

## [Maharashtra Earthquake](#)

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## Building Lives and Villages After Maharashtra Earthquake

Deep in the subterranean crust under the soil of the Latur region in Maharashtra, India, two plates of rock as large as Japan came slightly unglued like two zippers going in opposite directions. A millisecond later, stones cobbled together by mere mud rained down from whipsawing walls and roofs onto families asleep in pre-dawn darkness. A 6.1 earthquake had struck. It was September 30th, the day after the final celebratory day of Ganesha Chaturthi. One hundred and seven villages were flattened or severely damaged. Ten thousand died in the deluge of rubble, most because search-and-rescue efforts were hampered. Sixty-five thousand became homeless. Rumors were trafficked that somehow Lord Ganesha was responsible for the quake. But as in the pre-dawn, January 17th 6.6 earthquake that jolted Los Angeles, California-killing 56, injuring 8,000, 25,000 homeless-the disaster was natural geology, not supernatural eschatology. A renewed spirit of religiousness has blossomed in L.A. out of the quake crisis. In Latur, as our report explores, historic and heroic rehabilitation efforts by Hindu organizations and individuals, casteism and religious competition are blending into a complicated social curry. By Sujata Anandan, Bombay

The green grapes are sweetening once more in the rich, black soil of Killari (the quake's epicenter) and will be ripe for the picking in a few weeks. It would be no surprise if these grapes went on to win the top prize at an international grape show as they did in London in 1991. It is difficult to believe so much

has changed here. But the new temporary settlements of galvanized iron or stiff straw stand witness to a complete rupture in the village ethos. Ironically, most of the survivors are the very poor who couldn't afford to live in stone houses-rock bound together by mud, not cement, which would have prevented the huge death toll. The poor had to content themselves with straw houses, with-at best-asbestos sheets for a roof. The straw homes either withstood the quake, or if they caved in, caused little harm. Along with the stone houses of the unlucky wealthy, each villages' rock temples tumbled down, leaving deity images abandoned to the rubble, like the defaced Ganesha in Killari. Lord Vithal of Rajegaon now rests in the open, under the shade of a benevolent mango tree. The Maharashtra government is promising to build one Hindu temple and one mosque per village as part of the rehabilitation. But there is little likelihood that the government's temple-rebuilding efforts will duplicate the ancient grace of Killari's Nilkanteshwar Temple whose majestic Nandi is today unworshipped, deserted and lonely in the ruins. Alongside the narrow roadways that vein through this table-flat farming region are dozens of encampments. Temporary straw and tin shacks with small sacred basil plants in front squat alongside new cement block housing, corrugated iron structures and ferro-cement huts based on Buckminster Fuller's geodesic design. It is quake-proof, rain-proof, wind-resistant and cooler in the broiling summer. But villagers-in what could be labeled the Spoiled Disaster Dependent Syndrome (see sidebar)-are snickering at it, jibing each other with jokes about "Where do you keep the cows?" A legitimate concern cropped up among the land-savvy farmers, who ask, "Where do we store the grain?" "Many believe their fate is some kind of divine punishment and a volcano will erupt from the earth," says Shrikumar Poddar, who toured the earthquake scene in mid-December. Tremors were still

rumbling and steam rising from cracks. Poddar lives in Lansing, Michigan, USA, and in Bombay, is a Vaishnava Hindu and founder of International Service Society. He explained that a lot of money came in earmarked for relief measures but not for rehab projects. The Hare Krishna response from Bombay is one example of Hindu cavalry to the rescue to offer swift relief [see sidebar]. Aromar Revi, a disaster consultant, says the rehab effort is running into a serious problem of too much money promised in the future, with too few people and little money at work now. The Maharashtra government-supported by the World Bank-launched a US\$430 million rehabilitation program that will fund the building of three kinds of homes, plus civic and religious structures. The smallest plots and houses will go to the poor and even to the previously homeless. These are totally free of cost. On a rising scale of economic status, larger homes are being built for wealthier villagers-at no cost. But if they want more land, they have to buy it from the government. Shrikumar Poddar points out that, "As a result of the government's promises, a majority of funds from public sources dried up. The government and voluntary groups performed magnificently at the disaster's onset. Now, almost everyone has pulled out except for a few dedicated voluntary groups." Among the cadres that are toiling in a sun-baked karma yoga are religious organizations-both Hindu and Christian-and secular groups like the Hindustan Petroleum Corp. Ltd. manned by corporate employees, who are mainly Hindu. It is, in fact, the secular corporate or civic groups that are accomplishing more than the spiritual ones. While two major Christian organizations moved in to help, there are no Christians in this region. This fueled speculation about induced conversions. Christianity is conspicuous by its absence in these areas of Maharashtra, but being part of the estate of the erstwhile Nizam of Hyderabad, there are 10-15% Muslims in every village. They have

