Local and Municipal Department.

Govt. of {1894} Madras.

JUDICIAL.

Issued

Read. *Encl.*

G.O., 9th April 1894, No. 849.

APRIL.

Cochin Fires.

Passing orders on the report on the — of the 2nd, 3rd and 7th February.

Ro. 1059 W. d 24th April 1894

Communicated to the Superintending Engineer IV Circle for report with reference to para 6 of the Government order

(Sd) P.W.

Do
The Suptg Engnr. IV Circle

[25]
2,000—2-2-94.

Local and Municipal Department.

CHIEF SECRETARIAT MADRAS.

PROCEEDINGS OF THE MADRAS GOVERNMENT.

READ the following paper :—

From the Public Works Department, dated 21st March 1894, No. 1307 C., transferring letter from the Superintending Engineer, ~~No 86 W~~ dated 16-3-94 V Circle, stating that bridge No. 1 on the Eastern road referred to in G. O. 572 W. dated 2nd March 1894 should be opened.

Order dated 16 April 1894. No. 491 M. Mis.

The necessary orders will be issued in the Public Works Department for the removal of the masonry structures which block up the openings of the bridge in question.

(True extract)

Under Secretary to Govt.

for Chief Secretary.

To The Chairman, municipal council, Tanjore.
" Sanitary Engineer.
" Public Works Department.

9TH APRIL 1894, No. 849, JUDICIAL.

GOVERNMENT OF MADRAS.

JUDICIAL DEPARTMENT.

READ—the following paper :—

From H. BRADLEY, Esq., Acting District Magistrate of Malabar, to the Chief Secretary to Government, dated Camp, Cochin, 28th February 1894, No. 180-M.—G1.

I have the honour to forward, for the information of Government, a copy of the Cochin Deputy Collector's report on the recent fires in that town. I have supplemented the Deputy Collector's investigation by a personal inquiry held in Messrs. Volkart Brothers', Brunton and Son's and Peirce, Leslie and Co.'s premises, during which I examined all the witnesses whom the merchants were able to bring before me.

2. The European mercantile community of Cochin is divided in opinion as to the cause of the fires. Most of these gentlemen attribute the fires to incendiarism, but the minority consider them to have been accidental. There is not the slightest evidence either way, but there was and is now a great deal of heat and excitement in relation to the cause of the fires. One gentleman stated before me: "I think the fires were caused by incendiaries—I cannot conceive with what object, but at the same time certainly it was incendiarism." Similar statements have been made frequently by other gentlemen in my hearing since I came to Cochin.

3. Even those who accept the incendiary theory do not always pretend to be able to point out the object of the incendiaries. Some assert that it was loot, others can give no opinion. It is certainly very strange that two fires should have broken out in Messrs. Volkart Brothers' yard and one in Messrs. Brunton and Son's in 5 days immediately after the order issued by the municipal council regarding thatched houses —*vide* paragraph 11 of the Deputy Collector's letter—but it may have been a mere coincidence. Still the theory of incendiarism seems more probable.

4. The suggestion that the object of the incendiaries, if the fire was not accidental, was loot, is, I think, untenable. The looting of coir-yarn cannot be a very profitable proceeding, and although a considerable quantity of cocoanut oil appears to have been stolen during the fire at Messrs. Volkart Brothers, there was absolutely nothing but coir in Messrs. Brunton and Son's yard. Messrs. Volkart Brothers' agent estimates the loss in cocoanut oil at Rs. 26,000, of which he thinks Rs. 25,000 worth was stolen when the casks were rolled into the backwater, but if loot had been the object of the fire of the 7th February, it would not have been Messrs. Brunton and Son's yard that was fired.

5. The supporters of the accident theory point to the fact that the fires took place in two yards in which there were chimneys connected with machinery at work and that these are the only two yards where there are such chimneys. On the other hand it is stated that these chimneys have been in use for many years and there has, as yet, been no fire attributable to them. Nevertheless the fact remains that the merchants of Cochin had large quantities of loose coir-fibre stored in sheds and lying about in their yards and it seems to me a perfect marvel that they have not been burnt out

times without number. It is, no doubt, a fact that coir-fibre is not very inflammable except in a breeze; it merely smoulders. But a spark is enough to set it smouldering and a breath of air fans it into a flame, and once in flame probably nothing burns quicker. At Cochin like the rest of this coast there are strong winds daily.

6. The first fire at Messrs. Volkart Brothers may have been accidental, but the second is very suspicious indeed. It broke out, when the land breeze was blowing, at the very east of their yard in a shed containing coir-yarn. Some of the salvage from the first fire may have been put into the shed in front of that in which the second fire broke out, but none was put into the further shed. Still, as I found that a heap of unburnt coir about 4 feet 6 inches in height remained near the spot where it broke out after the fire was quenched, it seems probable that the fire commenced at a considerable height from the ground and may have been caused, as suggested by the Deputy Collector, by a burning spark blown through a crevice in the tiles. The tiles were Mangalore tiles of the old pattern under which the wind on this coast occasionally drives rain with such force that roofs of houses leak.

7. The most suspicious circumstance in the whole series of fires is the breaking out of the fire at Messrs. Brunton and Son's yard. It began when the most of the employés had left for their midday meal. The spot at which it began was the eastern end of the bale shed, and if the direction taken by the fire is any criterion of the direction of the wind, it could not have been caused by a spark from their chimney. I imagine that it must have been caused by an incendiary. It was suggested to me that this fire was lighted in the hope that it would communicate itself to Messrs. Aspinwall and Co.'s or Messrs. Peirce, Leslie and Co.'s yards where there was likely to be a good deal of loot; but this idea is untenable as, although Messrs. Aspinwall and Co.'s yard is difficult of access, that of Messrs. Peirce, Leslie and Co. is very easy, and if there had been any notion of looting, the last firm's yard would have been set on fire. It happened at the time to be full of loose coir-fibre and nothing could have been easier than to drop a lighted match into it.

