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## Two Fires\*

On Tuesday, September 11, 2012, a horrific fire in a garment factory in the Baldia Township in Karachi killed at least 259 persons, male and female. As I read about it on subsequent days I was reminded of another fire that occurred a century earlier—to be exact, on Saturday, November 25, 1911—in New York City. It too was in a garment factory, and took 146 lives, mostly young females. Named after the shirtwaist factory where it occurred, it is known in American history as the Triangle Fire. To refresh my memory I took to the books, and soon realized that the Triangle Fire had a few lessons for the present day Pakistan.<sup>1</sup>

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The Triangle Waist Factory (TWF) was situated on the top three floors of a ten-storey building in the Washington Square area in Manhattan. The neighborhood was far from being a slum; it had several buildings with similar factories, but it also had a few mansions of the rich and some buildings of the New York University. TWF was owned by two Jewish men, Max Blanck and Isaac Harris, who were related to each other through marriage. They had immigrated to the United States only a couple of decades earlier, and through hard work as well as exploitation of immigrant labour, the two, by 1911, had become millionaires in garment industry. Their success had come in particular from the popularity of a new female garment called “shirtwaist,” i.e. a shirt or bodice that reached only to the waist and could be worn with any tailored skirt. It allowed more choice and freedom to its wearer while adding a modish flair to her otherwise more sober costumes. Shirtwaists were mostly made of sheer cotton fabrics, which, unfortunately, were also highly combustible.

Blanck and Harris employed close to 500 people in their factory, most of them newly immigrant Jewish and Roman Catholic girls and women from Russia, Austria and Italy. Though the women did the bulk of the work, they were not direct employees of the company. The owners found it more profitable to use contractors, who in turn hired and fired female workers as they thought fit while paying them a pittance compared to the value of their work.

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\* Written in October 2012, it was originally sent to the personal attention Dean Anjum Altaf at LUMS, who, with my permission, put it up on “The SouthAsianIdea Weblog.” <http://thesouthasianidea.wordpress.com/2012/10/16/two-fires/> Many readers alerted me to the typos and grammatical errors I had ignored in my haste. These have now been corrected, I hope.

<sup>1</sup>The following account is chiefly based on two books: (1) Leon Stein, *The Triangle Fire* (New York, 1962); and (2) Jo Ann Argersinger (ed.), *The Triangle Fire: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston, 2009).

A little over an year before the fire, the working women at TWF had made history by walking out and going on a strike to demand better treatment and wages and the right to unionize. Their cry was taken up by other similar workers in New York and a few other large cities. The all-male unions also supported them. Most interestingly, the lowly garment workers were also initially much supported by many of the local elite women, who were then waging a suffragette movement of their own. (American women had to wait nine more years before they got the right to vote.) The larger strike was successful in obtaining many of its goals, due to the willingness of its proponents and opponents to settle for less. But at TWF, the owners adamantly refused to make any concession. The TWF women held on to their demands for a while, but losing the sympathy of the elite and the support of other workers in the city, they had to give in and return to work without much gained. The owners did not even allow them to form a union. However, the TWF women's spontaneous challenge to the oppression at workplace gained them a permanent place in the histories of the labor and the women in the United States.

The Asch Building in which the TWF occupied the top three floors was recently built; the builders and owners had followed the existing laws. Its owner described it as “fireproof,” and the claim stood justified after the fire, for its walls and floors showed little damage. It had two manned elevators and two separate stairs going all the way from the ground to the tenth floor, from where there was access possible to the roof. It even had iron fire escapes. In fact, the building had been inspected by city officials only five months earlier, and found to be fully “in compliance.” While that was literally true for the building's walls and floors, it was only euphemistically so in the case of the spaces within, which were cluttered and crowded in the worst way. While a new law had required that each worker should be provided with 250 cubic feet of air, it had also allowed factory owners to crowd in more workers and workstations on the floor by placing their workshops in loft like spaces that had high ceilings. Similarly, though the building had two sets of stairs for the workers' use in the case of an emergency, the stairs themselves were only wide enough for one person to move at a time—only every sixth step was wide enough to allow two persons to pass by.

