

Since the families of both of us come from Kutch, we felt we had to go and figure out for ourselves ways in which we could be of help to victims of the devastating earthquake. We reached Gandhidham on February 7. Everyone complained that the government machinery was extremely slow in responding to the crisis, took a long time before they started rescue operations, and gave up in a bit of a haste. The officials justified discontinuing the rescue efforts on the ground that there would be no more people alive under the rubble after a week or ten days. However, as Sakarben Sawla of Gandhidham pointed out, even on February 10, some people were rescued from the rubble after 16 days. Sakarben said, wherever the air managed to seep through and reach those pockets where people lay buried, there was all likelihood of people surviving, even after a fortnight. This area has a lot of Jains who are traditionally used to long periods of fasting (even up to three months) and can go without food or water for long stretches of time.

Electricity, phone lines, water services, hospitals, government offices lay destroyed. Due to the loss of life and injuries, few local people were available for relief work. Though transport was available to take the injured to hospital, there was no one to drive the vehicles. Announcements were being made at the state transport bus stands asking for people who knew driving to come forward. But even the drivers of the state transport were themselves affected by the earthquake not many were available. The vacuum was filled in by the RSS and VHP cadres who were the first ones to rush forward to help the distressed.

Nilesh Jethwa, a young boy from Anjar involved in rescue work told us, "In the beginning we took out the dead bodies, identified them and took

Rising out of its Own Ashes

People's Initiative in Post Earthquake Gujarat

○ Chetna Galla Sinha and Jayant Diwan

The following account by Chetna and Jayant highlights the spirit of self help among the earthquake stricken people of Gujarat which was not dampened by the failure of the government machinery in providing the necessary relief following the great calamity. The first to initiate relief and rescue operations were various socio-religious organisations and missions but this report highlights the fact that communities with strong caste, community and kinship ties were able to cope with the calamity far better than those who lacked such efficient networks.

them to the cemetery. But this turned out to be too time-consuming. The Anand Margis involved in relief work advised us to conduct mass cremations. In that grave situation, with thousands of dead bodies rotting all over, we were not even able to keep a count of the number of cremations." People we talked to confirmed what has been widely reported in newspapers, that the RSS cadres were the first to come to their aid. They took the injured to the hospital for treatment at the Jubilee grounds.

Very soon, the local people started looting houses, and shops. Even the police officials were not spared by the looters. For two days the looting continued, before the army took over. In the meanwhile, people in Gandhidham started patrolling at night, to protect themselves.

State Government Fails the People

Government apathy and inefficiency to provide instant relief to the distressed in Kutch has resulted in a total loss of faith in its capability to come to the aid of its citizens in any crisis. A lot of people died as they were left unattended. J.C. Bhatt, a bank officer, complains, "Ours must be the most inefficient government in

the world. There were people calling out for help to be drawn out from the debris but to no avail. "We could save some people from the rubble but for two days they were lying unattended. Though a few were sent to the army hospital, due to the delay, the injured bled excessively and many died of cold." If only medical aid were provided in time, the number of deaths would have been substantially lower." Bhat lives in Bhuj, with a job at the Bank of India. The loss of family, (brother, his wife, and mother-in-law) and property has left him inconsolable. A disappointed Joseph Bhai echoed popular sentiment when he said: "We are ready to stay in tents but we want to start earning as soon as possible so that we are able to survive on our own."

Rescuing the injured from the rubble, taking the injured to hospitals, cremating the dead, setting up medical camps, and other rescue activities have been undertaken by agencies other than the state government. The people, however, are thankful that the government has at least been successful in restoring water, electricity and phone services!

Villages around Bhuj, Anjar, Bhachau, have already begun re-

construction of houses on their own. The people of Ratnal, a village 15 kilometres from Anjar, which has a large population of truck drivers, began construction work independently as governmental support and advice was not forthcoming.

