DISASTER MANAGEMENT : A CASE STUDY OF THE MAJOR FIRE AND RELATED INCIDENTS IN GOPALA TOWER AT RAJENDRA PLACE, NEW DELHI

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On 6th June, 1983, there was a major incident of fire in Gopala Towers, one of the multi storeyed buildings in Rajendra Place, which was described to be a building fire of an unprecedented dimension in the city of Delhi. Although, in this major fire incident, only one life, that of a fire officer, was lost, this event in itself was extremely traumatic and shocking for it exposed the shortcomings in our system of "Disaster or crisis management' of this type. The escape of nearly 150 remaining men and women trapped in this fire through an improvised "Rope and ladder' method of rescue operation, was nothing short of a miracle. For times to come, the operations related to "Gopala Towers" became memorable and, in all fairness, it should have served as a model for tackling similar incidents in the future. However, our experience of the 3 subsequent major fire incidents, i.e, at siddarth International Hotel, Ansal's building in Connaught Place and in Vigyan Bhawan which still stands gutted-indicate that till date we have not taken the lessons and no well thought out system for such contingency, which may be termed a kind of 'Disaster Manatgement' has been drawn up in Delhi.

Major disaster or a major incident:

A 'major disaster' is an accident of catastrophic proportions, such as a natural incident like an earthquake or an artificial one like Bhopal Gas tragedy. A 'major incident' is described as a situation arising with little or no warning, causing or threatening to cause death, injury or serious disruption of people and services, which cannot be dealt with by the public services operating under normal conditions and requiring the special mobilisation, organisation and coordination of those services and when necessary, of voluntary bodies.

By their very nature the 'major disasters' or 'major incidents' come as surprise, unnoticed, with little or no warning. For these reasons, the initial stages of such incidents are bound to be chaotic. It requires high degree of skill, organisation resources and coordination to bring under control such situations and to achieve successful conclusion.

Contingency plan

To bring about an order into the chaos, based on the experience of the similar previous incidents, a careful study and analyses of these events, the failures and shortcomings and suggested recommendation to over come them a well defined, but flexible contingency plan could be drawn up. The contingency plan, as the term suggests, has to be in the nature of a prepared scheme to tackle the unforeseen incidents and, in the benst possible manner, to coordinate control and monitor the involvement of the concerned departments and organisations. It is meant to ensure the most effective and efficient collective effort, to save life and alleviate sufferings, to protect property, to re-establish normal conditions as soon as possible and to enforce law.

The police as the coordinator

In all situations of major disasters and incidents, inevitably, there is multi departmental and multi-organisational involvement. However, the local police or the desingated specialised police being the main instrument to maintain law and order, becomes the nodal point and the coordinator in such crisis situations. Ultimately, it is for the police to control and coordinate the related activities of the other departments and agencies on such occasions. In the present day dynamic industrial and commercial activities, there are various socio-economic, political and environmental forces, besides many other factors,, such as legal, which make the task of crisis cooridinator or crisis manager very critical.

Before we decided to go into the actual stages of tackling any major incident like the Gopala Tower Fire, it may be appropriate to go into the facts of this particular incident. Based on police records and the related investigations which have since been filed in the court in the form of a charge sheet under section 173 Cr.P.C. on 25th July, 1983, briefly, the facts are as under:

An eye-witness account of the incident

On 6th June, 1983, at about 145 hours, an information was received at Police Station Karol Bagh that there was an out break of fire in Gopala Towers, Rajendra Place, New Delhi. An ASI of the Police Station was immediately dispatched to the scene of occurrence and the information was transmitted to the senior officers. An Deputy Commissioner of Police of the Central District of Delhi, I reached the spot immediately, and was followed by other senior officers including the Commissioner of Police, and the dignitaries like the Lt. Governor, Chief Executive Councillor of Delhi, the Members of Parliament and, subsequently, the Home Minister of India. Minute to minute account of this unprecedented fire was being reported to the highest quarters.

When I reached the spot, a portion of the 14 storeyed Gopala Tower building, situated on Plot No. 25, measuring 564.367 Sq. mtrs., was on fire. It was reported that nearly 400 persons including large number of women were inside the building and they were unable to come out as most of the stair cases, especially between 6th and 12th floor were blocked due to fire. The rescue operation had begun but the fire service was ill equipped for this incident. The fire tenders were unable to raise the water beyond the sixth floor since they were in possession of only one ladder which could take one hose upto 10th floor. The recently acquired high rise 'Simon Snorkel', it appeared, was being tested on the ground for the first time and it could not be put to its proper use.