coexisted peacefully with the Hindus over the centuries. No Muslim aid showed up except for one rich Arabian man who drove an expensive car in and started handing out Rs. 200,000 to Muslims only. But he was crowded by eager non-Muslims too, and drew a gun to clear a path to escape. The state government hasn't yet started constructing 80 new relocated villages. It is slowly dribbling funds to volunteer groups to build housing, even to reincarnate entire villages that the groups "adopt." Volunteers are building about 5,000 homes. Meanwhile a dark windstorm of despair, laziness and superstition has blanketed the villagers. The government has announced it will take care of everything, thus sapping the initiative of the locale folk, and no one expects the government housing to be finished before the onset of the next monsoon in May. Hindu volunteers escorted frightened villagers to their old homes in the dead of night to allay fears. Good crops were being left in the field to rot till the government stopped relief supplies, forcing the farmers to harvest. Officials are doling out thousands of sleeping pills in a desperate-and many feel misguided-attempt to deal with crisis trauma. And it is apparent that Hindu volunteers need training in crisis counseling. The villagers are proving tough on political maneuvering. They are suing political party Shiv Sena for proselytizing during their relief efforts. And the stratas of caste are surfacing in rebellions against the government's intention to mix castes in the new settlements. You might have a harijan as your neighbor on the right, a brahmin to the left and a maratha across the road. Jayshree Maruti Dudbhate, a young, poor sheep farmer says, "I can live with a Muslim neighbor. But I certainly will not live beside a mang or a mahar"-considered the lowest castes among Maharashtrans, and who are now Buddhists. In the village of Sastur, Baburao Shantappa Dhanuri of the Siva-worshipping Lingayat community, offers his own reasons. "It is better to bunch

similar castes together and separate one from the other." A mild-mannered man, he says his call for the sustaining of original divisions in society are more cultural than casteist. "We are vegetarians. They aren't. People of the same caste understand each others' compulsions well." The low castes are all for separate settlements. One man affirms, "The upper castes will always blame us for contaminating their water or polluting their homes. It is better to live separately but peacefully." In the ruddy, smoke-laced twilight of another tiring day, dozens of orange-robed swamis from the Swaminarayan Temple Trust (STT) sit in chairs at an impromptu conference, hurry on important errands or are leading a melodious bhajan before huddled male villagers. Bhajans and kathak story-telling were welcome spiritual salve provided by many Hindu groups. SST is part of the worldwide Swaminarayan Fellowship group, headquartered in Gujarat. And this is Samudral, allotted to the SST as an adopted village with 284 homes to build. SST is the major Hindu presence out here, the only organization to take on full-scale rehab work, something brand new to them. They are pros at relief work, but reengineering a village from dirt up is a daunting task. Out in the purplish evening, at other adopted villages are Christian priests from the Churches Auxiliary for Social Action (CASA) and Caritas India (CI), an organization of the Catholic dioceses of India. CASA, with its experience at the 1991 earthquake site of Uttarkashi in the Himalayas, already has many homes finished. CI, with experience in Nepal and Bangladesh, is intending to finish 410 homes by mid-July and has moved in social workers, including priests and nuns. The Swaminarayan group lost precious time in starting home construction by insisting on the building of a Swaminarayan Temple before the houses. Maharashtra Chief Minister put his foot down last month saying they could have their temple but he must first have the homes. Soon after, huge boards proclaiming the new