Lack of coordination made matters worse. A team of doctors, including orthopaedic surgeon, Dr. Shyam Mukhi, who had agreed to fly down to Kutch for free medical aid, were left stranded for hours at Mumbai airport, because the government failed to provide them the promised airplanes to take them expeditiously to the affected areas. After a long wait, the team was left with no choice but to undertake a lengthy train journey by the Kutch Gandhidham Express.

Likewise, Dr. Chheda's team of 25 doctors was stuck at the Mumbai airport for hours as the government did not arrange for the promised plane to fly them to Bhuj. The entire team had to travel for 36 hours by train to Bhuj before they could commence the relief work, thus losing precious time which could have been used for saving lives.

In a meeting of the relief associations network called the *Abhiyan*, some doctors who had arrived from Sanjeevani Hospital, Pune, to provide medical services complained that they were unable to put their services to full use as there was nobody from the administration to guide their efforts. While these doctors wanted to provide medical aid to the distressed, they were asked by the government to conduct surveys instead of medical relief.

The government failed to perform even a minimally supportive role in the medical relief taken up by social organisations and private initiative. The Sarvodaya Hospital was stretched to its limits in caring for the injured on a war footing. Outside help

poured in from all over the world, including Non Resident Indians (NRIs). Several foreign agencies rushed in with the necessary equipment for medical help and other relief requirements. Since they were unfamiliar with the place and language, they were in special need of guidance and coordination. Even after two weeks, we found the state government floundering in this simple task.

If the government authorities had functioned efficiently, a lot more could



Rescue operations Photo: India Today

have been done to further the relief efforts. The earthquake occurred at 8:30 a.m. The Chief Minister was still taking the salute at a parade in Gandhinagar at 11:30 a.m. and reached Bhuj the next day. By contrast, during the earthquake, the then Chief Minister of Maharashtra Sharad Pawar, had reached Latur within a few hours of the earthquake and the entire secretariat was at work by the time the CM's helicopter landed in Latur.

The media and political figures

visiting the town were repeatedly asked to provide for paramedical people, trained nurses and doctors. There was no communication from them, much less help in any form.

Voluntary Medical Care

The earthquake had destroyed the government hospitals and private nursing homes. Medical camps by the Indian Medical Association and the military hospitals were set up at the Jubilee grounds at Bhuj. Surgery was being performed at these camps. Mandvi is a *tehsil* center which has a hospital but no operation theatre.

Bidra and Bhojai are villages in Mandvi where hospitals of the Sarvodaya Trust are situated. A medical camp had been held at Bidra just three days before the earthquake and two attending doctors stayed back at the villagers' request for the January 26 celebrations. They were able to set up the camp soon after the earthquake struck. Shri Liladhar Gada, trustee of the hospital, also reached Bidra with a 40 doctor medical team.

The Sarvodaya Trust Hospital at Bidra was set up twenty years ago. Medical camps have regularly been set up by the Trust with surgeons from various specialities. The hospital is funded by Jain industrialists from Kutch and NRIs.

When the two of us reached Bidra on February 8, the medical camp set up in tents was jam-packed with patients well looked after – with bandages and plasters in place, being attended to by their family members. The patients were getting medicines and they with their family members were being provided free food and hot water for bathing. Dr Dhiraj Chheda from Mumbai was the organising mentor. He came to Bhuj with a team of 25 doctors from Mumbai. Dr Shyam Mukhi, an orthopedic, brought a whole set of surgical instruments by air to Bhuj. Dr Chheda told us: "On the first day itself 800-900 injured

