

Maharashtra and Bombay were just recovering from the shock waves of the barbaric riots that had taken place in December, 1992 and again in January, 1993 when the region was once again struck hard, this time by earthquakes, on September 30, 1993. About 50 villages from Ausa and Umarga talukas, in the districts of Latur and Osmanabad of the Marathwada region, were completely devastated by the massive earthquake between 3:56 a.m. and 4:00 a.m. on September 30, 1993. The tremors of the earthquake were felt even in Bombay.

I received a telephone call from Shri T. P. Kamble early in the morning and I, along with my colleague in Bombay, Shri Husain Dalwai, left for Latur in the evening. It was a heart-rending experience to visit the several quake-torn villages from Latur and Osmanabad districts, which included Tavshigadha, Holi, Sastur, Rajcgaon, Ekundi, Chincholi Rebe, Pethsangavi, Killari, Talani, and Mangloor.

About 20 villages were completely destroyed, resembling the mounds of stones and earth of Mohenjo Daro. About 70 to 80 per cent of the population of these villages have fallen victim to this calamity. Many of those who survived are as good as dead. There was the same pathetic sight everywhere—heaps of corpses, masses of debris, pyres arranged out of wooden beams of houses, nauseating smells of burning and decomposed bodies filling the atmosphere, the limbs of men and women peeping out of mountains of debris and rubble, dogs unearthing the dead bodies and devouring them, feeble wailing voices, grief-stricken eyes dried of tears.

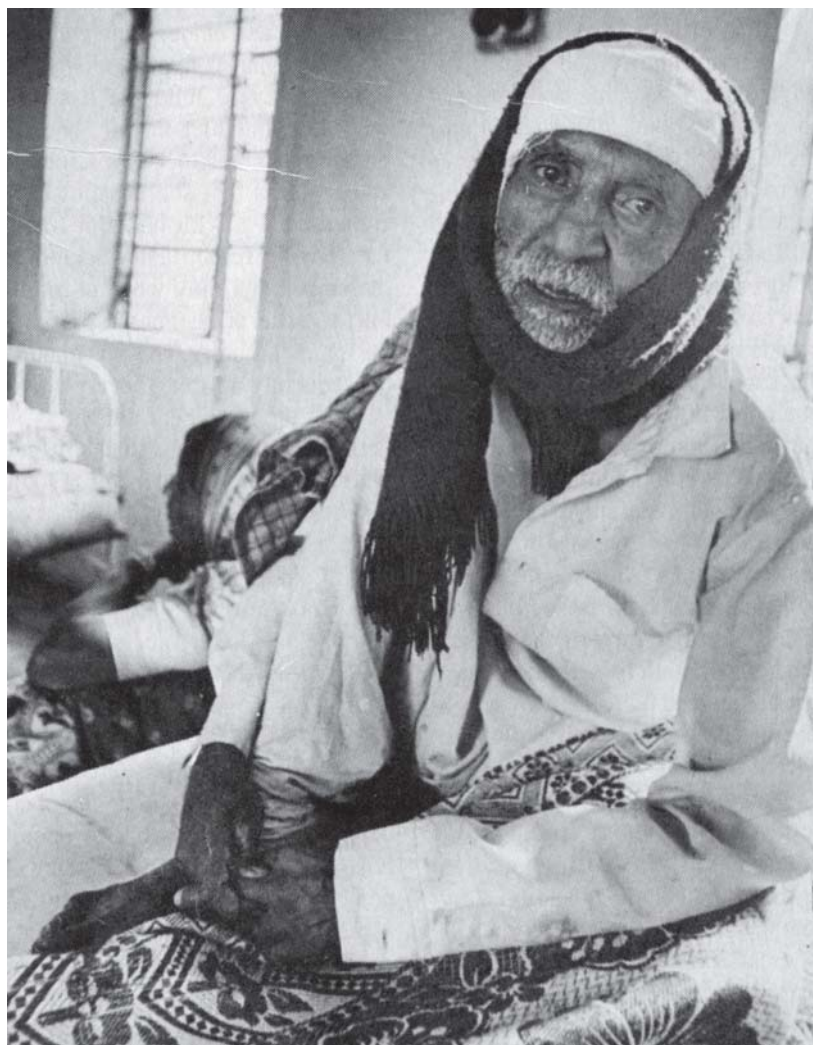
The tragedy struck in the small hours of the morning. Many people had returned home late in the night and were enjoying a sound sleep.