8. The fire in the southern portion of Messrs. Brunton and Son's yard was, I think, almost certainly caused by burning materials blown there from the fire in the main yard. Messrs. Peirce, Leslie and Co.'s Assistants say that this was absolutely impossible as the wind was blowing from the south and the sparks must have travelled against it. But the direction of the fire in the main yard, which burnt along the north and west sides of the yard, seems to me to show that the wind could not have been blowing continuously from the south. And these gentlemen also state that they were employed in moving loose fibre from the neighbourhood of the walls of the works of their firm both in Messrs. Brunton and Son's southern yard and in their own, which is on the south and west of the last-mentioned yard. The fire in Messrs. Brunton and Son's southern yard broke out almost under the eyes of Messrs. Peirce, Leslie and Co.'s two Assistants, and I do not think that any native incendiary would dare to set fire to coir-fibre in an open shed with two European gentlemen looking on.

9. On the whole, I fear that it must be considered that the fires were caused by incendiaries. It is not easy to determine what their object could have been.

10. For the future, I think that the storing of coir-fibre, as distinguished from coir-yarn, in Cochin should be absolutely prohibited. The merchants have already taken the precaution of removing all they had. But I doubt whether this could be done under section 188 of the District Municipalities Act, and I would therefore recommend the addition of the word "inflammable" after "explosive" in sub-section (i) and of "fibre" before "or coal" in sub-section (iii) when the Act is being amended.

11. The municipal council appears to have shown a certain amount of misplaced tenderness for the poorer inhabitants in carrying out section 179 of the Act since the big fire of 1889 and the notice issued by them requiring the owners of thatched houses to pull down the roofs within ten days appears to be illegal. In future I think section 179 should be gradually brought into operation and no one allowed to re-thatch a building in future.

12. I do not recommend the offer of a reward suggested in paragraph 12 of the Deputy Collector's letter. If any reward is to be offered it should, I think, be done by the merchants themselves or the insurance companies. I do not think the sinking of a few wells would meet the difficulty alluded to in paragraph 17 of the Deputy Collector's letter. What is really wanted is sufficient hose to enable the fire-engines to work at distances of 100 or 150 yards from the backwater. No doubt a steam fire-engine on the backwater would be of the greatest service and if it could be combined with a steam vessel capable of making the journey to the Laccadives it would be of great advantage to the administration of the islands. It might also be used as a tug and earn fees from time to time in towing boats against the sea breeze to steamers. Only a day or two ago the *Rewa* had to leave a good deal of cargo behind as the boats were unable to reach the vessel against the sea-breeze.

Enclosure.

From B. M. D'CRUZ, Esq., Deputy Collector and Magistrate, to the Collector of Malabar, dated Cochin, 17th February 1894.

Telegram, dated 2nd February 1894.
Letter, dated 4th February 1894.
" " 6th " "
Telegram, dated 7th February 1894.

In continuation of the telegrams and letters noted in the margin, I have the honour to submit the following report on the result of my enquiry in connection with the recent fires that broke out in the business yards of Messrs. Volkart Brothers and Brunton and Son, Cochin.

2. The first fire which occurred at Messrs. Volkart Brothers took place on Friday, the 2nd instant, at about half-past 10 A.M. It originated in a heap of fibre which lay in a portion of a tiled shed situated on the margin of the backwater and used chiefly for storing casks. From this heap of fibre the fire spread rapidly along the cask-shed, communicating itself to the loose fibre lying in the open yard in front of it and its western end. The next place affected was the coir-shed, from which the fire spread quickly towards the bungalow occupied by the agent, Mr. Schwarz, the matting factory and the screw house, all of which lay adjacent to each other. Messrs. Volkart Brothers' pumps which were in the premises commenced at once to play on the flames followed by the municipal fire-engine. Two more fire-engines were expeditiously brought on the scene by the Cochin Sirkar police. Although all these worked vigorously the flames could not be got under before 2 P.M. owing to the inflammable nature of the materials stored within the premises.

3. No time was lost by me in making enquiries and recording statements from all who were in the immediate vicinity of the spot where the fire first broke out and who were likely to afford information as to its origin. I examined Mr. Schwarz, the agent of the firm, Mr. Cherian, the yard clerk, Mr. Jackson, the store-keeper, Lucian, coir-matting maistry, Farridkhan and Mammad, yard peons, and Annamah and Anno, two female coolies who were sorting fibre within a couple of yards of the spot where the fire was first seen. All of them declare their utter inability to account for the cause of the fire.

4. As the fire broke out at a point adjoining the wooden palings facing the river, I took the precaution of ascertaining whether any boats were at the time moored alongside. It appears from the statement of Lucian, the coir-matting maistry, that at the time the conflagration began he observed a boat loaded with cocoanut shells and two covered baggage-boats moored in the river just outside the wooden fence. There seems no reason to doubt this statement although uncorroborated by others, as according to peon Mammad's evidence three boats loaded with yarn arrived that morning and were unloaded by 8 o'clock and two of them had not left when he shut the river-gate and went to the yard to attend to other business. Very probably these two boats had lingered behind for the purpose of cooking, as all baggage boats are furnished with fire-places, and these boats had arrived from a great distance. Every effort has been made to find out from persons unconnected with the boats whether they saw any cooking going on on board but no one is able to throw light on the subject. As for the boatmen themselves they are quite certain to deny having kindled a fire even if they can be got at. If cooking had actually taken place it is not improbable that a spark or a cinder reached the fibre from the oven through the gaps in the palings and set it on fire. Mr. Jackson's statement that he has often seen boatmen cooking in their boats at the firm's jetties and that he used to cut the ropes and send them adrift for fear of fire lends support to this theory.

