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Malpa landslide: Historical aspect

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Abstract

Landslides are very common in hilly regions, particularly during monsoon. Landslides each year cause havoc but there are some incidents which get stuck to human psyche as they take a big toll on human resource and also let the people know how much they and their government are ready to face such havoc. Nature is always unpredictable. Malpa landslide is one of the worst hit disasters in Uttarakhand. The main victims of this disastrous landslide were kailash mansarovar pilgrims who had no idea what they will have to face on their journey.

Keywords: Chhani, consumption, fuel-wood, households, Lanchaan

Introduction

Landslides account for considerable loss of life and damage to communication routes, human settlements, agricultural fields and forest lands in India. Based on the general experience with landslides, a rough estimate of monetary loss is of the order of Rs. 100 crore to Rs. 150 crore per annum at the 2011 prices for the country as a whole (Disaster Management in India, MHA, Govt. of India, 2011). In India, excluding the permafrost regions in the north, about 0.42 Million km² areas of the landmass (12.6%) is landslide-prone which are spread over 19 odd numbers of States/Union Territories and are spreading over more than 65,000 villages in hilly/ mountainous areas (Fig. 1)

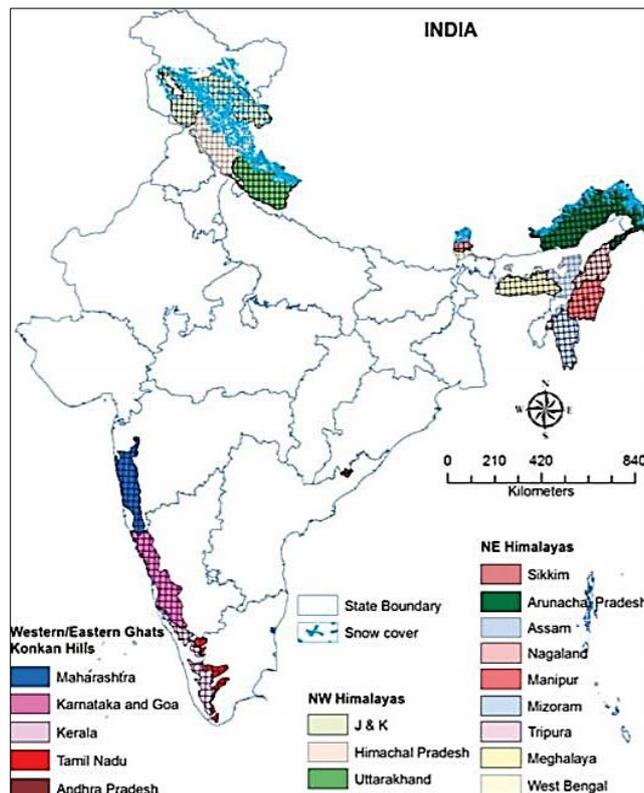


Fig 1: Major landslide prone areas of India (0.42 Million km²)

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Landslides are simply defined as the mass movement of rock, debris or earth down a slope and have come to include a broad range of motions whereby falling, sliding and flowing under the influence of gravity dislodges earth material. They often take place in conjunction with earthquakes, floods and volcanoes. At times, prolonged rainfall causes heavy block to the flow of river for quite some time, this formation of river blocks can cause havoc to the settlements downstream on its bursting. In the hilly terrain of India including the Himalayas, landslides have been a major and widely spread natural disaster they often strike life and property and occupy a position of major concern. One of the worst tragedies took place at Malpa Uttarakhand (UP) on 11th and 17th August 1998 when nearly 380 people were killed when massive landslides washed away the entire village. This included 60 pilgrims going to Lake Mansarovar in Tibet.

Main reasons behind occurrence of landslides are rainfall, cloudbursts, flash floods, deforestation, human activity, drainage etc.

