after it was dead, wished to circumcise it but for this the father would not permit but buried it with Christian rites" (Pierre Du Jarric, 1979, pp. 177-78).

#### 7. Plague of 1617 AD

In 1617 AD, a devastative plague broke out. Jahangir in his *Tuzuk* writes about the plague and says that, "The plague had taken a firm hold of the country (Kashmir) and that many had died. The symptoms were that the first day there was headache and fever and much bleeding at the nose. On the second day the patient died. In the houses where one person died all the inmates were carried off. Whoever went near the sick person or a dead body was affected in the same way. In one instance, a dead body was thrown on the grass, and it chanced that a cow came and ate some of the grass, it died, and some dogs that had eaten its flesh also all died. Things had come to such a pass that from fear of death, father would not approach their children, and children would not go near their fathers" (Jahangir, I, 1909, p. 442).

#### 8. Fire in 1619

Before Kashmir was freed completely from the plague, a fire broke out in the Valley in 1619 and Jahangir says that almost 3000 houses burnt down (Jahangir, I, 1909, p. 442). The historical Jama Masjid of Srinagar also got fire for which the historian Haider Malik Chadura and his father Malik Muhammad Naji were alleged for firing the mosque, because of him being the Shia and the Sunni people of the city suspected them as a reprisal for the destruction of the *khankah* of Shamsuddin Iraqi by the Sunnis during the reign of Mirza Haider Daughlat. The Sunnis made petition to Jahangir for justice. Jahangir ordered that Haider Malik and his father should rebuild the mosque out of their own expanses. They constructed the mosque as was ordered by the Emperor Jahangir out of their own expanses. This fact is supported by an inscription on the stone slab on top of the entrance gate of the mosque (Parmu, 2009, pp. 305-06).

#### 9. Famine of 1641

Again during the reign of Shahjahan in 1641, a great famine broke out due to the continuous and heavy rainfall. This famine completely destroyed the crops. The scarcity of food stuffs forced a number of inhabitants to migrate to other places. Lahore alone accommodated about 30000 people. Their hunger and wretched condition touched even Shahjahan and he gave them one lakh rupees in cash and gave orders to open up ten kitchens to provide free food for them (Lahori, 1868, pp. 282-83).

#### 10. Earthquake of 23<sup>rd</sup> June, 1669

Muhammad Saqi Mustaid Khan reports of an earthquake on 23 June, 1669 and says that, "report of an incident from Kashmir has been submitted before the King that on Wednesday 3<sup>rd</sup> Safar, 1080 H. (23<sup>rd</sup> June, 1669) an earthquake occurred in Kashmir from evening to the next morning. The buildings rocked like cradles but there was no report of any calamity" (Saqi Mustaid Khan, 1947, p. 55). Pir Hasan Shah also gives similar information about this earthquake. It looks that he might have only this source of information available about this event. He says that, "a

severe earthquake struck Kashmir which lasted from evening to morning. All the buildings of the city kept trembling but fortunately no causality took place” (Hassan Khuihami, II, p. 408).

### 11. Earthquake of 1678-79

“During the governorship of Ibrahim Khan, first of all heavy floods occurred which caused a lot of destruction. All the bridges of *Bihat* (Jhelum) River were destroyed. Houses got damaged. Crop fields and cattle were also affected. The floods were followed by calamity of a severe earthquake. In which houses were destroyed and living souls lost their lives. Due to the persistence of the earthquake for a long time people were shaken. Those who were affected by earthquake constructed their separate (new) houses. The chronogram of the earthquake is *taghyan-i-behad* (unlimited inundation), the earthquake was followed by severe flood” (Hassan Khuihami, II, p. 408).

### 12. CONCLUSION:

From the above discussion, we came to the conclusion that Kashmir had always been the region of natural disasters. The earthquakes, floods, famines, fires, plagues caused a huge loss of life and property of its inhabitants. The recent floods and earthquakes in the region further enhance the scope of the theme under review. It gives one insight about the natural disasters which had struck Kashmir time and again in history. There had been all possible measures taken on the part of rulers to recover and overcome from the disasters. For example after the famine of 1641, Shahjahan gave amount of one lakh rupees in cash and also ordered to open up free kitchens to provide food for the affected people.

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