5. Although the fire was brought under by 2 P.M., as stated above, and the fire-engines were kept working the whole night in addition to fetching water from the river in buckets and throwing it on the flames, bales of yarn kept burning throughout the night and the following morning.

6. At about 8 A.M., while efforts were being continued to completely stifle the flames, an alarm was raised of a fresh fire having broken out in the easternmost shed, that is, in the direction

opposite to where the first fire was still smouldering. This shed was stored with coir-yarn, nux vomica and gunnies. After destroying these the flames spread to the sheds situated on either side of it and in spite of the efforts made to check their progress they stopped short only at the easternmost corner of the office.

7. The only buildings saved out of these two fires are the weighing-shed and bleaching-house by the river side and the office, the strong room, a yarn-shed next to it, the screw room and the coir-matting shed adjoining the Kalvetti road. I must admit—to use the words of Mr. Schwarz, the agent—that "the origin of this second fire is very mysterious," although it appears from Mr. Jackson's statement that there were crevices between some of the mission tiles with which the roof of the easternmost shed was covered and that there was 'every possibility of small cinders from the first day's fire being carried by the breeze through those crevices and deposited on the bales of yarn which were piled up to the tiles. This theory is strengthened by the fact that when this second fire was first observed it was the upper portion of the pile of yarn that was seen burning.

8. A rude shock, however, was given to the theory of accident when the ringing of the alarm bells announced on Ash-Wednesday, the 7th instant, at 1-30 P.M, that another fire had broken out at Messrs. Brunton and Son's premises, which are separated from those of Messrs. Volkart Brothers by the extensive yard of Messrs. Aspinwall and Co. This fire was first observed at the eastern end of the northern bale-shed. It spread rapidly, and despite the prompt assistance rendered by the local fire-engines and the hearty co-operation of the Sirkar engines which were manned by the police of that State and worked with the same energy that characterized their efforts at the first fire at Messrs. Volkart Brothers, the whole shed situated by the river side, a portion of the shed on the western side, the press house and an upstair building were soon enveloped in flames. While great exertions were being made to get the fire under control, another shed belonging to the same firm on the southern side of the Kalvetti road which was stored with fibre was observed to be on fire. This was a critical juncture. It was of the utmost importance that this fire should be got under at all hazards, as this shed adjoined the premises of Messrs. Peirce, Leslie and Co. which were also full of similar inflammable materials. The absence of a supply of water at this point increased the difficulty of quenching this fire before it could spread to the other sheds in this portion of the yard or could attack Messrs. Peirce, Leslie and Co.'s premises. However, the flames were at last put down and all attention again concentrated on the burning mass of buildings on the northern side of the road. Throughout the whole night the fire continued burning; and though the pumps were worked the whole time it was only by daybreak that further danger was obviated. The portions that escaped the fire in the main or northern yard are the gate-shed, a long shed on the eastern side of the yard, and the machine shop.

9. There seems to be an impression that the fire that broke out suddenly and unaccountably in the fibre-shed on the southern side of the road above referred to was the result of a deliberate act of incendiarism as the breeze was blowing at the time in a direction different from that in which this shed stood. Although the general direction of the breeze was away from this shed, yet, considering its proximity to the fire and that sparks and cinders were seen flying about in all directions, it was, I think, just possible that the one fire originated from the other. Moreover, it is not easy to believe that when hundreds of persons were about the place eagerly exerting themselves to put out the fire, any one would have been so daring as to commit an act of incendiarism as it were under their very eyes.

10. With regard to the origin of the main fire, however, the matter wears a very suspicious aspect, closely following, as it did, the double fire which took place at Volkart's only four days previously. In connection with this fire also I have examined several witnesses, but none of them can explain or account for the cause of the fire, which, strangely enough, began when the great bulk of the coolies and the head clerk in temporary charge of the place were away to partake of their midday meal. Mr. Wilkieson, the Superintendent, who was here on the day this fire broke out, also made enquiries with, I believe, no better results. The theory that both the fires under report may have been caused by the sparks from the chimneys attached to the machinery in those yards appears to be far from tenable as the sparks emanating from them have been found innocuous by the experience of years. Taking all the circumstances into consideration it appears to me that the fire that broke out at Messrs. Brunton and Son's yard, at any rate, is attributable to incendiarism. It is not surprising that no clue has been found to the actual perpetrators of the crime regard being had to the numerous facilities that an unsuspected labourer working in the premises had for doing this nefarious act without fear of detection. A single matchstick, which a miscreant cooly can easily secrete about his person, is all that is required to set such inflammable materials as fibre ablaze all in a moment. The deed once done unobserved, it is next to impossible to discover the offender as he leaves no clue behind. It is hardly credible that a stranger would dare to fire the buildings in broad day at the imminent risk of detection when night affords him a far safer opportunity for working his wicked will. It seems clear to my mind that the mischief was done by one or more persons having business connected with the yard and from inside.

11. The question of motive for this diabolical act has next to be considered.

The scheme of doing away with the thatched huts at Kalvetti has been a burning question at Cochin ever since the great fire of 1889; and the recent petty fires among some of those huts induced the European firms to present a petition to the municipal council praying that the owners of the huts be compelled to unthatch them. At the meeting of the council on the 31st ultimo it was accordingly resolved to issue a notice to them to the effect that they would be prosecuted unless they removed in 10 days the thatch they had put on without the council's permission. Within two days after the passing of this resolution at the instance of the European firms we have a big fire on the 2nd instant, another the next morning and a third four days after, all in their business premises and unaccounted for. The inference that the European firms incurred the ill-will of some at least of the hut-owners (who are mostly Moplahs) whose dwellings were about to be dismantled is not an unreasonable one, and hence arises the suspicion that one or more of them might have resorted to the desperate expedient of weakening the case against them by demonstrating that the premises of the European firms which have pucka buildings with tiled roofs are not less dangerous to public safety than their own huts which have been made the subject of so much complaint.