The fire started just when the work in the factory had stopped for the day. The cutters had stopped; the machines had been turned off; and the girls and women on the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> floors were collecting their things and starting to walk out to the stairs and the elevators—after getting their bags searched at the single exits on each floor. Then someone on the 8<sup>th</sup> floor noticed flames near one table in the pile of the cutaways. These cutaways—what we call *katran* in Urdu—would accumulate under the worktables as bolts of cloth were cut, sized, and trimmed into pieces for the shirtwaists that were then put together and sewed on the 9<sup>th</sup> floor. This highly combustible material was sold to a dealer, who removed it every two months or so. Its size can be gauged by the fact that the last accumulation before the fire, removed two months and ten days earlier, had come to over one thousand kilograms.

As the cry—“Fire”—went up, a panic set in among the workers, almost all of them girls and women newly arrived in the country, with little or no experience of workplace emergencies. In fact, despite a regulation, there had been no fire drills in the factory to

inform the workers of what was available. Most were not even aware of the fire escapes on the other side of the closed windows, and discovered them too late. There were no sprinklers installed in the ceilings. Less than a dozen water buckets were available on each floor, but they had not been kept filled. Within minutes the 8<sup>th</sup> floor had turned into an inferno. Soon it was also the fate of the floor above.

This is how a reporter who witnessed the whole episode wrote about it in *The New York World*:

The fire began in the eighth story. The flames licked and shot their way up through the other two stories... The estimate of the number of employees at work is made by Chief Croker at about 1,000. The proprietors of the company say 700 men and girls were in their place.

Whatever the number, they had no chance of escape. Before smoke or flame gave signs from the windows, the loss of life was fully under way. The first signs that persons in the street knew that these three top stories had turned red furnaces in which human creatures were being caught and incinerated was when screaming men and women and boys and girls crowded out on the many window ledges and threw themselves into the street below.

They jumped with their clothing ablaze. The hair of some of the girls streamed up aflame as they leaped. Thud after thud sounded on the pavements. It is a ghastly fact that on [the two exposed sides] of the building there grew mounds of the dead and dying.

And the worst horror of all was that in this heap of the dead now and then stirred a limb or sounded a moan.

Within the three flaming floors it was as frightful. There flames enveloped many so that they died instantly. When Fire Chief Croker could make his way into these three floors, he found sights that utterly staggered him, that sent him, a man used to viewing horrors, back and down into the street with quivering lips.

The floors were black with smoke. And then he saw as the smoke drifted away bodies burned to bare bones. There were skeletons bending over sewing machines.

The response of the police and the fire department had been swift, and their jets of water had brought the fire under control in less than 20 minutes. Where they failed was in rescuing the panic-driven girls and women on the fire escapes and in the burning windows of the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> floors. Their ladders, when fully opened, could reach only up to the 6<sup>th</sup> floor! And when they spread life nets to catch the people jumping down, the impact was such that the nets broke, or the men holding them were knocked over. One experienced person estimated that “each falling body when it struck the net was about 11,000 pounds”—i.e. close to 5000 kilograms.

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The aftermath of the fire can be better understood in two parts. Within days the larger population of the city and the state was gripped by feelings of shock and grief that soon turned into a general outrage. There were also efforts to ameliorate the plight of the survivors and the dependents of the victims. The fire had occurred in the evening of a Saturday. By the following Monday, an Emergency Committee had been formed to develop support plans. It consisted of the notables of the city, including many society women and city and state officials. A major life insurance company donated space and furniture for its office, and, more significantly, also provided trained visitors who went to the bereaved homes to inform the relatives of the victims and also advise them and the survivors on how to deal with the legal aspects of the situation. In just two days they were able to visit and give council to every family on the list supplied by the police.

Bankers and financiers donated money, as did worker unions and individual workers and community groups. The Jewish fraternal organizations and the Roman Catholic Church started relief and support programs. A real estate owner gave two of his properties for free use for three months to the families who had lost their bread-earners. Prominent stage artistes and singers and musicians organized concerts to raise money. In a short time these diverse efforts and other appeals brought in a grand total of \$120,000—a huge amount in 1911.