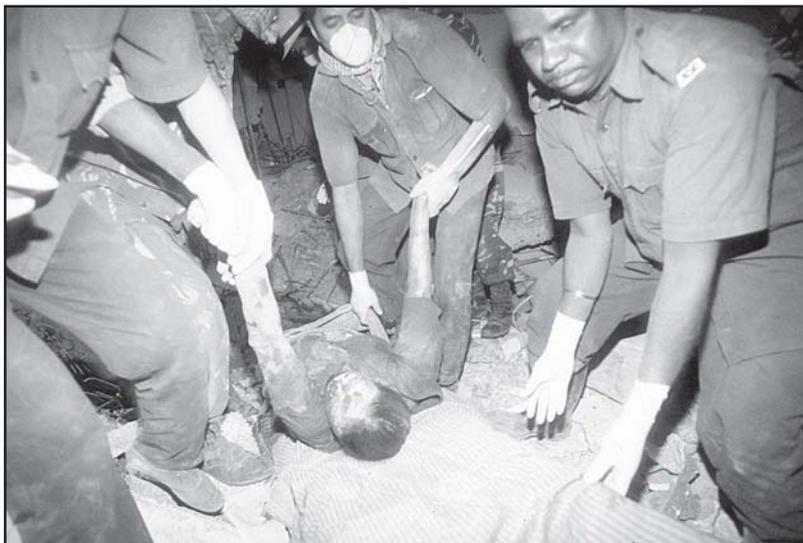
were brought to our camp. That day we handled 80 surgical cases. We have 150 beds at this camp. The entire brunt of the nursing work is being handled by only three nurses working round the clock. They are fatigued, but there are no replacements for them. With paramedical staff being unavailable, the surgeons had to even give injections to the patients.”

The Nair hospital at Mumbai is starting a unit at Bhachau tehsil and the Sarvodaya Trust is in touch with them. The injured can now be sent to Bidra instead of Kutch. A medical camp set up by the Red Crescent of India with medical experts from Mumbai, was unable to provide any substantial help besides first aid. An operating table worth lakhs had been bought by the society, but this expensive equipment was lying waste in the tents.

Amidst the pain and the confusion of patients and their relatives, on the night of February 8, a spiritual discourse by a visiting Jain *sadhu* gave succour to the distressed. After a religious discourse, the *sadhu* asked the people congregated there to sing. The *bhajans* and discourse by the *sadhus*, had a visibly soothing effect.

Socio-Religious Organisations Lead

At Bhuj, Anjar, Rapar and Bhachau, which are the main affected towns, we found socio-religious organisations playing a leading role in carrying out rescue and relief operations. Among the most noticeable were the Swaminarayan Sect, the Ramakrishna Mission, Kutchi Jain Bisa Oswal, Kutchi Youth Society, Dhera Saccha Sauda, various Sikh gurudwaras which ran big *langars* and ISKCON teams. They had pitched big tents, where the people were being graciously offered food. Other than these, the local *Jati mandalis* (caste associations) were also contributing in their own way.



A woman being pulled out of the rubble

Courtesy: India Today

The Ramakrishna Mission camp was set up in a middle class area and they were working in close association with camps set by other communities like the Saccha Sauda. The Mission conducted a house-to-house survey and distributed coupons, which were exchanged for foodstuffs. A worker from the Mission said, “We are not only providing relief help, but are also initiating relocation work. At the time of the cyclone we made 180 homes. This time we would be doing about double the number.” The Ramakrishna Mission carried out their relief measures with great sensitivity, taking care not to make the people feel demeaned or obligated while accepting relief.

The Swaminarayan Sect had set up their camp in Samkhiyari village, near Bhachau. We two were stopped at the entrance to the camp as the *swamis* do not present themselves before females. Their associate worker Ghanshyam Waghaliya said their volunteers had surveyed 80 villages. Tents had been put up in 26 villages and they would fully adopt 6-7 villages for rehabilitation work. Bhachau *tehsil* has been selected by the Maharashtra government for reconstruction work. Ghanshyambhai

reported that the *swamis* go to the villages, hold *satsangs* and distribute relief measures.