12. Assuming the fire at Messrs. Brunton and Son's to have been the result of foul play, the efforts on the parts of the police, the magistracy and the firms cannot do much towards preventing a recurrence of such crimes which can be perpetrated so easily and with such little risk of detection. I would therefore suggest that a substantial reward of a thousand rupees be offered to those giving information leading to the conviction of the party or parties implicated in the said fire. Even if the offer of such a reward does not lead to an immediate detection, I submit it will not fail to serve the very useful purpose of acting as a deterrent to evil-doers, who will be apprehensive of being betrayed by one of their accomplices who might be dazzled by the prospect of a handsome reward.

13. In order to minimize the risk of accidental fires and to diminish the facilities for incendiary ones I propose suggesting to the municipal council that the warehousing in the heart of the town of loose fibre, which is highly inflammable, be prevented or at least controlled under the authority vested in them by the Municipal Act.

14. The losses incurred in the fires are estimated as under, and I understand that they are nearly all covered by insurance:—

(1) Volkart Brothers	Between 3 and 3½ lakhs.
(2) Brunton and Son	Rs. 1,75,000.

15. Every assistance was readily rendered by all classes, officials and non-officials, in putting down the fire, among whom I may mention Mr. J. W. Boys, local Agent of the Bank of Madras, who was the most active and energetic in aiding to arrest the progress of the flames and who has come to be recognized by all as the captain of our impromptu fire brigade; Mr. S. Locke, Chairman of the Municipal Council, who was indefatigable in personally superintending the operations of the municipal staff throughout the fire; Messrs. W. N. and E. Black, who directed the working of some of the pumps day and night; and Mr. G. H. Gunther, Superintendent of the Cochin Sirkar Police, who rendered valuable assistance by promptly bringing the Sirkar pumps and a staff of 30 men and two inspectors, who worked with a will to the end.

16. The fires have been unattended with loss of life.

17. It would be a serious omission on my part were I to fail to bring to your notice one of my sad experiences at the fire. With pumps at hand and men ready to work we were greatly handicapped in our operations, except on the river side, for want of water. To remedy this grave disadvantage in connection with future contingencies I would strongly advocate the sinking of a dozen wells at convenient centres. These wells at a place like Cochin, where the water level is easily reached, will not cost more than Rs. 50 each.

18. The statements recorded by me are herewith submitted as per accompanying list.

ORDER—dated 9th April 1894, No. 849, Judicial.

The correspondence read above relates to the fires which occurred at Cochin on the 2nd, 3rd and 7th February. The origin of the fires is disputed but the Government inclines to the view that they were accidental and agrees with the District Magistrate in thinking it inexpedient to offer any reward for information.

2. It appears to His Excellency in Council that Cochin will never be safe from disasters of this character while cocoanut fibre and oil continue to be stored in great quantities within municipal limits and while the council continues to show such apathy in regard to the substitution of tiled for thatched roofs.

3. The storage of cocoanut fibre and oil can, it seems to Government, be restricted by applying the provisions of section 188 of the Madras District Municipalities Act, 1884, for these articles are certainly " combustible materials " within the meaning of the section. But, as the District Magistrate seems to feel some doubts on the subject, the Government will suggest to the Select Committee to which the Bill to amend Act IV of 1884 has been referred the advisability of inserting the word " fibre " between the words " straw " and " or coal " in clause (iii) of section 188.

4. With regard to the substitution of tiles for thatch, it is observed that, immediately after the great fire of 1889, the municipal council issued a notice prohibiting the reconstruction with thatched roofs of buildings which had been destroyed by the fire unless the written permission of the council had been obtained. But, in spite of this notice and of the monetary assistance offered by Government to enable house-owners to comply with its terms, the reconstruction of buildings with thatched roofs has been permitted and no active steps to punish persons guilty of disobedience to the notice of the 22nd January 1889 seem to have been taken until the 31st January last when they were threatened with prosecution. It is true that a similar threat was made in October 1890 but it appears never to have been acted upon and the Government is not aware whether any prosecutions have been instituted even yet. His Excellency in Council does not deny that the enforcement of the order requiring the substitution of tiles for thatch was attended by difficulties but he considers it unquestionable that the defiance of the council's orders is the result of a want of resolution and energy on its part. The matter must now be taken in hand seriously. The existence of thatched buildings in the crowded portions of Cochin is a great danger and may lead at any time to a catastrophe similar to that which occurred in 1889.

5. It is even more important, however, that the unrestricted storage of combustible articles within the limits of the municipality should be put a stop to. It is reported that the merchants have already removed their stocks and, if storage within the municipality can be absolutely prohibited without unduly hampering trade, there will be no reason to anticipate a recurrence of these disastrous and periodical conflagrations.

6. It has further been suggested that a hose of 100 or 150 yards in length should be obtained with the object of enabling the engines to work at that distance from the back-water, that a dozen wells should be sunk in various parts of the town for the purpose of supplying water or that a steam fire-engine should be obtained to work on the back-water. It will be considered in the Public Works Department which of these schemes is likely to prove most effective and least expensive. The further proposal that a steam fire-engine should be combined with a steam-vessel does not, for several reasons, commend itself to Government, but the cost of an engine combined with a barge would probably not be excessive.

7. It remains to request the District Magistrate to convey to Messrs. Boys, Locke, W. N. Black, E. Black and Gunther the thanks of Government for the assistance afforded by them.

(True Extract.)

J. F. PRICE,
Chief Secretary.

To the District Magistrate, Malabar.
" Local and Municipal Department.
" Public Works Department.
" Legislative Department.

Exd. A. Raitt.