settlement of Samudral as "Swaminarayanagar" emerged on the site, angering the villagers who want no change in their identities. "Let the homes come up first, then we shall formally resist the attempt to rename the village," says Nilu Kamble. Kamble explains that the STT already set the backs up of his fellow villagers by ostracizing women who are neither given darshan by the swamis or allowed to take prasad from them at the evenings end, when women are barred from the camp. Nagabai Keshav Kokate and other fellow village women decided to remain loyal to the village diety Ambabai, currently in a shed at the settlement. Her worshippers will have to find a suitable home, now that the new village temple will be devoted to Swaminarayan. At the CI village site I stand in the blazing sun with Father Joachim-head of CI operations here-to ask him, "There have been reports that Catholic organisations entrusted with construction activities have been attempting..." "Conversions?" Father Joachim seizes the option. "Yes. I've heard the reports. They are untrue." CI has been accused by the press of distributing literature among the villagers in the early relief stages, but Father Joachim denies this emphatically. "When we showed those newspaper reports to the villagers, none could confirm the allegations. We have no Bibles to give. Our daily prayers are said only among the priests and nuns." The Hindu relief efforts rolled in and many lessons were learned. For the villagers, the cycles of nature roll on; farming is a predictable labor, but weather and Earth unpredictable. Survivors are ensured of a good harvest that will keep the home fires burning in their new abodes, and a new spirit will rise. Hindus to the Rescue

The Hindu relief teams rushed to the Latur region like cavalry out of the Old West. Swaminarayan Fellowship, Vishva Hindu Parishad, ISKCON Hare Krishna, Ananda Marg and others saddled up to the rescue. Hare Krishna filed this press release report: The devotees staying in the six-storied brahmachari

ashram in Bombay were getting ready for the Mangala Arati at 4am. Suddenly, the whole building started shaking as the earthquake struck Latur. The temple devotees rallied around for a short meeting and decided to dispatch a relief team immediately. All available material from the Food for Life (FFL) supplies was collected within the next four hours. Two temple FFL vans, a hired truck stuffed with food, and a jeep left at 10pm. The FFL troop went everyday to a very severely affected area: Ganjankhed. Often the roads were in bad shape and the adjoining fields were mushy due to incessant rains. One evening the FFL team was forced to halt one kilometer from their destination. Leaving the driver, the others loaded baskets of prasadam and started walking. The local police ordered the lone driver to remove the vehicle. He pleaded with them, but they insisted. Fearing the devotees would miss the van in the darkness the driver pleaded again with the police. Regarding this as defiance, the police started hitting him with a lathi (bamboo stick). Raghunath, the driver, shouted for fellow devotees. Hearing the shouts of "Haribol, Haribol," two of the devotees in the end of the receding party rushed back. The others joined them and, boarding the van, tried to move away. There was no space to turn the van-eventually it ploughed into the field and got stuck in the mud. The FFL relief team had to walk to the village and stay that night. The next morning the devotees rescued the van with the aid of a tractor. The FFL distributed halva, puri and sabji, a pleasant and much appreciated turn from the daily quota of dal, rice and sabji. The villagers appreciated the help from the Hare Krishna devotees by touching their feet. Victims who are Spoiled

Is there a balance between humanitarian relief and self-help? In 1991 an earthquake ripped through Uttarkashi in the Himalayas. Over a two-year period, as food, materials, men and money came in to reconstruct the victims' lives, the once

hardworking mountainfolk-like spoiled children-turned churlish, lazy, violent and corrupt. Everyone who lost a house was paid a generous Rs.10,000 plus materials, largely as a result of Swami Rama's death-fast at Uttarkashi. Living in the area were 47,000 families, yet there were 56,000 claiming compensation. Victims refused to help in rebuilding their own houses or in gaining employment. When the Ramakrishna Mission finished 60 new houses in Netala village, mission workers were abused for not building an extra 100. In one case American carpenters were nearly beat up after deciding to build homes for the homeless instead of extra homes for some. Corruption is thriving. A village headman certified that 60 houses in his village were destroyed rather than the actual six. Meanwhile, all government buildings-like schools-remain damaged. The Maharashtra rehabilitation effort may go the same way: too much money, too little self-help.