

Latur, a relatively obscure small town in the Marathwada region of the state of Maharashtra in western India, shot into the news nationwide after a devastating earthquake razed the region surrounding the town to rubble in the pre-dawn hours of September 30, 1993. Around 8,000 people died. According to some non-government organisations (NGOs), the figure was much higher, nearer 11,000 – official estimates do not always account for migrants, infants and those without ration cards. It is also believed that still more unnumbered dead lie buried beneath the uncleared debris. The quake, which measured 6.5 on the Richter scale, left another 16,000 men, women and children injured and over two lakh houses destroyed, making it one of the worst natural disasters in recent history.

Women bore a disproportionate share of the trauma – more women died in the quake than men because the men were sleeping out in the open, while the women were indoors when the pre-dawn tremors began and were trapped under the collapsing debris. More girls than boys died because male children had been sent away to residential schools outside the village, while daughters remained at home. The plight of widows, some of whom lost all their children, was particularly pitiable.

The devastation nonetheless brought in its wake some positive gender-related developments that would not have been triggered off if such a massive calamity had not befallen the community. Women who had never even ventured out of their homes previously (because of caste restrictions for instance), now found themselves impelled to reach out, seeking as well as offering emergency assistance, and, in the process, getting used to community involvement in the public domain.

It was in this scenario that the community's women began to link hands and forge partnerships to cope

Disaster Turned Opportunity

Women in Latur Rebuild Their Lives

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with the disaster. Visiting some of the ravaged villages of the Latur-Osmanabad districts around September 30, 2003 (the tenth anniversary of the quake), one could note the gains that the women had made under different heads: psychological empowerment, skill acquisition and solidarity for a greater voice in community decision-making.

Psychological Empowerment

Although women here remain as economically marginalised as they were before the disaster, these ten years after the quake have seen a significant change in their collective perception of themselves and their role as members of the community. This psychological

change can be counted as the most positive fall-out of the post-quake projects, notwithstanding the many shortcomings in planning and implementing resettlement work – by the community, by donor agencies like the World Bank, by NGOs and by the government.

In Rajouri village, as in several other villages, a *mahila mandal* (women's group) came into existence where previously there was none. Begun in order to pool resources for rehabilitation, these initiatives have grown into on-going movements for gender empowerment. Such *mandals* now run lively *bachat ghats* (group savings schemes that give loans to start income-generation activities). This networking, now in its tenth year, has resulted in women developing significant self-confidence and has encouraged them to continue participating in village-level developmental activities. Mandakini Kadam, *mandal upadhyaksha* (group's Vice-President) Shantabai and Shyamala Ananth Gogre typify the kind of attitudinal changes that these women have developed in the last ten years. "At first we thought, 'What is the point in saving money? And how will we save when we don't have enough to run our houses with?'" they recall. They were, however, persuaded to put by small amounts of Rs. 50 every month, and these savings were pooled to form a corpus from which members could take loans for activities that could generate some earnings. Some bought



The earthquake memorial at Killari village, Marathwada

sheep and goats, some set up small vending shops – and the idea grew, until the self-help groups (SHGs) boast today of a whopping Rs. 1.3 crores as their ‘banked’ savings.

Mangaltai Patil of Katejawalga village and Kantabai Patil of Ambulga taluk are both educated (till the 11th and 10th class respectively), but had been prevented by caste conventions from venturing outside the house. Mangaltai faced ridicule from the community when she first set out to get involved in community work. There were sarcastic comments like, “There goes our social reformer, Savitribai Phule.” However, during the relief work, when saving lives rather than safeguarding conventions took priority, the women not only ventured out but also urged others to join in. Once the conventional handicaps were

broken, it became easy to continue with their involvement without inviting condemnation. Kantabai now works as an active community facilitator.

It is a measure of the assertiveness these women have developed that, during the tenth anniversary observance at Latur on September 30, 2003, one of the women felt emboldened enough to question a State Minister in the middle of a public meeting, demanding to know what the government was doing about closing liquor shops (because drunkenness leads to domestic violence). Ten years ago, none of these women would have dared to thus question a minister. Rajuri village now has no liquor shops, though, as the women concede, the men drink outside the village before returning home. The women’s groups are now agitating for closure of *daru* shops in other places as well.