P. W. CURRENT No. 2990

Govt. of {1894} Madras.

JUDICIAL.

Issued

Recd. 18.4.94 Encl.

G.O., 9th April 1894, No. 849.

APRIL.

Cochin Fires.

Passing orders on the report on the — of the 2nd, 3rd and 7th February.

Ro. 1059 W. dy 24th April 1894.

Communicated to the Superintending Engineer IV Circle for report with reference to para 6 of the Government order

Ld / Pw.

Ro. 1059 W. dy 24th April 1894.

B

Communicated to the Supty Engrs IV Circle for report with reference to para 6 of the Govt. order

Ro

The Supty Engrs IV Circle

CMB 21.4.94

Sworn

I.C 26/4

2 Chowdiahs ✓ 1-5-94

S.E. IV Circle 23/4

S IV Circle

Off. 14

R 23/4

INDEXED.

24/4

Govt. of {1894} Madras.

JUDICIAL.

Rc. 1059 W. dy 24th April 1894.
Communicated to the
Superintending Engineer IV Circle
for report with reference to para
6 of the Government order
[Id / Pw.

Issued

Read. *Encl.*

G.O., 9th April 1894, No. 849.

APRIL.

Do
The Supdg Engr IV Circle

Cochin Fires.

Passing orders on the report on the — of the 2nd, 3rd and 7th February.

GOVERNMENT OF MADRAS.

JUDICIAL DEPARTMENT.

READ—the following paper :—

From H. BRADLEY, Esq., Acting District Magistrate of Malabar, to the Chief Secretary to Government, dated Camp, Cochin, 28th February 1894, No. 180-M.—Gl.

I have the honour to forward, for the information of Government, a copy of the Cochin Deputy Collector's report on the recent fires in that town. I have supplemented the Deputy Collector's investigation by a personal inquiry held in Messrs. Volkart Brothers', Brunton and Son's and Peirce, Leslie and Co.'s premises, during which I examined all the witnesses whom the merchants were able to bring before me.

2. The European mercantile community of Cochin is divided in opinion as to the cause of the fires. Most of these gentlemen attribute the fires to incendiarism, but the minority consider them to have been accidental. There is not the slightest evidence either way, but there was and is now a great deal of heat and excitement in relation to the cause of the fires. One gentleman stated before me: "I think the fires were caused by incendiaries—I cannot conceive with what object, but at the same time certainly it was incendiarism." Similar statements have been made frequently by other gentlemen in my hearing since I came to Cochin.

3. Even those who accept the incendiary theory do not always pretend to be able to point out the object of the incendiaries. Some assert that it was loot, others can give no opinion. It is certainly very strange that two fires should have broken out in Messrs. Volkart Brothers' yard and one in Messrs. Brunton and Son's in 5 days immediately after the order issued by the municipal council regarding thatched houses —*vide* paragraph 11 of the Deputy Collector's letter—but it may have been a mere coincidence. Still the theory of incendiarism seems more probable.

4. The suggestion that the object of the incendiaries, if the fire was not accidental, was loot, is, I think, untenable. The looting of coir-yarn cannot be a very profitable proceeding, and although a considerable quantity of cocoanut oil appears to have been stolen during the fire at Messrs. Volkart Brothers, there was absolutely nothing but coir in Messrs. Brunton and Son's yard. Messrs. Volkart Brothers' agent estimates the loss in cocoanut oil at Rs. 26,000, of which he thinks Rs. 25,000 worth was stolen when the casks were rolled into the backwater, but if loot had been the object of the fire of the 7th February, it would not have been Messrs. Brunton and Son's yard that was fired.

5. The supporters of the accident theory point to the fact that the fires took place in two yards in which there were chimneys connected with machinery at work and that these are the only two yards where there are such chimneys. On the other hand it is stated that these chimneys have been in use for many years and there has, as yet, been no fire attributable to them. Nevertheless the fact remains that the merchants of Cochin had large quantities of loose coir-fibre stored in sheds and lying about in their yards and it seems to me a perfect marvel that they have not been burnt out

times without number. It is, no doubt, a fact that coir-fibre is not very inflammable except in a breeze; it merely smoulders. But a spark is enough to set it smouldering and a breath of air fans it into a flame, and once in flame probably nothing burns quicker. At Cochin like the rest of this coast there are strong winds daily.

6. The first fire at Messrs. Volkart Brothers may have been accidental, but the second is very suspicious indeed. It broke out, when the land breeze was blowing, at the very east of their yard in a shed containing coir-yarn. Some of the salvage from the first fire may have been put into the shed in front of that in which the second fire broke out, but none was put into the further shed. Still, as I found that a heap of unburnt coir about 4 feet 6 inches in height remained near the spot where it broke out after the fire was quenched, it seems probable that the fire commenced at a considerable height from the ground and may have been caused, as suggested by the Deputy Collector, by a burning spark blown through a crevice in the tiles. The tiles were Mangalore tiles of the old pattern under which the wind on this coast occasionally drives rain with such force that roofs of houses leak.

7. The most suspicious circumstance in the whole series of fires is the breaking out of the fire at Messrs. Brunton and Son's yard. It began when the most of the employés had left for their midday meal. The spot at which it began was the eastern end of the bale shed, and if the direction taken by the fire is any criterion of the direction of the wind, it could not have been caused by a spark from their chimney. I imagine that it must have been caused by an incendiary. It was suggested to me that this fire was lighted in the hope that it would communicate itself to Messrs. Aspinwall and Co.'s or Messrs. Peirce, Leslie and Co.'s yards where there was likely to be a good deal of loot; but this idea is untenable as, although Messrs. Aspinwall and Co.'s yard is difficult of access, that of Messrs. Peirce, Leslie and Co. is very easy, and if there had been any notion of looting, the last firm's yard would have been set on fire. It happened at the time to be full of loose coir-fibre and nothing could have been easier than to drop a lighted match into it.