Monetary relief was then distributed to the suffering survivors and relatives, mainly through the Red Cross but also through community organizations. Most significantly, instead of just obviating the immediate hardship or setting one arbitrary value on every lost life, attention was paid to the needs and circumstances of individuals and families, helping them get a new start toward an improved life. One widow, for example, was given money to buy a small store, while some money was also put in a trust fund for the education of her two children. The benefits of such individualized attention were also felt far away from New York, when Jewish and Catholic organizations traced down and sent relief money to the families in Russia and Europe that had sent their ill-fated girls—in many cases, their main bread-earners—to work in the USA.

Soul searching and a sense of public guilt soon began to prevail, and special meetings were held by such assorted groups as the Architectural League, the NY Chamber of Commerce, Federation of Women's Clubs, and many more. A series of protest meetings by women and labor groups were held across the urban sprawl of greater New York. At these meetings, along with expressions of grief and solidarity, speakers also made clear how the particular tragedy had links with general issues such as a woman's right to vote or the obligation of a political system to ensure security in livelihood for all working people.

A noted suffragette pointedly addressed the men in her audience at one meeting: "You men—forget not that you are responsible! As voters it was your business and you should have been about your business. If you are incompetent, then in the name of Heaven, stand aside and let us try!" She then continued: "There was a time when a woman worked in the home with her weaving, her sewing, her candlemaking. All that has been changed. Now she can no longer regulate her own conditions, her own hours of labor. She has been

driven into the market with no voice in the laws and powerless to defend herself. The most cowardly thing that men ever did was when they tied woman's hands and left her to be food for the flames."

At the same meeting, a Socialist lawyer reminded the audience of the struggle that many of the victims of the fire had only some months earlier put up against their exploitation at work. "The girls who went on strike last year were trying to adjust the conditions under which they were obliged to work. I wonder if there is not some connection between the fire and that strike. I wonder if the magistrates who sent to jail the girls who did picket duty in front of the Triangle shop realized last Sunday that some of the responsibility may be theirs. Had the strike been successful, these girls might have been alive today and the citizenry of New York would have less of a burden upon its conscience." He also reminded the audience that across the country more than 1000 workers were losing their lives in industrial accidents every week.

On April 2, seven days after the fire, a major memorial meeting was held in the Metropolitan Opera House that brought together under one roof concerned people from all strata of society in the city, even if the rich and the prominent occupied the boxes and the main floor and the less fortunate filled up the balconies. What some of the religious dignitaries said there is worth noting. A Monsignor of the Catholic Church put his audience on notice by saying, "We have allowed a contradiction to grow up between our economic and our spiritual ideals; we have put property rights above life. The workers have a right to life and it comes before our right to the ease and luxury that flow to the community through the production of the wage earners." And a Jewish rabbi put it still more bluntly: "It is not the action of God but the inaction of man that is responsible. The disaster was not the deed of God but the greed of man. This was no inevitable disaster which could not be foreseen." He then continued, "We have laws that in a crisis we find are no laws and we have enforcement that when the hour of trial comes we find is no enforcement. Let us lift up the industrial standards until they will bear inspection. And when we go before the legislatures let us not allow them to put us off forever with the old answer, 'We have no money.' If we have money for the necessary enforcement of the laws which safeguard the lives of workers it is because so much of our money is wasted and squandered and stolen." (For the record, just five weeks earlier, the Fire Department of the city had listed more than thirteen thousand buildings as dangerous, but, by the time of the fire, the city's 47 Building Inspectors had been able to inspect only two thousand of them.)