During the operations, after nearly 2 hours, the fire seemed to be partly under control on the stairs which had already facilitated the evacuation of a large number of people. But, nearly 150 men and women who, instead of coming down had gone up on the terrace, over the 14th floor, were trapped. A number of those who came down were under severe shock and were provided medical aid.

Peak of Crisis: Responsnes

An extreme crisis developed when the fire fighting machinery failed to reach beyond the sixth floor while the fire was relentlessly extending on the floors above. The lifts had gone out of order long back, the stars had become totally non-functional and the fire almost gutted the seven floors downwards. Nearly 150 persons, including women, who had reached the top floor were in the imminent danger of being burnt alive. These people went to the roof top and mounted over the huge

concrete water tank in the hope that the water will give them at least some cooling effect. However, on account of the fire cascading over the rooftop, it was almost singeing these trapped people.

In an extremely desperate situation, from above the top of the water tank, some of the trapped people started throwing crumpled 'distress notes' requesting us to summon the services of helicopters to airlift them. Till then, there did not appear to be any other means to rescue these trapped people. In the absence of any well thought out strategy based on the previous experience, various suggestions were being made. One of the suggestions that cropped up was to collect fishing nets from the fishermen from the banks of Jamuna and hold them at a height on which these trapped could jump. Fortunately, this suggestion was not implemented since a fall from the 14th floor to the ground level could have caused deaths by shock in many cases even if they were managed to be hung up.

In response to 'distress notes' for helicopters, services of Indian Air Force was taken for evacuation through airlifting. One helicopter started hovering over the roof top and it came down to lift about a dozen persons. It was soon realised that the helicopter started fanning the fire and on account of its sucking effect, it really increased the fire from base. It was then decided to give a message to the "Air force control" to direct the helicopters not to come near the building and so the operation was stopped.

Ladder and Rope bridge

The fire was now cascading from the 12th to 14th floor of the building and leaping up towards the rooftop. The occupants were running for their lives and all of them took shelter above the concrete water tank. At this stage, the attempts to put up an improvised 'ladder and rope bridge' between Gopala Tower and the adjacent Pragati Tower succeeded. Some of th fire and police-men were able to reach the terrace of Gopala Tower, which was fortunately at the same height. There was intense heat and smoke all over which was preventing the trapped persons from reaching to the point from where they could cross over to the Pragati Tower. For the obvious reasons of height, these persons were almost scared to death and they did not want to cross over. Now, when the heat and smoke increased to an unbearable intensity, finding themselves almost on the verge of death, the trapped men and women, including a pregnant one, started the most difficult journey of their lives. One by one, nearly all the trapped persons crossed over and reached to the top of Pragati Tower walking on the ladder with the help of two ropes to support them.

In this completely improvised fire fighting/rescue operation, these occupants and visitors of Gopala Towrs survived through a miraculous escape. Everyone could come out of the Towers alive except a Fire Officer, Kishore Singh, Incharge Fire Service Station Moti Nagar, who was suffocated by flames while he attempted to rescue some trapped persons on the 12th floor. Kishore Singh became unconscious and he could not be brought out. His charred body was later recovered and identified with the help of his belt, pips and the name plate.

Preliminary investigation

Origins of fire

During the preliminary investigation it was found that on 6th June, 1983 at about 11.15 a.m., Mahinder Singh, an unqualified plumber and electrician who was working as a welder in the company, assisted by helper Sukh Pal, was summoned by Col. P.M.K.Kapoor, the Estate Manager. A parapet was being installed on the ground floor towards the office of 'Delhi Medical Centre' for protection from the rain water. The Estate Manager assigned the task of wlding to Mahinder Singh who started the work. Mahinder Singh, not being a qualified person, did his job carelessly and it caught fire. Later the welding machine was recovered from the ramp which was connected with the welding lead with a cable running through a window. The welding instrument was found lying near the feeder of the AC plant and the adjacent window was slightly ajar. Inside, there were highly inflammable materials like curtains, foam, paper, cardboards which caught fire and transmitted through the cotton lining of the AC duct. Like in many other cass of multi storeyed fires the AC duct in Gopala Tower fire as well, formed the conduit through which the smoke and fire travelled all over the building. The wooden partitions etc. also got completely gutted adding to the fire on all floors.