8. The fire in the southern portion of Messrs. Brunton and Son's yard was, I think, almost certainly caused by burning materials blown there from the fire in the main yard. Messrs. Peirce, Leslie and Co.'s Assistants say that this was absolutely impossible as the wind was blowing from the south and the sparks must have travelled against it. But the direction of the fire in the main yard, which burnt along the north and west sides of the yard, seems to me to show that the wind could not have been blowing continuously from the south. And these gentlemen also state that they were employed in moving loose fibre from the neighbourhood of the walls of the works of their firm both in Messrs. Brunton and Son's southern yard and in their own, which is on the south and west of the last-mentioned yard. The fire in Messrs. Brunton and Son's southern yard broke out almost under the eyes of Messrs. Peirce, Leslie and Co.'s two Assistants, and I do not think that any native incendiary would dare to set fire to coir-fibre in an open shed with two European gentlemen looking on.

9. On the whole, I fear that it must be considered that the fires were caused by incendiaries. It is not easy to determine what their object could have been.

10. For the future, I think that the storing of coir-fibre, as distinguished from coir-yarn, in Cochin should be absolutely prohibited. The merchants have already taken the precaution of removing all they had. But I doubt whether this could be done under section 188 of the District Municipalities Act, and I would therefore recommend the addition of the word "inflammable" after "explosive" in sub-section (i) and of "fibre" before "or coal" in sub-section (iii) when the Act is being amended.

11. The municipal council appears to have shown a certain amount of misplaced tenderness for the poorer inhabitants in carrying out section 179 of the Act since the big fire of 1889 and the notice issued by them requiring the owners of thatched houses to pull down the roofs within ten days appears to be illegal. In future I think section 179 should be gradually brought into operation and no one allowed to re-thatch a building in future.

12. I do not recommend the offer of a reward suggested in paragraph 12 of the Deputy Collector's letter. If any reward is to be offered it should, I think, be done by the merchants themselves or the insurance companies. I do not think the sinking of a few wells would meet the difficulty alluded to in paragraph 17 of the Deputy Collector's letter. What is really wanted is sufficient hose to enable the fire-engines to work at distances of 100 or 150 yards from the backwater. No doubt a steam fire-engine on the backwater would be of the greatest service and if it could be combined with a steam vessel capable of making the journey to the Laccadives it would be of great advantage to the administration of the islands. It might also be used as a tug and earn fees from time to time in towing boats against the sea breeze to steamers. Only a day or two ago the *Rewa* had to leave a good deal of cargo behind as the boats were unable to reach the vessel against the sea-breeze.

ENCLOSURE.

From B. M. D'CRUZ, Esq., Deputy Collector and Magistrate, to the Collector of Malabar, dated Cochin, 17th February 1894.

Telegram, dated 2nd February 1894.
Letter, dated 4th February 1894.
" " 6th " "
Telegram, dated 7th February 1894.

In continuation of the telegrams andl etters noted in the margin, I have the honour to submit the following report on the result of my enquiry in connection with the recent fires that broke out in the business yards of Messrs. Volkart Brothers and Brunton and Son, Cochin.

2. The first fire which occurred at Messrs. Volkart Brothers took place on Friday, the 2nd instant, at about half-past 10 A.M. It originated in a heap of fibre which lay in a portion of a tiled shed situated on the margin of the backwater and used chiefly for storing casks. From this heap of fibre the fire spread rapidly along the cask-shed, communicating itself to the loose fibre lying in the open yard in front of it and its western end. The next place affected was the coir-shed, from which the fire spread quickly towards the bungalow occupied by the agent, Mr. Schwarz, the matting factory and the screw house, all of which lay adjacent to each other. Messrs. Volkart Brothers' pumps which were in the premises commenced at once to play on the flames followed by the municipal fire-engine. Two more fire-engines were expeditiously brought on the scene by the Cochin Sirkar police. Although all these worked vigorously the flames could not be got under before 2 P.M. owing to the inflammable nature of the materials stored within the premises.

3. No time was lost by me in making enquiries and recording statements from all who were in the immediate vicinity of the spot where the fire first broke out and who were likely to afford information as to its origin. I examined Mr. Schwarz, the agent of the firm, Mr. Cherian, the yard clerk, Mr. Jackson, the store-keeper, Lucian, coir-matting maistry, Farridkhan and Mammad, yard peons, and Annamah and Anno, two female coolies who were sorting fibre within a couple of yards of the spot where the fire was first seen. All of them declare their utter inability to account for the cause of the fire.

4. As the fire broke out at a point adjoining the wooden palings facing the river, I took the precaution of ascertaining whether any boats were at the time moored alongside. It appears from the statement of Lucian, the coir-matting maistry, that at the time the conflagration began he observed a boat loaded with cocoanut shells and two covered baggage-boats moored in the river just outside the wooden fence. There seems no reason to doubt this statement although uncorroborated by others, as according to peon Mammad's evidence three boats loaded with yarn arrived that morning and were unloaded by 8 o'clock and two of them had not left when he shut the river-gate and went to the yard to attend to other business. Very probably these two boats had lingered behind for the purpose of cooking, as all baggage boats are furnished with fire-places, and these boats had arrived from a great distance. Every effort has been made to find out from persons unconnected with the boats whether they saw any cooking going on on board but no one is able to throw light on the subject. As for the boatmen themselves they are quite certain to deny having kindled a fire even if they can be got at. If cooking had actually taken place it is not improbable that a spark or a cinder reached the fibre from the oven through the gaps in the palings and set it on fire. Mr. Jackson's statement that he has often seen boatmen cooking in their boats at the firm's jetties and that he used to cut the ropes and send them adrift for fear of fire lends support to this theory.