Meanwhile, grief-drenched burials had been going on in some of the poorest neighborhoods since most of the bodies had gradually been identified and claimed by the relatives. On April 5, however, a massive funeral parade—it consisted of two separate processions that eventually merged—was organized by various labor and civic groups, which was led by an empty hearse. It passed down main streets of the city, and was watched by thousands of people from the sidewalks, windows, and rooftops. The same day in a separate part of the city a second procession also formed. It had eight hearses in the lead; the first seven carried the coffins of the seven totally charred bodies that had remained unidentified, while the eighth bore a coffin that contained bits and pieces of

limbs and flesh gathered from the site of the fire. That procession first went to a public graveyard, where the eight coffins were buried after Catholic, Episcopal, and Jewish prayers had been said. It then turned into a massive parade that continued down the city streets for several hours. “The final police estimate was that about 400,000—[i.e. four *lacs*]— had seen the parade, and of these about one-third had marched in it.” Since the population of New York City at the time was between 4 and 5 million, it meant that at least 1 in 34 New Yorkers not only made the effort to observe that mournful parade but also marched in solidarity with it.

Eventually there was a juried trial in December. It lasted three week, and, as generally expected, the owners were not convicted. They had mostly done, in word if not in spirit, what the existing laws required of them. Also, as one of the two owners claimed when asked about the single exits and checking of bags, they had a right to protect their property by all means. But the unions and civic and religious groups persisted with their cause, and gradually over the years laws were changed and city executives and administrators became more vigilant with regard to workplaces and workers’ safety. Those improvements were then duplicated in other major cities. The Triangle Shirtwaist Fire took the life of 146 persons, but it found a place in American history due to the improvements and advancements it brought into the lives of working men and women across the country. Consequently, it remained on record the most devastating work-place incident in the United States for 90 years, until the World Trade Center buildings came down on September 1, 2001. Equally significantly, it created new social and political ties among the working classes, immigrants, and the liberal elite in New York and in other urban areas that had large immigrant populations; these eventually resulted in the famed New Deal of President Franklin D. Roosevelt a couple of decades later.

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A few things struck me as I read about the Triangle Fire. The most striking were the public—i.e. shared, community forming, lines-crossing—events that soon followed. Not only the memorial meeting in the opera house, but also the two marches that soon followed. Imagine the response of the powers that be—the politicians and the mullahs—if even 1 out of 100 citizens of Karachi had come together in different parts of the city and organized formal prayers for the dead—*ghaaibana namaaz-i-janaaza*—to express solidarity with the victims. Perhaps such prayers were held, and I didn’t read about them, but I’m sure they would have been much better reported had they been held on a dozen college campuses and neighborhood parks in Karachi, not to mention other major cities or the grounds of the Presidential mansion in Islamabad. People all over the country grieved and raged, but were not enabled by any political or social group to cross the usual social/regional/sectarian lines and become united even for one evening on a shared platform.

As fate would have it, the media very soon found another major issue: a 14 minutes long anti-Islam video. The international dimensions of the issue and the violent public reactions made it of primary importance to media masters, and the coverage of the Karachi fire as well as the few measured responses to it lost the prominence they had for

three days. Thanks to the Internet, I have indulged for some time in daily glancing through the headlines and columns in several Pakistani newspapers: English—*The Daily Times; The News; The Express-Tribune; Dawn*, and Urdu—*Jang; Nai Bat; Express; Nawa-i-Waqt*. As usual, there was some difference in the quality of coverage—the English papers had more detailed and varied reports. Both presses, however, enabled us to see the victims, survivors, and affected family members from a close range. And yet, neither said enough concerning the physical, social, economic, and political contexts of the destroyed factory and the factories that were still functioning in that area with no better work and safety conditions. Generalized statements, yes, but not the nitty-gritty details. I could be totally mistaken but few reporters in either language sought to bring in the voices of professional experts, for example industrial engineers, psychologists experienced in dealing with trauma victims, or the firemen and policemen who had been serving in that area for some time. The English press must be commended, however, for making better efforts to bring to us the views and actions of many of the NGOs working in that area; I missed their views in the Urdu press, where many columnists commonly use NGO as a word of abuse. That is tragic since it is the Urdu press that is more likely read by the men and women in those factories.