State of the building

During the inspection of the building it was found that the basement was being used as a godown, and there was a full-fledged Polyclinic operating on the ground floor. As per the documents examined then, both the basement and the ground floor were meant for parking. On most of the floors, it was found, the exit gates had been blocked either on account of other condemned usage or due to dumping of furniture and other items, in utter disregard to fire safety conditions.

The Chief Fire Officer who was examined later had stated that all emergency exit gates and staircases were completely choked at the ground level and there were hindrances and obstacles on each and every floor. Some of the occupants thought it prudent to jump down from the second floor as they found the ground floor stairs to be closed. Against the basic fire safety conditions, the wet risers on each floor were not charged and there was no one to operate the pump or the diesel engine. Many fire service inlets were closed by fixing plates permanently. At many places even the hose pipe nozzles, hose reels were not available. The entire fire instruments were totally unserviceable and they "also rendered the fire fighting machinery helpless. The ground floor being completely encroached upon by the builders, people had no place to run for safety. The entire mezzanine floor was unauthorised, not approved by the concerned Govt. agencies including the Municipal and the Fire.

Police response and legal action

Based on the preliminary investigation, by the next day, 3 persons namely Col. P.M.K.Kapoor, the Estate Officer, Mahinder Singh, the unqualified plumber and electrician and his assistant, Sukh Pal, were arrested while detailed investigation was set on foot to find out the others involved. The fire incident had created a major law and order situation in Rajendra Place for which a force of one platoon (nearly 30 policemen) was deployed round the clock by the Police. The area was cordoned off completely and the access/entry to the area, Gopala and Pragati Towers, was controlled. Special, traffic arrangements were also deployed. However, all these arrangements were preceded by a major chaos when thousands of on-lookers, interested persons, family members and friends of those trapped and present at Gopala Tower and around thronged the area. The problems were multiplied by the present and visiting dignitaries. There was complete dislocation of business and activities in the area for days to come. During the fire incident and after, a regular police post cum Information Centre was

set up near Gopala Tower by the police which handled the matters relating to the incident and coordinated.

On account of the proximity and some fire in the adjacent Pragati Tower as well, this building was also temporarily taken over by the police through a prohibitory order under section 144 Cr.P.C. This step led to some litigations in the future, which also needs to be taken into consideration while planning for such major incidents.

During investigation, it further revealed that this property was purchased by United Towers India Private Limited, in an open auction in December, 1977, the construction started in April, 1978 and completed in May, 1981. The company applied for a completion certificate and NOC to occupy the building, but, till the date of the fire, these certificates had not been secured by the Company on account of prolonged legal difficulties caused by altered usage. In the building there were 146 flats i.e., 13 on each floor and three on the mezzanine. Most of them were sold out to individual buyers but no regular leases had been signed with them. Most of the individual buyers had, in turn, let out their flats to different other companies while some of the flats were occupied by the owners themselves, including the flats on the ground, basement and mezzanine floors, from where the fire originated. 'Delhi Medical Centre', the Polyclinic on the ground floor actually belonged to the owners of Gopala Towers, M/s United Towers. It was later indicated during investigation that this place was approved as a car parking in the original building plans. The mezzanine floor was similarly created /misused putting up wooden roof etc. which had since completely burnt in the fire.

Based on the detailed investigations and collection of evidence relating to negligence which caused the fire, the Managing Director of the Company, Shri R.K.Gupta and another Director, Shri K.B.Kalra were also arrested. All of them (including the previously arrested persons,) were charged under section 285 (Negligent conduct with fire and combustible material), 336 (endangering life and pe4rsonal safety of others) and 304 (causing death by rash and negligent act) of the Indian Penal Code.

