

FOREST NOTES AND OBSERVATION

DEATH OF FOREST GUARD WHILE DOUSING FOREST FIRE

Death of Forest Guard named Murugappa Thammangulu of Moleyur Range, Bandipur National Park (Tiger Reserve), while dousing fire is extremely tragic and poses questions relating to preparedness of officials for firefighting. While fighting fire in Kalkere range on 18th February 2017 along with others, he was exhausted for lack of oxygen. He fell on the ground, engulfed in fire and died on the spot. His colleagues made unsuccessful attempts to pull him. They also received burn injuries. Others fighting fire in the area did not know this tragic incidence for some time. The department has to improve its communication system. The victim is survived by wife, who is pregnant. Homage is paid by all serving and retired members of Karnataka Forest Department and each one are coming forward with financial support to the bereaved family. Chief Wildlife Warden has proposed a compensation of Rs thirty lakhs and a job.

The fire flames release carbon mono oxide and Carbon di oxide, which lowers oxygen level and changes the direction of the wind. The place is filled up with thick smoke and persons do not have sufficient time to escape. Sometimes even wild animals are victimized in such circumstances. The area is covered with thick lantana growth and many a times it is difficult to make way quickly. The forest is dry deciduous type and is more prone to fire as compared to moist deciduous and semi ever green areas. The presence of lantana acts as fuel and poses bigger challenge.

In 1971, a Forest Guard was caught in flames, for lack of coordination with his colleagues, engaged in first burning of working Coupe in Mandagadde, Shimoga division. Later he succumbed to burn injuries. In yet another instance in 1989, a fire watcher was burnt alive in N Begur Range of Bandipur National Park while he was fighting fire along with 20 other watchers under the supervision of Range Forest Officer. After completing the task, they discovered a person missing, returned to fire ravaged area and located the burnt body of the victim on the top of the hill.

Controlling forest fire is the most important task, a Forest person has to perform. Regeneration of the forests is always impacted by frequent fire. Fire ravaged areas are occupied by invasive species such as lantana, eupatorium, etc. Though many preventive measures like control burning, fire line clearance etc are taken up, the forests are still ravaged by fire during dry summer months when there is huge debris and leaves lying on the floor.

Fire lines are cleared and burnt annually, well before the commencement of the fire season. Historically forests

were cut into fire blocks and the same lines are to be cleared and burnt annually. The purpose of making the fire blocks is to ensure that even if there is fire in one block, it does not cross over the adjoining block. With invasion of Lantana, the clearing and burning is discontinued. These fire lines have become redundant. Special rates may be provided for one time clearing and burning these lines to make them more effective.

Firefighting is always difficult. Forest Department recruits additional daily wages persons for patrolling the area and putting off the fire. If any dry deciduous forest is fully protected from fire in a particular year, the thickness of the debris in the following year increases and the area is at greater risk of fire.

The fire fighter should have goggle, fire resistant gloves, chest guard, headlight, water bottle and first aid kit for his own protection. They should also carry equipment for beating the fire. Although these equipment are being procured for last two decade, but the person leaves behind, when he has to negotiate the difficult terrain on foot to reach the fire place. The staff is generally used to do fire beating with the brooms of the fresh twigs.

Up gradation of firefighting skill should be in routine curriculum of staff. Controlling fire should not only be left to Beat Guards, but senior officers must visit the spot, guide and supervise the operation. All forest officers require very high level of physical fitness to accomplish such important task on a regular basis.

All forest fire is found to be manmade and there are hardly any cases of accidental fire due to lightening, rubbing two stones etc. Communities dependent on forests for grazing, collection of non timber forest products, fuel wood, small timber etc is generally responsible for it. Further forests are burnt for encroachments and claiming titles under Forests Right Act 2006. Forests are also burnt for taking revenge on forest officers. We only hope to check such activities with growing education and awareness among the communities residing in and around the forests.

Karnataka Forest Department must ensure to upgrade the skill of firefighting staff with regular drills, improved communication, regular exercise for fitness etc. Old fire lines covered by lantana must be cleared by sanctioning one time higher rate and there after it should be regularly maintained.

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