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Swami Rama Wins More Government Quake Relief With Fast-To-Death Vow

Himalayan Sage Mobilizes Small Movement from a Makeshift Delhi Office to Marshal More Supplies and Helicopter Rescues for Helpless Uttar Pradesh Villagers

Rishikesh, Himalayan foothills, 2:53 A.M., October 20th. The moonlit Ganges placidly glides past Swami Rama's ashram. The sturdy, gray-haired sage is in his room meditating, as is his nocturnal regimen. Twelve ashramites are sound asleep. Suddenly, 100 miles east and 10 miles below the earth, a massive Indian tectonic plate collides with the Asian plate, unleashing 15 times more force than Hiroshima's atomic bomb. The ashram quivers. Disciples run downstairs and innocently laugh about "who fell of the bed" and try to guess what number on the Richter scale reading it is.

With the sun, came the tragic news. Over two thousand people were crushed. The Uttarkashi region of Uttar Pradesh was reduced to rubble. Much of the region is at 10,000 feet and accessible only by footpath. Winter is in the air and snows could drift in on China winds any moment.

Within 24 hours, CNN had the whole world informed - another grizzly death-toll somewhere in South Asia. In a few days it faded away. In India, central and state governments scrambled to send relief - 55,000 blankets, 25,000 tarpaulin tents and countless gunnysacks of rice. But bureaucratic mishandling, and poor distribution coordination crippled their best intentions. The Prime Minister of India announced US\$ 22 million in cash would be awarded the victims immediately. But three weeks later less than 1/100th of that had actually made it up to the villagers - the rest cruelly stuck in a petty state/federal standoff and siphoned into pockets along the way.

At his ashram, Swami Rama read quake news each day from lean Rishikesh tabloids. He knew this region in a heartfelt way. It was in Uttarkashi, as young sannyasin, he had wandered, meditating in caves perched on the spectacular wildflower slopes and cavernous gorges that wind back up to Gangotri - the sacred source of the Ganges. More recently, in nearby Garwhal, he is endearing himself to the whole region building a giant modern hospital. But still, to devotees he displayed no nostalgic preoccupation. What had happened was tragic, but exquisitely linked to divine order. Then, abruptly, his mood changed.

After a meditation he heard a voice," Dr. Aruna Bhargava, a resilient at his ashram, told HINDUISM TODAY. "The voice said: 'Either you can crush your conscience, meditate and do your japa or stand up and fight for these helpless villagers.'" These kind of messages aren't daily fare even for yogis and aren't ignored. So like the earth flipping its poles, the broad-shouldered yogi reoriented his universe - the center was now the people of Uttarkashi. From that moment, his every thought orbited around their needs. "It was then he sent me up to the devastated areas so I could bring him an eye-witness report," Dr. Bhargava said. (See box right). "Then he announced he would take the voice of the people to the government and called a meeting at the ashram. He spoke without alarm, even telling us stories about his early days in the hills - his pet bear, the time he was sitting in his cave and a tiger family camped at the entrance and how he mentally talked them into departing."

But under the serene voice, thunder rumbled. After personally visiting the afflicted areas, on November 11th, Swami posted a letter to the Prime Minister of India Narasimha Rao which read in part: "The villagers and their children are living in open camps in the cold. The whole area is infested by leopards and bears who have already carried away many children. Dear Prime Minister, I appeal to your sense of justice and compassion. Forget politics for a little while. Be pragmatic. Do what needs to be done to bring immediate and effective relief to the people of Uttarkashi and Chamoli. Do not delay. If adequate measures are not taken in 15 days, I and other concerned people will hold a fast unto death."

Swami Rama opened a bank account in the name of Earthquake Rehabilitation Committee and made a deposit of \$100,000 from his own book trust, adopted a village called Ginda and started rebuilding homes himself. He set up an office in Delhi and staffed it with his own young devotees. "We were shocked by the lack of concern in Delhi," Dr. Aruna Bhargava said. "It was appalling. They were saying things like, 'Oh yes, an earthquake happened, but now it's over.' So we held a big rally. Swami launched a movement. Our days started at 4 AM and ended at

midnight. It felt just like Gandhi's movement with all the spirit of the Bhagavad Gita - 'work not for the fruit.'"

On November 27th, Swami Rama sent another letter to Prime Minister Rao saying, "Please remember that this area is the motherland of the Ganga and Yamuna, the inspirational ground of Indian culture and spirituality. The young men of this region have died while protecting our borders. He then listed seven demands including: compensation of US\$ 2,000 for dependents of each deceased and US\$ 800 to those injured; relief work to be transferred from government agencies to the military; public account of all monies received and spent on relief work and destroyed homes rebuilt immediately.

Dr. Bhargava explained, "We wanted the military because they have helicopters which can access the high altitudes. Already snows have trapped 1,300 people which the helicopters are now rescuing." Also the quake collapsed a key bridge that leads from Uttarkashi into the populated Gangotri highlands. Only the military could quickly rebuild it.

News of the prominent yogi's imminent fast rippled passionately across India via radio, TV and newspapers and to all of swami's Himalayan Institute centers world-wide. Devotees called to dissuade him. He refused, "Not until all the demands are met will I give up."

"I called Swamiji from Malaysia on December 3rd," recounts devotee Dr. Mohan. "Tensions had mounted up. He told me very relaxedly, 'Don't worry. Mother will look after us. I met the Prime Minister for forty minutes. It was a very pleasant and fruitful meeting. Everything will be in our favor for the victims.' On the 4th, I called him again. He had met the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh to catalyze a thaw in the relationship between the state and federal governments. 'The chief minister is flying to Delhi to meet the Prime Minister and discuss further arrangements for the victims,' he told me optimistically."

On December 25, HINDUISM TODAY called Dr. Arjuna Bhargava. "I just spoke with Swami this morning," she reported. "The government has complied with all the demands except Swamiji's request for \$2,000 compensation to families of the deceased. They want to give \$800. Swami told me, 'I will start my fast on the 27th

if they do not meet this last demand.'" The Indian government has regularly paid \$2,000 in similar circumstances in other parts of India. Paying the mountain people less is being taken as a cruel insult - adding increased emotion to the tragic drama.

In the Himalaya hinterlands, the whisper is that the quake was Mother Ganga's response to gouging her sides-dynamiting for the Tehri dam. But Swami Rama isn't looking for culprits. As HINDUISM TODAY went to press, he was on his way up to Uttarkashi where thousands of mountain people were planning a parade down the slopes with sacred drums and Indian bagpipes, welcoming their hero, and wanting to be with him if he begins his fast-to-death.

Eye-Witness

"As we climb up into the villages, destruction is all around - homes reduced in heaps of stone and rubble, the stench of rotten flesh. The human corpses had been removed but the corpses of animals were still found in the rubble. Kerosene had been poured over severely injured animals and set to fire. The air around us was bleak and the people distraught. A man whose entire family had been crushed, to death was yelling at his only surviving water buffalo, telling her, "Drink this water or else you too will die." The cries of a wailing woman rang through the air. The moral fibre of these gentle Garhwali farmers is being eroded by the chaotic manner in which relief is being given. Truckloads of blankets and food supplies come here daily sent by well meaning organizations. But they unload these on the roadside. Men, women and children rush the trucks. The donors are themselves at a loss coping with this phenomena of people grabbing wildly." - Dr. Bhargava, Director of Swami Rama's Himalayan Institute Rural Development Center, Uttar Pradesh.

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