5. Although the fire was brought under by 2 P.M., as stated above, and the fire-engines were kept working the whole night in addition to fetching water from the river in buckets and throwing it on the flames, bales of yarn kept burning throughout the night and the following morning.

6. At about 8 A.M., while efforts were being continued to completely stifle the flames, an alarm was raised of a fresh fire having broken out in the easternmost shed, that is, in the direction

opposite to where the first fire was still smouldering. This shed was stored with coir-yarn, nux vomica and gunnies. After destroying these the flames spread to the sheds situated on either side of it and in spite of the efforts made to check their progress they stopped short only at the easternmost corner of the office.

7. The only buildings saved out of these two fires are the weighing-shed and bleaching-house by the river side and the office, the strong room, a yarn-shed next to it, the screw room and the coir-matting shed adjoining the Kalvetti road. I must admit—to use the words of Mr. Schwarz, the agent—that "the origin of this second fire is very mysterious," although it appears from Mr. Jackson's statement that there were crevices between some of the mission tiles with which the roof of the easternmost shed was covered and that there was 'every possibility of small cinders from the first day's fire being carried by the breeze through those crevices and deposited on the bales of yarn which were piled up to the tiles. This theory is strengthened by the fact that when this second fire was first observed it was the upper portion of the pile of yarn that was seen burning.

8. A rude shock, however, was given to the theory of accident when the ringing of the alarm bells announced on Ash-Wednesday, the 7th instant, at 1-30 P.M, that another fire had broken out at Messrs. Brunton and Son's premises, which are separated from those of Messrs. Volkart Brothers by the extensive yard of Messrs. Aspinwall and Co. This fire was first observed at the eastern end of the northern bale-shed. It spread rapidly, and despite the prompt assistance rendered by the local fire-engines and the hearty co-operation of the Sirkar engines which were manned by the police of that State and worked with the same energy that characterized their efforts at the first fire at Messrs. Volkart Brothers, the whole shed situated by the river side, a portion of the shed on the western side, the press house and an upstair building were soon enveloped in flames. While great exertions were being made to get the fire under control, another shed belonging to the same firm on the southern side of the Kalvetti road which was stored with fibre was observed to be on fire. This was a critical juncture. It was of the utmost importance that this fire should be got under at all hazards, as this shed adjoined the premises of Messrs. Peirce, Leslie and Co. which were also full of similar inflammable materials. The absence of a supply of water at thic point increased the difficulty of quenching this fire before it could spread to the other sheds in this portion of the yard or could attack Messrs. Peirce, Leslie and Co.'s premises. However, the flames were at last put down and all attention again concentrated on the burning mass of buildings on the northern side of the road. Throughout the whole night the fire continued burning; and though the pumps were worked the whole time it was only by daybreak that further danger was obviated. The portions that escaped the fire in the main or northern yard are the gate-shed, a long shed on the eastern side of the yard, and the machine shop.

9. There seems to be an impression that the fire that broke out suddenly and unaccountably in the fibre-shed on the southern side of the road above referred to was the result of a deliberate act of incendiarism as the breeze was blowing at the time in a direction different from that in which this shed stood. Although the general direction of the breeze was away from this shed, yet, considering its proximity to the fire and that sparks and cinders were seen flying about in all directions, it was, I think, just possible that the one fire originated from the other. Moreover, it is not easy to believe that when hundreds of persons were about the place eagerly exerting themselves to put out the fire, any one would have been so daring as to commit an act of incendiarism as it were under their very eyes.

10. With regard to the origin of the main fire, however, the matter wears a very suspicious aspect, closely following, as it did, the double fire which took place at Volkart's only four days previously. In connection with this fire also I have examined several witnesses, but none of them can explain or account for the cause of the fire, which, strangely enough, began when the great bulk of the coolies and the head clerk in temporary charge of the place were away to partake of their midday meal. Mr. Wilkieson, the Superintendent, who was here on the day this fire broke out, also made enquiries with, I believe, no better results. The theory that both the fires under report may have been caused by the sparks from the chimneys attached to the machinery in those yards appears to be far from tenable as the sparks emanating from them have been found innocuous by the experience of years. Taking all the circumstances into consideration it appears to me that the fire that broke out at Messrs. Brunton and Son's yard, at any rate, is attributable to incendiarism. It is not surprising that no clue has been found to the actual perpetrators of the crime regard being had to the numerous facilities that an unsuspected labourer working in the premises had for doing this nefarious act without fear of detection. A single matchstick, which a miscreant cooly can easily secrete about his person, is all that is required to set such inflammable materials as fibre ablaze all in a moment. The deed once done unobserved, it is next to impossible to discover the offender as he leaves no clue behind. It is hardly credible that a stranger would dare to fire the buildings in broad day at the imminent risk of detection when night affords him a far safer opportunity for working his wicked will. It seems clear to my mind that the mischief was done by one or more persons having business connected with the yard and from inside.

11. The question of motive for this diabolical act has next to be considered.

The scheme of doing away with the thatched huts at Kalvetti has been a burning question at Cochin ever since the great fire of 1889; and the recent petty fires among some of those huts induced the European firms to present a petition to the municipal council praying that the owners of the huts be compelled to unthatch them. At the meeting of the council on the 31st ultimo it was accordingly resolved to issue a notice to them to the effect that they would be prosecuted unless they removed in 10 days the thatch they had put on without the council's permission. Within two days after the passing of this resolution at the instance of the European firms we have a big fire on the 2nd instant, another the next morning and a third four days after, all in their business premises and unaccounted for. The inference that the European firms incurred the ill-will of some at least of the hut-owners (who are mostly Moplahs) whose dwellings were about to be dismantled is not an unreasonable one, and hence arises the suspicion that one or more of them might have resorted to the desperate expedient of weakening the case against them by demonstrating that the premises of the European firms which have pucka buildings with tiled roofs are not less dangerous to public safety than their own huts which have been made the subject of so much complaint.

