

MUNICIPALITY KNEW BRIDGE TRAGEDY LOOMED

Chief Officer's Questioning Exposes Brazen Neglect

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Ahmedabad/Morbi: Did the Morbi civic body officials know that bridge could turn fatal due to inferior renovation? A volte face by Morbi municipality's chief officer on Tuesday has exposed the civic body's brazen disregard for safety of people and led to the death of 135 people in the Victorian era suspension bridge collapse on October 30.

Hours after the collapse, chief officer Sandeepsinh Jhala had made an unconvincing claim that the municipality was not aware about the reopening of this bridge renovated by Oreva Group, maker of Ajanta clocks. Shifting the blame to the clock-maker, he had categorically briefed media persons that the company had neither obtained fitness certification



File Photo

nor any other permission to reopen the bridge for public. "Neither did company officially inform us about the material used in the renovation nor about the load-bearing capacity," he told journalists on Sunday evening.

However, during marathon questioning by police on Tuesday, Zala spilled the beans and said that the civic body was aware that a catastrophe was in the making if a large number of people visited the bridge. "We asked him if he was aware that the contractor had not taken permission for reopening. He admitted that no nod was taken

and that the renovation was not at all up to the mark," said a senior investigating officer. "Zala also admitted they were aware that using the bridge could turn fatal due to inferior renovation," the officer added.

Police also asked Zala to provide documents substantiating his claims and questioned his role in the repairing and reopening of the bridge.

On Tuesday, a team of cops visited Oreva office in Morbi and collected some 'important' documents regarding the bridge contracts. However, they refused to disclose details, even as call data records of all accused are under scanner.

Condolence meetings mourn loss of 135 lives

Ahmedabad: Civic bodies across the state held condolence meetings as Gujarat observed state-wide mourning on Wednesday to pay homage to the victims of the Morbi bridge collapse tragedy.

Chief Minister Bhupendra Patel was present at the condolence meet organized by the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation.

Flags were flown at half-mast at the state secretariat in Gandhinagar and other Gujarat government offices. All official and entertainment programmes were cancelled. The collapse of the bridge on Sunday evening claimed 135 lives.

Ahmedabad mayor Kirit Parmar said, "We organised a meet to condole the loss of lives in the tragic incident."

Similar prayer meetings were also held in other parts of the state. The decision to observe the state-wide mourning was taken on Monday in a meeting chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi to review the situation after the tra-



Condolence meeting in Rajkot

gedy. CM Bhupendra Patel had in a tweet said no official function will be held on Wednesday.

Prime Minister Modi on Tuesday called for a "detailed and extensive" inquiry into the Morbi bridge collapse tragedy and said its key learnings must be implemented at the earliest.

He had visited the collapse site and a local hospital where the injured have been admitted. He had also chaired a high-level meeting in Morbi.

Accused claims collapse 'God's will'; four remanded till Nov 5

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

Morbi: "It (bridge collapse killing 135 people) was 'bhagwan ki ichcha' (God's will)," a manager of the Oreva company that was responsible for the maintenance of the 140-year-old bridge, Deepak Parekh told Chief Judicial Magistrate M J Khan during court hearing where the accused were produced for remand.

Parekh is one of the nine people arrested on October 30.

While requesting for remand of the accused on Tuesday, assistant government pleader **Harshendu Panchal** argued that the contractors who had assigned the bridge's renovation job were ill-qualified. "We have also submitted before the court that bridge flooring was replaced by the Oreva group



The nine arrested by the Morbi police



told media persons.

During renovation, the wood of the flooring was replaced with aluminium sheets, a primary forensic report

submitted to the court in a sealed cover stated. The court was also apprised that the bridge was suspended on cable sans maintenance like oiling and that the cable was also rusted. The court sent Parekh, Dinesh Dave, Prakash Parmar and Devang Parmar on police remand till November 5. The FIR was also added with IPC section 336 and 337.

Never saw such influx of bodies: Crematorium staff

Morbi: Caretakers of crematoriums and graveyards in Morbi town of Gujarat said they never saw a huge influx of bodies in a short span of time in decades, which they witnessed in the aftermath of the bridge collapse tragedy that claimed 135 lives.

The British-era suspension bridge on the Machchhu river in the town caved in on Sunday evening, plunging people into the water below.

Sajid Piludia of Morbi's biggest graveyard for Sunni Muslims said nearly 40 members of the Muslim community lost their lives in the incident.

"Of them, 25 were buried here and another one at a nearby graveyard on Monday. This was the biggest tragedy after the 1979 Machchhu dam breach incident," he said. It all happened due to the negligence of the administration, a visibly upset Piludia said.

Yusuf Samada and Yunus

Shaikh, working as grave diggers at that graveyard, said they dug 14 out of the 25 graves from Sunday night till Monday evening to meet the sudden influx of bodies. "This was very unusual for us because we usually dig nearly 20 graves a month," he said.

Bhima Thakor, caretaker of a gas-run crematorium in Morbi town said he performed the last rites of 11 persons on two days — on Monday and Tuesday.

"Nine bodies were brought on Monday and two on Tuesday. Usually, only two to three last rites are performed in this crematorium every week. I have never seen such a high death toll in a short span in decades," Thakor said.

Dr Pradip Dudhreja, Superintendent of Morbi Civil Hospital said since the cause of the death of the Morbi tragedy victims was known (drowning), post-mortem procedures was not conducted on



Kin carry a deceased to a local crematorium

the deceased.

"A team of experts ascertained that the cause of death of all the 135 people was drowning and some died due to drowning and associated injuries," he said.

"Since the cause of deaths was known and there was nothing more to find out, post-mortem was not conducted on

the victims as recommended by a team of designated medical experts," Dudhreja added.

The caretakers of crematoriums and relatives of the deceased said the tragedy reminded them of the Machchhu dam breach incident of 1979 when thousands of Morbi residents were washed away

in flood waters.

Ramesh Patel, who lives near the hanging bridge, lost his niece and her three neighbours.

"Out of the seven people who came to my house to enjoy the holiday, four have died, including my niece. After learning about the bridge collapse, all of us rushed to the spot and saved nearly 60 persons. It reminded me of the dam breach incident. This was the biggest tragedy in Morbi after the dam breach," said Patel, who cremated her niece on Monday, a day after the incident.

Meanwhile, the National Disaster Response Force (NDRF) and other agencies continue to look for bodies at the site.

VVN Prasanna Kumar, the Commandant of the NDRF, said apart from drowning, people also died of injuries because "floor of the river was full of rocks".

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