Acquiring New Skills

Apart from the monetary corpus (which has taught the women to handle and manage money, offered them an



Women of Rajuri outside the toilet facilities they constructed.

escape from usurious local moneylenders and promoted economic activities), these SHGs have helped generate an attitudinal change that has carried over into other areas of their routines, in the form of increased self-confidence. “We decided that if we could handle money, even though we were illiterate and had no experience, we could try our hands at other things too,” says Rukmini Kohli, who garnered sufficient self-confidence to travel to Mumbai and address a meeting at the Press Club to mark the tenth anniversary of the quake.

Contractors entrusted with reconstruction work by the government

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were, not surprisingly, doing a shoddy job. Dissatisfied with the quality of their work, these inexperienced and unlettered but emboldened women volunteered for training in masonry, much to the amusement of the males, when a UNDP project was mooted. They not only learnt the ropes, but went on to acquire the very first contract given by the government for the construction of toilet blocks. The women of Rajuri, led by Ganga Kashinath Bhise, take great pride in 85 such toilets that they built entirely by their own effort. That the toilets are now unused, due to lack of water following a series of drought years, is hardly their fault.

In January 2001, when another earthquake devastated the Kutch region of Gujarat, these women masons travelled to assist women victims in that region and to teach them how to rebuild their houses.

Women of Kutch, in turn, acquired masonry skills which they now pride themselves on. Dilharba Jadeja, 21, is one such Gujarati girl who grew up, sheltered and cloistered, in a conservative *kshatriya* family but has now blossomed into a social activist. Over 600 women in the two regions have learnt masonry skills in the wake of the quake disaster.

Community Involvement

When the women learned to band together to form self-help groups, group solidarity automatically led to collective involvement and action on other fronts. In Rajuri it was the SHG-linked confidence that led to Rukmini Kohli being elected the village’s first woman *sarpanch* in 1994-95. In Kavda village, one of the worst hit hamlets, the 11-member *panchayat* now includes four women more than the statutory one-third requirement, as current male *sarpanch* Sonavane points out.

Shantabai, *upadhyaksha* of a *mahila mandal*, declares that the

mandals have helped bridge caste divisions within the community. Kanthabai Patil of Nilanga district near Latur is today a vocal critic of the administration whenever she feels there is a lack of accountability in public decision-making, which is often. Women's attendance and participation at *gram panchayat* meetings has increased significantly, local NGOs like the Swayam Shikshan Prayog point out. These are all positive developments in the aftermath of the killer quake.

Once they acquired skills like masonry and construction, the women began to question the working of the contractors, exposing shortfalls in cement and shoddy procedures. They even went to the Collector to expose corruption. The *mahila mandal* has also complained to the district education authorities about absentee teachers in village schools. None of this "audacity" or assertiveness would have happened in the social milieu preceding the disaster.

The 4,588 rural women who turned up on September 30, 2003 for the tenth anniversary observance of the earthquake at Latur, did not merely come out with a list of resolutions. They came prepared with a list of demands which included:

1. Allocation of 25 per cent of the annual income of the *panchayats* for plans recommended by women;
2. Sending government directives on development and anti-poverty programmes not only to local government units and *panchayats*, but also to women's SHGs so that they can monitor the work;
3. Female doctors at all primary health centres (PHCs) and allied services to address women's health needs. Health camps, they said, ought to be coordinated by women's groups (instead of being thrust on them via decisions made by males/outside);
4. Personnel trained in mental health at PHCs and rural hospitals in the quake-affected areas to address the

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psychosocial needs of the traumatised population;

5. Action to be taken on the recommendations of village level committees on health, water, sanitation and education (which the women have now started to monitor in some of the villages as part of their empowerment strategies);

6. Marketing outlets for products made by women's groups. At present, governmental effort is confined to training in income generation, without any attention to marketing, which means that the 'training' generates no economic benefits;

7. Withdrawal of the current rule of 51 per cent adult voters' approval as a requirement for cancelling liquor shop licenses. Instead, as in other cases, decisions approved by

a quorum of 100 persons at the *gram sabha* should be accepted.

The minister present during the tenth anniversary observance conceded that the 51 per cent requirement effectively prevented the women's demands for fighting alcoholism from being accepted.

The State government as well as the union ministries have published reports detailing elaborate statistics about monies spent on rebuilding quake-affected villages, number of families rehabilitated etcetera; but activists point out that it is the rural, unlettered women's activism that holds out promises of ensuring a better and more democratic functioning of the state machinery, rather than the efforts of the government.

These gains however, when assessed in the larger context of the community's quality of life and the inputs from official machinery, show a picture that underscores the argument that women's empowerment fails to get translated into meaningful gender-equity unless the state and the male segments also change their mindsets.