There was no water supply in the earthquake-hit areas. However water was distributed in pouches and mineral water bottles were also provided. Mineral water bottles had come from as far as Oman. Since Rapar does not have good drinking water and stomach problems are common, the clean drinking water from Oman was a treat. Rapar is one of the badly affected areas, and since government aid did not reach the people on time, they sought relief from their relatives in Mumbai. The Swiss Embassy was actively involved in the rescue work and received a lot of appreciation from the people. They employed trained dogs to sniff the rubble and help detect the presence of people under the rubble. They also had the right tools needed for digging and employed micro cameras to track the position and location of the injured. The team could, therefore chart the best route to get to the trapped with least damage to them. Watching this team was a learning experience in how disaster management operations need to be undertaken.

In Bhuj, Anjar, and Bhachau, the streets were under rubble, so

vehicular movement or walking on foot was difficult. To clear the roads, the use of cranes and bulldozers were necessary. In Gandhidham, IFFCO (Indian Farmer's Fertilizer Cooperatives) was working to clear the rubble with their equipment. While Reliance was working in Anjar, Larsen & Toubro was working in Rapar and Bhachau. The officers from L&T told us that they planned to resettle the people temporarily in tents, until the government directed them as to where the village would be re-settled. All these multinational companies were utilising large cranes, bulldozers and other equipment to clear the roads so that the houses and the bodies stuck within would be accessible.

At Bhadreshwar, a religious centre of the Jain community, relief work was not being undertaken, despite the crores of rupees held in a trust with that institution. Similarly, we were somewhat surprised to see that Jamait-e-Islam had not engaged in any visible relief work, among the Muslim community. It was left to ISKCON to make a commitment to provide food to the villagers in this area for a month.

Spirit of Self-Help

Several newspapers had reported escalating tension between various castes and communities over the distribution and access to relief. Some political parties had made a big issue that Muslims and poorer communities were being discriminated against. Our impression was that instead of discrimination, another factor was at work in determining who got how much help. In the absence of any immediate aid from the government, people instinctively organised themselves community-wise, to cope with the disaster that had struck them. This internal cohesiveness enabled people to organise themselves instantly to carry out relief, for at least their own community members. For example, there are 250-300 people of

the Shia community in Bhuj, who have well-organised community networks and organisations, both within the country and abroad. Shaukat Khoja is the secretary of the Shia community. Within days he was able to trace the foreign settled relatives of an old woman who had died in the earthquake — all this through the network of the Shia community in Mahua and London. The Mahua federation had committed itself to provide all the requirements for setting up new homes for 25 families, within days. For example, Kutch Yuvak Sangh provided for free phones, once the facility was available. This enabled monitoring the rescue work and the relief operations being carried out by their volunteers.

Even after facing the earthquake, the people of Kutch have their self-confidence intact. The Jain and Patel communities are reluctant to wait for the government to take up rebuilding activity. These two have their own camps and were independent of government support. The Jains from Rapar have business establishments in Mumbai and were thus able to seek quick assistance from their kinship networks. The relief camps in Rapar were well organised with each Jain

family housed in good quality tents. Water, food grains, milk and clothes were in adequate supply. However, Monghiben, a Dalit woman of Pharadi village told us, "We are not getting enough food and supplies, as our community representatives are fighting with their own people. They have no unity."

Govind Bhai Jethwa, a government employee, coordinating the Mistry camp at Anjar told us, "After the earthquake, there was a state of total chaos, with people desperately searching for their family members amidst the rubble. A collective marriage ceremony was to take place on January 26, and a family-wise list of the community had been prepared for this purpose, which helped us detect the number of people dead or missing in our community." While speaking to Govind Bhai, we also met Joseph Bhai, a Khatri Muslim. On being questioned on the issue of communal tension, Joseph Bhai replied, "Twice, I had lunch in the Mistry camp and I felt no tension there." But he felt that the people should form a coordination committee consisting of representatives from various community organisations, especially to deal with the problem of



Community kitchens being run by volunteers

Courtesy: India Today

resettlement. It is quite apparent that well-organised communities were quicker in putting their act together and start rebuilding their lives more easily than the poorly-organised ones. It is the traditional community networks that created an efficient infrastructure for rendering appropriate help. Those communities which lack inner cohesiveness and functioning networks in normal times, found it harder to respond to the challenge and make use of the available resources as well as some others did.