I must also mention the surprising indifference of Urdu columnists as compared to the much more sustained response of their English language counterparts. I became aware of the phenomenon as the days passed, but obtained some details to confirm my impression only when I began writing this note. I went back to old issues when it was possible and also made use of a website that provided access to the columns of many of the writers I had been following. I could find only eight columns, one each by the writers listed below:

Abdul Qadir Hassan (*Express*, Sep. 13); Dr. Safdar Mahmood (*Jang*, Sep. 14) Talat Hussain (*Express*, Sep. 14); Taiba Zia Chima (*Nawa-i-Waqt*, Sep. 14); Orya Maqbool Jan (*Dunya*) 9/15; Ali Mu'een Niwazish (*Jang*, Sep. 20); Dr. Abdul Qadeer Khan (*Jang*, Sep. 24); Wasi Shah (*Nai Baat*, Sep. 24).

A pitifully meager response to the deaths of so many. Some details were more depressing. Mr. Abdul Qadir Hassan, for example, linked the fire to the recent devastating floods, and called both *Allah ki pakaR* (God's Judgment). He also brought up an unnamed Sufi who claimed these disasters were God's way to punish the Pakistani people for their sins. Mr. Hassan's nemesis, Dr. Safdar Mahmood, promptly rejected that thesis; according to him Pakistani people were not being punished for their sins but for their having unworthy leaders and administrators. Eventually Dr. A. Q. Khan mediated by declaring that while the fire was an *aafat-i-ilaahii* (a calamity sent by God) it was also caused by the incompetence and criminality of the Pakistani "system."

There is no need to list the twelve or so other names that I had expected to find among the responders. I hope those men and women in fact wrote on the subject and that I merely failed to locate their columns at this late date. I also need not list the many who wrote in English not only immediately after the event but also over the subsequent two weeks. Instead I want to highlight a feature that seemed to be common in both languages. No column in either language gave evidence of any kind of personal involvement of the

writer beyond a generalized mixture of outrage and pity. No essayist apparently took the trouble to visit the site, talk to the survivors and affected families, or engage in inquiry specific relevant authorities. Nothing appeared in those columns that could be of precise helpful use either to the victims' relatives and the injured survivors or the volunteers and voluntary agencies that were—and still are—actively engaged in that area. I read the news of the relief grants and monetary help that was extended by governors and ministers but did not learn if any professionally trained advisors were also available to help the receivers in properly utilizing that money, to make sure the young and the dependent did not lose out in the long run. In the Triangle fire the victims were mostly female, while the affected relatives belonged to both sexes. In Karachi, the victims seem to be predominantly male, while the hapless relatives are predominantly females and children—exactly the segments of the local population that could be manipulated and exploited by the unscrupulous in the society, male or female.

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One can be certain that the individuals and organizations that took on myriad tasks on the morning after the fire are still engaged in their efforts. They couldn't abandon what they were doing, as the media perforce had to, in order to give priority to the vile video and its repercussions (the "Love the Prophet Day"; the looting and firing; the name-calling and blame-laying) and then the heinous shooting of Malala Yousufzai. Someone must now take up not only what the media earlier did not do but also what they more recently abandoned. I can best make my point by reporting the following. I used the Google search, putting in "The Triangle Factory Fire." The result was over 1 million hits. More importantly, when I used the same tag to search for books and films presently available on the subject—a century after the fire—Amazon readily offered 833 titles. Their range covered popular non-fiction, academic research, general fiction, poetry, plays, children books, and documentaries, including videos.

Should we not then make sure that when ten years from now someone wishes to learn about the Baldia Fire, or the fire at the shoe factory in Lahore, the search engine turns up at least a dozen titles? If we don't ensure that, the deaths in the two industrial fires will soon be lost in the heap of so many other forgotten deaths and killings. Earlier today (October 12, 2012) I attended a public meeting on Palestine where the two speakers were both Jews. The rabbi from Chicago talked about solidarity with the Palestinians, which for him meant speaking up on their behalf. Then the speaker from Israel, a former general's son, spoke, and made a different powerful point. For him, living in a shared space with the Palestinians, solidarity with them meant listening to them—letting them feel that they were being heard, that their words about themselves, which they cannot but utter, were not disappearing into a vacuum. It is the solidarity of the second kind that the people victimized by the two fires call for from the media and academic institutions of Pakistan.

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