Malpa village



Fig 2; Malpa in Uttarakhand map

Malpa is in the Pithoragarh district of Uttarakhand, then in Uttar Pradesh in Kali Valley of Higher Kumaon division of the Himalayas. Malpa village is located almost 50 km away from Dharchula in Pithoragarh district. Malpa village became a name synonymous with disaster when a series of massive landslide struck the region, early in the morning of 18th August, 1998. It is a small stop on the route of Kailash Mansarovar yatra, situated between Gala and Bundi.

The scale of disaster was so huge that the army and paramilitary forces were needed to conduct search operations to locate the missing people.

The landslide

The Malpa landslide was one of the worst landslides in India. On 18th August 1998 at 3:00 am massive landslide wiped away the entire village of Malpa in the Pithoragarh district of Uttarakhand in Kali valley of higher Kumaon division of the Himalayas. The rockfall started on August 16th bringing down huge rocks while initially killed three mules. A total of 221 people died, including 60 Hindu pilgrims travelling to Tibet as part of Kailash Mansarovar Yatra. The rockfall continued till 21st August. As the area lies in a seismic zone, the earthquake of 1979 and 1980 may

have been the underlying cause, as was attributed by a report of the Wadia Institute of Himalayan Geology.

The orgy of landslide in Malpa village of Dharchula tehsil between 12:30 and 3:00 am on the night of 17 August filled the morning of 18 August with an atmosphere of condolences and mourning. The twelfth team of Kailash Mansarovar Yatra had to move towards Bundi before 17th August, but due to closure of Malpa Bundi route, everyone had to stay in Malpa.

Near Malpa, situated at altitude of 2018 m., Kali River is extremely fast. Malpa was settled at a distance of less than 40 m. from the Kali River and from there towards Bundi at about 10 m. a small water stream (known as Malpa gaad) joins Kali River descending from the hills. This small water stream gave impetus in converting rocks and soil into debris in the landslide.

When local people used to go to the high hills of Malpa to collect wood, fodder or prey they used to see one and half to three m. wide cracks here for many years. According to local people, these cracks has helped in weakening of rocks as there was continuous seepage of water through these cracks and this somehow contributed to the landslide. It is undeniable that whether it is human intervention or rain both are capable of triggering landslides in these delicate areas.

Malpa village was a small stop on the route of Kailash Mansarovar yatra, situated between Gala and Bundi. During this, the 12th group of pilgrims of Kailash Mansarovar yatra was at this stop, which was the largest group till that time. Due to excessive rain, the local people also held at this stop. And both of these contributed in the increased number of people to get affected in this landslide.

Apart from pilgrims and departmental people many porters and local people were affected too and the actual number of the victims could not be known, especially the number of porters and local people.

Reasons causing Malpa landslide

The landslide generated around one million cubic metres of rock fall and debris flow. This debris partially blocked the Sharda-river. The landslide prevailed mostly due to steep, almost vertical slopes of rock above the valley.

In addition to the slopes of the proximity of the rock mass to major tectonic plates, major rainfall into the porous rock, and stress on the rock formations all contributed to the landslide.

Natural disasters in the area have been attributed to unplanned construction and urbanization on the non-trustful and un-consolidated materials produced by active faults and thrusts in various sectors.

With deforestation becoming the order of the day, minor landslides are occurring with ever increasing frequency. In 1984, a study conducted in the Himalaya revealed that more landslides took place in the deforested area than in the forested areas. The study found that

148 landslides took place on slopes where the tree cover was less than 40% and 118 landslides took place where the tree cover was more than 60%. Seismic movements are constantly taking place in the region. On an average about 200 earthquakes of smaller magnitude occur every year in the hills of Uttarakhand.

The Himalaya is a "young" mountain range, and is prone to natural disasters. Experts also say that they are one of the most erosion prone ranges. Intense rainstorms and earthquakes make these mountains prone to frequent

landslides. But it is intense rainfall that usually triggers landslides.

Prolonged downpour often reactivates old landslides. "The natural absence of vegetation in the higher reaches of the catchment areas also contributes to frequent landslides", said by experts.

Large scale deforestation and faulty farming practices have also led to soil erosion, according to local people. Says V Sharma, department of Geology, Delhi University. "It is not for the first time that these landslides are occurring. This time it has attracted attention due to the large scale of deaths and destruction". Human activities need to be controlled since the region is prone to earthquakes.