One example of the half-baked benefits that conventional initiatives for gender-equity bring is the experience of women who have acquired masonry skills. "We are ready to work, but the male decision-makers in the community



4500 women gathered last year at Latur for the quake's 10th anniversary.

hesitate to employ women for such jobs, thinking that we as women are not capable of doing the job, so that we are without work in spite of our training,” says Shantabai, *upadhyaksha* of the *mahila mandal* of Rajuri.

Psychological empowerment, while essential and welcome, does not translate into better availability of basic services – an example of this is the poor access to health centres in the interior regions. No medical facilities are available at Rajuri, and the nearest primary health centre is 10 kilometres away, observes Shantabai. The situation is not much better in other villages like Sastur or Gubal. The women have learnt to assert themselves and clamour for better services, but their voices are yet to be heeded by the authorities whose mindsets have not kept pace with the transformation in the women’s psyche.

Human Dimension Ignored

A report brought out by doctors and psychiatrists affiliated to NIMHANS (the National Institute of Mental Health and Neuro- Sciences) typifies the insensitivity shown to the non-quantifiable needs of a population that has gone through the shock and stress of a disastrous earthquake. The report takes note of the psychological damage done to the survivors of the quake. “Even today, ten years after the disaster, a light-bulb swaying in the breeze triggers off panic and fears about another imminent tremor,” said one resident of Killari, one of the worst affected villages of the district. The entire village has been rehabilitated in a new location, away from the mound of rubble that the old site was reduced to, and the new dwellings are *pucca* houses meant to withstand any tremors. Yet, understandably, the fear remains deep-seated among many survivors. Little has been done to tackle this damage, one that cannot be measured in terms of the cost of the houses razed or property damaged. Most government-sponsored relief and rehabilitation projects are spelt out only

in terms of financial or economic indices (so many houses rebuilt, so much compensation handed out, so many blankets distributed, loans advanced and so forth). The government report on rehabilitation in the quake-hit regions in fact claims that rehabilitation work has been “completed to the satisfaction of those affected.” The human dimension of the story that one finds as part of the ground realities tells a different tale.

Residents of Kavtha village had other problems to enumerate – their rebuilt houses are now a couple of kilometres away from the old location, which was reduced to rubble. A majority of the residents are farm-workers and they find that they have to walk longer distances to reach the lands that were closer to the old houses. The terrain is such that this causes a couple of extra

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hours to be wasted in walking to and fro, which in turn means less time working on the fields, which again means less earnings.

Essential Needs Neglected

Water is scarce in these districts, and a series of drought seasons has further aggravated the scarcity. While rebuilding entire villages would have been an ideal occasion for better designing the community’s access to basic needs like water, those in charge of implementing the rehabilitation projects did not seize the opportunity for re-designing, with the result that the quality of life, especially for women (whose job it is to fetch water for the family’s daily needs) is tougher now in spite of their

psychological empowerment. Whether their newfound assertiveness succeeds in enforcing accountability in the official machinery for overseeing basic needs remains to be seen. A beginning has recently been made in the form of the list of demands that the women’s groups are pursuing with the local authorities.

Even in places where water supply schemes have been put in place – in Mangrul, for instance – the hand pumps soon broke down and remain in need of repairs. On paper, so many hundred pumps have been installed; in reality, most of them do not function. If water and sanitation problems remain and the skills that the women have acquired do not bring them jobs, how meaningful does their “psychological empowerment” and self-confidence become?

At the *mahila mandal* meeting of Rajuri where this question was put to the *maji* (former) *sarpanch* Rukmini Baburao, quick came the answer not only from her but also in chorus from two *anganwadi* workers, Jijabai Kadam and Urmila Prakash Ingle: “Of course, it makes a huge difference,” they said. “Unless we raise our voices and demand our rights, nothing is going to be handed to us voluntarily. Previously we didn’t even have the courage to question, to ask. Now we are making a noise. They cannot ignore us for long, whether it is the local administration or the higher authorities. After acquiring a sense of confidence, it has taken us a while to learn the ropes and understand how the machinery works. We will see that our demands are attended to. Give us some time, come back in a year or two. You will see the difference.”

The women have to perceive themselves as agents of change before they become such. Hurdles will continue to confront them, in the form of official apathy, corruption and ‘backlash’ hostility from entrenched patriarchal attitudes, but a beginning has been made. And it was the earthquake that triggered it, even if it was a disaster.

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