12. Assuming the fire at Messrs. Brunton and Son's to have been the result of foul play, the efforts on the parts of the police, the magistracy and the firms cannot do much towards preventing a recurrence of such crimes which can be perpetrated so easily and with such little risk of detection. I would therefore suggest that a substantial reward of a thousand rupees be offered to those giving information leading to the conviction of the party or parties implicated in the said fire. Even if the offer of such a reward does not lead to an immediate detection, I submit it will not fail to serve the very useful purpose of acting as a deterrent to evil-doers, who will be apprehensive of being betrayed by one of their accomplices who might be dazzled by the prospect of a handsome reward.

13. In order to minimize the risk of accidental fires and to diminish the facilities for incendiary ones I propose suggesting to the municipal council that the warehousing in the heart of the town of loose fibre, which is highly inflammable, be prevented or at least controlled under the authority vested in them by the Municipal Act.

14. The losses incurred in the fires are estimated as under, and I understand that they are nearly all covered by insurance:—

(1) Volkart Brothers .. .. Between 3 and 3½ lakhs.
(2) Brunton and Son .. .. Rs. 1,75,000.

15. Every assistance was readily rendered by all classes, officials and non-officials, in putting down the fire, among whom I may mention Mr. J. W. Boys, local Agent of the Bank of Madras, who was the most active and energetic in aiding to arrest the progress of the flames and who has come to be recognized by all as the captain of our impromptu fire brigade; Mr. S. Locke, Chairman of the Municipal Council, who was indefatigable in personally superintending the operations of the municipal staff throughout the fire; Messrs. W. N. and E. Black, who directed the working of some of the pumps day and night; and Mr. G. H. Gunther, Superintendent of the Cochin Sirkar Police, who rendered valuable assistance by promptly bringing the Sirkar pumps and a staff of 30 men and two inspectors, who worked with a will to the end.

16. The fires have been unattended with loss of life.

17. It would be a serious omission on my part were I to fail to bring to your notice one of my sad experiences at the fire. With pumps at hand and men ready to work we were greatly handicapped in our operations, except on the river side, for want of water. To remedy this grave disadvantage in connection with future contingencies I would strongly advocate the sinking of a dozen wells at convenient centres. These wells at a place like Cochin, where the water level is easily reached, will not cost more than Rs. 50 each.

18. The statements recorded by me are herewith submitted as per accompanying list.

ORDER—dated 9th April 1894, No. 849, Judicial.

The correspondence read above relates to the fires which occurred at Cochin on the 2nd, 3rd and 7th February. The origin of the fires is disputed but the Government inclines to the view that they were accidental and agrees with the District Magistrate in thinking it inexpedient to offer any reward for information.

2. It appears to His Excellency in Council that Cochin will never be safe from disasters of this character while cocoanut fibre and oil continue to be stored in great quantities within municipal limits and while the council continues to show such apathy in regard to the substitution of tiled for thatched roofs.

3. The storage of cocoanut fibre and oil can, it seems to Government, be restricted by applying the provisions of section 188 of the Madras District Municipalities Act, 1884, for these articles are certainly "combustible materials" within the meaning of the section. But, as the District Magistrate seems to feel some doubts on the subject, the Government will suggest to the Select Committee to which the Bill to amend Act IV of 1884 has been referred the advisability of inserting the word "fibre" between the words "straw" and "or coal" in clause (iii) of section 188.

4. With regard to the substitution of tiles for thatch, it is observed that, immediately after the great fire of 1889, the municipal council issued a notice prohibiting the reconstruction with thatched roofs of buildings which had been destroyed by the fire unless the written permission of the council had been obtained. But, in spite of this notice and of the monetary assistance offered by Government to enable house-owners to comply with its terms, the reconstruction of buildings with thatched roofs has been permitted and no active steps to punish persons guilty of disobedience to the notice of the 22nd January 1889 seem to have been taken until the 31st January last when they were threatened with prosecution. It is true that a similar threat was made in October 1890 but it appears never to have been acted upon and the Government is not aware whether any prosecutions have been instituted even yet. His Excellency in Council does not deny that the enforcement of the order requiring the substitution of tiles for thatch was attended by difficulties but he considers it unquestionable that the defiance of the council's orders is the result of a want of resolution and energy on its part. The matter must now be taken in hand seriously. The existence of thatched buildings in the crowded portions of Cochin is a great danger and may lead at any time to a catastrophe similar to that which occurred in 1889.

5. It is even more important, however, that the unrestricted storage of combustible articles within the limits of the municipality should be put a stop to. It is reported that the merchants have already removed their stocks and, if storage within the municipality can be absolutely prohibited without unduly hampering trade, there will be no reason to anticipate a recurrence of these disastrous and periodical conflagrations.

6. It has further been suggested that a hose of 100 or 150 yards in length should be obtained with the object of enabling the engines to work at that distance from the back-water, that a dozen wells should be sunk in various parts of the town for the purpose of supplying water or that a steam fire-engine should be obtained to work on the back-water. It will be considered in the Public Works Department which of these schemes is likely to prove most effective and least expensive. The further proposal that a steam fire-engine should be combined with a steam-vessel does not, for several reasons, commend itself to Government, but the cost of an engine combined with a barge would probably not be excessive.

7. It remains to request the District Magistrate to convey to Messrs. Boys, Locke, W. N. Black, E. Black and Gunther the thanks of Government for the assistance afforded by them.

(True Extract.)

Under Secy to Govt
for Chief Secretary.

To the District Magistrate, Malabar.
" Local and Municipal Department.
" Public Works Department.
" Legislative Department.

Exd. A. Raitt.