Experts say that the change in the cultivation patterns is another factor for landslides. A large number of people have shifted to terrace farming. Terrace farming requires vast tracts of denuded land and also lot of water. The crop pattern has also changed. Villagers prefer less soil-binding crops such as rice instead of millets, more suited to this area. Local crops like millets and maize have taken a back seat while commercial crops and water intensive crops like paddy are grown. This makes the hill unstable. Earlier, forests would have protected the strength of the soil, but due to excessive deforestation, the protective cover has been drastically reduced.

What could be done so we don't have to face such devastation again?

Though natural calamities are unpredictable and it is inevitable to stop them, humans can just take precautions and stay alert towards such calamities.

- The government must plan development activities to check landslides.
- Government need to train locals towards such destructive landslides, as locals are the most affected.
- There should be proper precautions to be taken if possibilities of some disasters are seen prior occurring
- Medical facilities should be all time provided.
- Communication needs to be strengthened.
- Farming practices to be checked upon and needs improvement.
- Deforestation to be controlled.

Affecting locals

The impact of a landslide can be extensive, including loss of life, destruction of infrastructure, damage to land and loss of natural resources. Landslide material can also block rivers and increase the risk of floods. But most of all it affects locals like none other. They are the ones who have to face the aftermaths of such disasters and it can take pretty long time for them to get normalized which is often paid no heed to.

People of Malpa village and all the victims of this Malpa landslide and the ones who lost their dear ones in this

disaster might be going on with life but it must have damaged them to the core.

Relief measures taken by government and local authority

Even though there was so much rush of political parties and people yet the relief measures were at their worst with no basic medical facilities to having no control room at such crucial point. Dead bodies were everywhere, some identified some unidentified. People lost their family members, friends and had no idea where their dead bodies were.

Just 46 dead bodies were found in the debris, out of which only 36 were identified. Amongst these, 9 were of tourists, 19 were of locals and 8 were of ITBP personnel and 10 were unidentified. When in Dharchula, the relatives, friends and local people were interacted then what came to the forefront was, after the disaster occurred the site was the center of attention as many politicians were continuously visiting the site but the very much needed relief work, facilities were not made available to the victims. People were not able to get into contact with their family, friends as the connection there was totally lost. So people had to go to Darchula in Nepal and use the communication facilities at international rates.

There was no way for communication and not even enough information about the victims and not even control room was there. No proper medical facilities helped the bad situation to get worsen as there was no bleaching powder or enough chemicals to save the dead bodies from getting rotten. This explains the medical facilities at such disaster prone areas which are basically far away from main cities/towns. Such disaster prone areas are always in need of medical emergencies.

Conclusion

Malpa landslide, as much as it is an evidence of how disastrous nature could be also is an evidence of why people choose to migrate from their ancestral places. As important these places are as cut off they are from main cities and towns. Malpa landslide exposed the real condition of medical facilities at such far off places.

Malpa being en route to Kailash Mansarovar yatra makes people around there dependent on it for their livelihood. So the aftermaths of this landslide on these people are very basic to understand. This landslide made people feel how helpless they were without proper medical facilities as people didn't get the dead bodies of their family members as lack of medical facilities let the dead bodies rot in open.

Precautions are as important as proper medical facilities at such disaster prone areas and also some basic knowledge about the precautions and need of improving methods of agriculture should be provided to local people at such places.

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DMPH / MD KMVN NTL / A.E. PWD DCA / Y.A. DCA /
 L.O. KMY 9th Batch at Budhi
 L.O. 12 Batch MPA

17/8/20

60 Yatries of 12th Batch of KMY held up
 at MPA camp due to land slides between MPA
 and Budhi. Needful may please be done
 to clear the road for safe passage of
 yatries fm. MPA to Budhi urgently. L.O.
 of 9th batch of KMY is requested to hold
 the returning yatries at Budhi camp.

1/11 1110
 @bman
 17/8

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