The Latur Earthquake

Shaila Satpute

Within one or two tremors, houses collapsed and many sleeping people were buried alive—achildsuckling the mother, a grandson asleep clasping his grand-mother. Almost all the people who were sleeping were found

dead. Those who happened to be outside their village houses when the earthquake struck were largely spared. Among the survivors were some aged people sleeping outside in the courtyards or under tin sheds, those



This old man of Holi village has lost all his family and belongings in the worst ever earthquake since Independence

who had the habit of rising early in the morning and sitting outside, those who were residing in *kacca* houses in the fields, those who had left the village on some ex-cuse, and those who were staying in town areas for educational purposes. Three hundred youths who were working the nightshift at the Killari sugar factory survived. As the factory is two to three kilometres away from the village and situated at a height from the river, it was not affected by the earthquake. But almost every young person from the factory who survived has lost his or her family. Solitary men, lonely old people and destitute children—an imbalanced population has been created.

Shri Subhash Pawar, a Western Railway employee with the Rajdhani Express, was seen crying inconsolably at Tavashigadha. He was the lone survivor from his family, having lost parents, brothers, children, wife and even in-laws who were residing in the same village.

It is estimated that around 500 children and 1,500 to 2,000 aged persons must have been rendered homeless and destitute. Merely providing them houses will not suffice. An altogether new line of thinking will have to be adopted to rehabilitate victims.

Apart from these villages, several villages from Umarga, AUSA, Nilanga and Pandharpur *talukas* have also been affected by the earthquake. At several places, houses have developed cracks, men and women have been seriously injured, some have died. But the main feature of the tragedy is that people have been benumbed by shock. No deaths have been reported from the cities of Latur, Umarga, and Sholapur, but men and women are under extreme stress. They fear that they may meet the same fate as the people of Killari and Sastur.



A grief-stricken woman, the lone survivor of her family, at Chicholi village in Latur district

They are not sure of support from government. Just as it is necessary to extend help to the people by repairing houses, giving accommodation to persons rendered homeless, opening schools and dispensaries, providing seeds and implements to farmers, it is also essential to free the people from fear by giving them a scientific explanation for this natural calamity. If the region is susceptible to frequent earthquakes, the government will have to formulate appropriate reconstruction and rehabilitation plans for these villages. Mere extension of provisional aid will not allay the fears of the people.

When we visited these areas, it was apparent that the sheer apathy of citybred intellectuals and administrators had contributed in no small measure to this tragedy. We could hear loud noises like those of cannon-balls in the village of Sastur. The people from the village told us that they had become accustomed to hearing such noises and tremors over the last two years, but were unaware of the prospect of such a calamity. According to Dr Shankar Dhondiram Parasagak, member of Janata Dal and Sarpanch of Killari, and Kisanrao

Jadhav, member of Janata Dal and the Zilla Parishad, the region had experienced 125 tremors with roaring noises during the last year. On October 18, 1992 the village was struck with a tremor measuring 4.5 on the Richter scale and a deafening noise similar to the roaring thunder of a landslide was heard. Several houses in the village developed cracks.

The famous temple of Neelakantheshwar of Hemadapanthi style suffered damage when a pillar became tilted. Hariba Kshirasagar and Raghoba Bhosale, two senior villagers, died from shock. People, shocked by the event, started migrating.

The distinguishing feature of the houses in the village is that they are constructed out of white earth and stones. The walls and roofs are 4 feet thick. The houses of masonry do not have strong foundations. The land on the banks of the Terana river is extremely fertile; no hard rocks are found over the terrain even if you dig 10 feet deep. The foundations of houses are not strong enough with the soil being so loose. The effect of the seismic tremors over the last two years can well be imagined.

The government could have changed the construction standards for houses in this region, saving the lives of many thousands of people. The number of dead and injured would not have been so high had the masonry been replaced by brickwork. The earthquake in the Koyna region in 1967 measured 6.5 on the Richter scale, more severe than that recorded at Latur in 1993, registering 6.4 on the Richter scale. However, the Koyna earthquake had taken a toll of 600 lives, whereas 60,000 is the estimated number of victims of the Latur earthquake. The main reason for the huge difference in deaths is that the houses in the Koyna region were built of bricks and tiles, whereas those in the Latur area were constructed out of earth and stones. The government claims that it tried to convince the people to migrate, but people ignored the warning.

The village of Killari had a population of 20,000 out of which only 1,500 have survived. These villagers had been constantly communicating their anxiety to various government officials about the land tremors they experienced and the consequent cracks in their houses. On one occasion, some local people invited socialist leader Bapusahab Kaldate to visit the village. When Kaldate was on tour, the village experienced earthquake tremors twice, at 11:21 a.m. and 11:37 a.m. They were preceded by loud noises underground. Kaldate then wired the prime minister requesting him to look into the matter. One seismologist, Shri Dube, came from Delhi and visited the area. He, along with the member of parliament of Latur, and the chairperson of the Lok Sabha, Shivaraj Patil, denied that any major earthquakes were likely to occur, despite the noises and tremors. People, once reassured, started returning to the village.