The judicial and administrative enquiries: Litgiations

At least 3 different committees were appointed to go into this incident, including 2 by the then Lt. Governor and 1 by the Supreme Court. The Lt. Governor Shri Jagmohan appointed a three member technical committee consisting of Shri P.S.Majumdar, Chief Engineer PWD Zone 1, Shri J.L.Varshney, Chief Engineer, PWD Zone II and Shri D.R.Ambawani, Deputy Municipal Engineer MCD to inspect the building and submit a report keeping in view the public safety. This committee submitted an interim report on 9th June, 1983 declaring the Gopala Tower as unsafe and dangerous and recommended its total demolition. Consequently, the Municipal Corporation of Delhi issued a notice for the demolition of the building fixing a time limit till 5.00 p.m. on 12th June, 1983, giving 48 hours to the occupants to take out their articles. The promoters of Gopala Towers filed a writ petition under section 262 of the Constitution with a prayer to quash the demolition ord3er and to direct the respondents not to proceed with the demolition. This writ petition was taken up by the Delhi High Court on 11th June, 1983 and after hearing the arguments the application for injunction was dismissed considering the fact that the life and the safety of the passers by and the public could not be kept at stake.

Aggrieved by this order, M/s United Towers India Private Limited the builders and promoters, went in appeal to the Supreme Court of India through a Special Leave Petition which came up for hearing before the vacation Judge on 3rd June, 1983.After hearing the arguments, from both the sides, an injunction order was given by the Court restraining the authorities from the demolition of the building. The Hon'ble Court also appointed a Committee consisting of Dr.O.P.Jain, Director Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi, Dr.H.U.Bijlani, Chairman, HUDCO and Dr.Badami, Director General, Building Research Institute, Roorkee, to assess the structural damages caused to the Gopala Towers and give their recommendations. The committee reported that the entire building need not be demolished and they recommended the removal of the masonry walls of 6,7,12 and 13th floors, the removal of debris from other floors and to conduct further tests such as 'ultra-sonic-thermogravimetric X'ray diffraction and metallographic, to ascertain the damage and strength of the structure. The court accepted the recommendations of this committee.

Taking cue from this order, one of the occupiers of the adjacent Pragati Tower moved the Supreme Court for the removal of the prohibitory orders imposed by the Police under section 144 Cr.P.C. Further litigations included another writ petition challenging the constitutional validity of an enquiry committee appointed by the Lt. Governor Delhi to go into the cause of fire.

The Lt.Governor also appointed three other Committees consisting of a Senior Engineer, Dy.Commissioner of Police and a Fire Officer for different shopping complexes of Delhi to inspect and report on the fire and other safety aspects. These committees inspected the buildings and submitted their reports within two weeks.

All these committees examined in depth the fire and other safety conditions of the high rise buildings of Delhi and they submitted exhaustive reports. The subsequent fire of Sidharth Hotel also led to Justice D.R.Khanna judicial enquiry. Another major enquiry was conducted by a Committee constituted for the fire incident in Vigyan Bhawan. The findings of all these committees and related investigations will definitely cover the crucial aspects of the management of the fire safety pre-cautions and will serve as guide for the Fire Disaster Managers.

Retrospection

With reference to the standard pattern of major fire incident Management

Delhi Police has prepared contingency plans for all major establishments which are supposed to be put into operation as and when the occasions arise. The Delhi Fire Service has also prepared contingency plans for fire fighting and rescue operations in the bigger establishments and buildings. Needless to say that the concerned agencies should have learnt much from the experience of the major fire incidents like Gopala Tower. However, the comparisons of the responses to these major fire incidents have indicated that many lessons are not easily learnt.

1. In all the major fire incidents, including Gopals Tower, Ansal's, Punchkuian Road Timber Market, Sidharth Intercontinental, Vigyan Bhawan, the 'initial chaos' persisted throughout the operation on account of the lack of clear-cut management in terms of control, resource mobilisation and coordination.

2. In Gopala Tower fire incident, the specialised agencies, namely, the fire service and the police, who were supposed to tackle the fire and related law and order situations, were being guided by the non-professionals. With the best of intentions and organising capacity, the non professionals could not possibly replace the professionals, the job being specialised in nature.

3. In Gopala Tower case the Air Force helicopters were pressed into service and raised the fire, almost turning the building into a massive furnace. It was reported in the Press and criticised. Yet, after couple of years in Ansal building fire helicopter was once again summoned creating similar situation.

4. In the over all administrative hierarchy, the Chief Fire Officer and the area Dy.Commissioner of Police may be considered to be middle level officers, but they are supposed to organise the actual operations. The Senior Officers and the political masters invariably take in control of the situation on the spot, adding to the chaos.

5. The respective roles of various Government agencies get completely mixed up and practically no system is evolved to organise the valuable services of the voluntary organisations. In Gopala Tower incident a large number of interested/ spirited individuals and officials participated in the operation. They could be better organised to take optimum advantage of them and to avoid chaos.