There have been several media reports about caste and communal discrimination in relief and rehabilitation work. While such incidents are not surprising in communally polarised cities like Ahmedabad, in rural areas we did not find much evidence of such vicious divides. The work of organisations like the Swaminarayan sect and Ramakrishana Mission also did not betray any such biases.

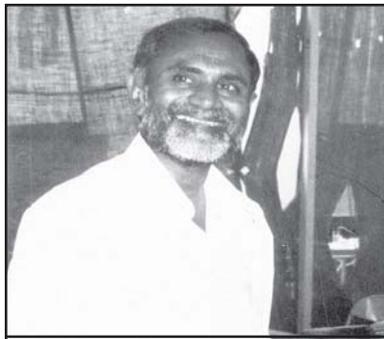
Over Sensational Coverage?

The print media has to an extent failed in its responsibility towards the public, despite giving prominent coverage to the tragic event. It tended to seek out and relish in a good deal of sensationalism. Mavjibhai Sawla, an eminent personality of Gandhidham said, "The newspapers reported that Gandhidham, Bhachau, Bhuj, Samkhiyari, and Rapar were completely destroyed. This has caused terror and fear among the public. The reported deaths would statistically constitute half of the entire population of Kutch. That is clearly not the case."

Apart from the over-exaggeration, the print media stands accused of frequent inaccuracies. In Pharadi village of Mandvi taluka, Damji Bhai showed us a news report in a Gujarati paper dated February 6, which stated that Madhapur village was not

affected by the earthquake. The same paper on February 7, reported a loss of property worth 3 crore at Madhapur and there was no clarification given in response to the earlier report.

Dr. Dhiraj Chheda, of Sarvodaya hospital said, "Newspapers print headlines such as 'Gastro-epidemic in Kutch'. They do not realise the tensions the hospital faces. If gastroenteritis patients start pouring into the hospital, where would they be put up?" Dr Dhiraj continues, "Newspaper reporters accompany political figures. I requested reporters to write about the lack of paramedical staff that was hampering the relief work. Trained nurses are needed



Dr. Dhiraj Chheda

urgently. Dressings, injections, medicines have to be administered by the doctors. I told them, please print appeals and let the people know of our needs." The Sarvodaya Trust, Mumbai, held a press conference on February 11, and went so far as to tell the reporters that, if the print media did not like to print their appeal, then they were ready to give a paid advertisement calling for nursing and

paramedical staff. And yet, this requirement was not adequately publicised.

Something to ponder upon

Earthquakes are not a new phenomena. Darbhanga in Bihar, Uttarkashi in Uttaranchal, Latur in Maharashtra and now Kutch and Saurashtra in Gujarat have seen widespread damage and loss of life due to earthquakes. Anjar faced a devastating earthquake in 1956, which totally destroyed the whole city. If only the government had taken up reconstruction of quake-resistant houses at that time more seriously, Anjar would not have been affected so badly. All future re-construction work should be such that the houses are able to resist any subsequent calamity. Though people have been forthcoming in donating money, old clothes and other such provisions, we are still unprepared for the emergencies that natural disasters like earthquakes subject us to. A government which cannot function efficiently in the best of times is not likely to put in place effective disaster management plans of action. Therefore, relief work and medical aid is not as effective as it should be. Maybe, if people stop counting on the government and take charge of rebuilding their lives and neighbourhoods, the quality of our civic life would improve dramatically. □

Chetna Galla is Chairperson, Man Deshi Mahila Sahakari Bank, Mhaswad, Maharashtra.

We had announced in our last issue that we would be publishing an interview with Mani Shankar Aiyar of the Congress party in this issue of Manushi. We began the interview. The first session lasted 4-5 hours with the transcription covering 74 typed pages. But due to a variety of pressures, we have not yet managed a second session to complete the interview. We regret this delay and hope our readers will bear with us.