The village of Killari was comparatively developed; it had telephone facilities. But people from small villages in odd places such as Ekondi, Rajegaon, and Talani, feeling increasingly insecure, constantly demanded rehabilitation. The government did not heed the demands. When a village applied persistent pressure, the government offered 20 acres of land for the village and financial aid of Rs 16,000 per house for construction. The people rejected this offer, as it was not feasible for a village with a population of 4,000 to 5,000 to settle within 20 acres of land. Nor was it possible, they pointed out, to build a house for a joint family with the meagre financial assistance of Rs 16,000. Thus, in the absence of adequate rehabilitation facilities and with the government and experts not adequately conversant with the gravity of the situation, people came face to face with disaster.

Even if it is accepted as true that people were not ready to move, the government could at least have informed the people about the risks of living in houses that were not adequately designed to withstand earthquakes. Had the government built shockproof houses in these villages previously, the danger could have been averted. But in our country, we learn our lessons only after many lives have been lost. Living in houses



College students distribute food to earthquake survivors

of masonry with the fear of earthquake looming large was a sure recipe for disaster.

The villagers of Killari have made their homes on the basis of caste. The major castes are Kumbhar AH, Brahman Ali, Maratha Ali, Lingayat Ali, and so on. The Dalits live in huts made of mudded thatch beyond the outskirts of the village. The dominant castes, such as Lingayat and Maratha, are the landowners, living on the banks of the Terana. They have flourished because of their crops of grapes and sunflowers, grown in the black and fertile soil and sustained with water from bore-wells. The village of Killari has 2,000 bore-wells. Killari and Tastur were the most prosperous villages.

The extent of prosperity of the

upper castes is illustrated by a recent division of assets in a joint family of Killari among four brothers, each of whom received two kilos of gold, apart from a share in the land. Such well-to-do and rich families lived in the big mansions constructed out of masonry. The majority of the dead belonged to this class. The poor Dalits, on the other hand, were saved on account of the flexible nature of their huts.

Within hours after the earthquake, the chief minister rushed to Latur. However, the government machinery was bewildered and confounded because they had no instructions on what to do. When we reached the site, the police were on duty, the military had just reached the spot, and the relatives of the dead were busy rummaging through the debris with the help of voluntary agencies. Initially, around 10,000 dead bodies were recovered by civilians. Later on, the military took over the job. Civilians were faced with several difficulties— heavy showers of rain, bystanders pouring in from other regions interested only in sight-seeing, pilferers intending to lay hands on ornaments and other property, and the government machinery looking on indifferently.

But many volunteers were working day and night undaunted by any difficulties and inconveniences, some of them representatives of political parties, some relatives of the dead, some only well-wishers. Organisations, such as Akhila Maharashtra Jain Sanghatana, Chhatra Bharati, Manavalok from Ambejogai Rotary Club, Lion's Club, scouts guides, and students of the engineering college were strenuously working 24 hours a day, leaving aside their own banners. RSS workers, on the other hand, were indulging in their usual exhibitionism with their tents, uniforms, banners, and badged volunteers. The people were not happy with such attempts to garner publicity.

Despite a few such exceptions of politicians trying to use the disaster for their own purposes, aid and succour in all forms reached the area. The merchant community of Jains and Marwaris from Latur, and especially Solapur, vacated the premises of the market area so that provisions for the area could be distributed from this location; provisions such as medicines, grains, cloth, and wood. Grocers and shopkeepers released goods from godowns and shops free of charge, while plantain-growers diverted their truckloads of bananas to the distribution centres.

Witnessing this humanitarian response, I was reminded of the

atrocious riots in Bombay. The people had met with death on a wide scale in both areas. However, there was a difference between these two deadly events. In the case of the riots, even the dead were the objects of malice and animosity, whereas here the feelings of grief and sorrow were sincere and spontaneous.

The Chief Minister's Relief Fund is receiving aid and donations from all sources—domestic as well as foreign, capitalists and labourers, employers and employees. It remains to be seen whether all of the aid is going to reach the people it is meant for or is going to be lost in the labyrinth of bureaucracy. □

Backbone

*The pain in my mother's bending back
prickles at the back of my eyes.
When I see a grimace on her face
as she rises from a chair
to serve us tea
the back of my eyes run down to my heart.
Not my mother. Not pain. Not yet.
She is young at 72, but her back
cannot hold any longer the weight of her days,
the worry of adult children,
the deaths inside her from childhood.
And the stubborn halo she paints with her eyes
around the heads of her children and grandchildren
reflects unseen upon her
and brightens with each offered pain.
I watch as her back bends toward the earth
a little more each month
despite calcium, long walks, daily naps,
and my heart bends toward her
in gratitude for the weight I have been,
wishing she were a willow, not an oak,
praying the remorseless wind of time
would become a breeze.*

Mary Elizabeth Lauzon