Aspects of managing a major incident

1. Contingency Plan

It should be a well thought out and practical manual covering all aspects of the management situations. In Gopala Tower crisis incident no such contingency plan had existed, hence never put into operation.

2. Command and Control

The Command and Control Officers need not be the top most officers. The Chief Fire Officer and the area Dy.Commissioner of Police should act as the Command Officers for such situations and they may be supported by the seniors and the juniors.

In Gopala Tower incident these two officers acted as the main coordinators as well as the functional command officers, but they were not formally designated commanding officers.

3. **Command base station and forward control**

Whereas the 'command post' could be the nearest police station or the fire service station where all facilities for resource mobilisation deployment and communication could be available, a 'forward control' has to be set up to direct the operations at the scene.

In Gopala Tower incident the Police Station and the Fire Service Station could not become effective base stations. There was some kind of forward control near the scene of fire but it only served to dilute the role of the base command without being effective as an actual operational control.

Incident Commander, Incident Coordinator and Administrative Coordinator

The Incident Commander is an officer in over all command of the incident and the incident Coordinator is an officer appointed by the incident commander having his position at the base station, whereas the Administrative Coordinator could be a Sr.Officer from the Administration to coordinate various activities of other departments, including assistance from the unrelated agencies and relief operations.

In Gopala Tower incident, the dynamic Ltd. Governor of Delhi was himself coordinating various activities and was actually helping in the fire fighting operations. Although it was remarkable on his part to have personally participated in the entire operation, it was not the ideal thing to happen.

Casuality/Information Bureau

Major incidents may involve deaths and injuries creating panic and generating over-whelming enquiries from the public. There should be a Central, well publicised Unit to handle such enquiries connected with the Police Controls, Fire Service Stations, hospitals and other emergency services. This bureau should be manned round the clock by responsible officers.

In Gopala Tower Incident, there was a common Police/Information/Casualty Post which became the main Inquiry Office as well as the Centre of various activities. Under ideal conditions the enquiry and the operational posts should be constantly in contact , but separately located.

A Police Post was set up near Pragati Tower, adjacent Gopala Tower, which became a mini Control Room and the central point for all kinds of operations and activities. Later, when prohibitory orders under section 144 Cr.P.C. was imposed and the 2 buildings were taken charge of by the police, the police post continued to play a very significant role. The inventory of all items in both the buildings were being prepared under the supervision of this police post which a manned round the clock. In addition, individual permissions to enter these buildings were being granted by this police post, who also coordinated the inspections by various Committees conducting enquiries, the visiting dignitaries and the press.

Media and information services

It is appropriate that the media and information matters are handled at the force or Administrative Hqrs. In respect of Gopala Tower incident there was a wide coverage through out the day by the national television, radio and the press. Although, the Lt.Governor himself briefed the media, the officers from various departments and the victims had lot to say. A more systematic media management could be done.

Logistics

In a major incident the following resource/services are to be organised:-

1. Personnel – the availability may be ensured only through proper deployment through assessment and planning, rosters of duties and assignment of work to each individual worker.

2. Transport – Personnel carriers, vans, coaches and specialist transports may be deployed as per the requirements. A Motor Transport Officer should plan the availability and deployment according to the requirements.

3. Equipment and Communications – machineries, office equipments and utility items required for the operations and technical services are to be organised.
4. Welfare and Liaison – for the services on duty, the normal catering requirements and emergency accommodation are required to be fixed. The liaison with other services and agencies is also an ongoing process.

In the matters of logistics there was no dearth of anything except the technical equipments for fire fighting. However, throughout the operations and even later the situation remained chaotic although, fortunately, only one life was lost and no major casualties occurred.

Evacuation, Searches, Hospitalisation, Rest Centres and Mortuary Sections

These are some of the basic stages of a major incident management operation. In Gopala Tower incident evacuation and hospitalisation was very swiftly done and the searches of the buildings was also systematically conducted. However, there was no need for rest centrs for the evacuees, uninjured or less injured, nor was there any need for a separate mortuary section. However, while tackling such situations, emergency hospital services are required to be strengthened and the above mentioned arrangements are required to be made.

Safeguard of property

The police is responsible for the identification and safeguarding of the unguarded property and they are expected to maintain records on them. In Gopala Tower incident the police did this job commendably and there were practically no complaints about theft of any valuable property.