

Gujarat has witnessed a series of natural calamities in the last few years. In spite of a cyclone, flood and prolonged drought in the past three years, we found that among SEWA members there was an eagerness and an enthusiasm to undertake long-term projects to offset the damaging effects of these calamities on people's economic life. SEWA, with a 3,20,000 member-count, was planning this year to prioritize their efforts to stave off ensuing migration due to the recurring natural and man-made disasters. A major initiative of introducing integrated insurance covering life, health, assets, house and maternity for the self-employed women, was also on the anvil. Over three years, SEWA planned on increasing the insurance cover to 7,00,000 from the earlier 50,000 women.

Then, on Friday, January 26, the earthquake struck and SEWA organisers in Ahmedabad saw multistoried flats collapse, while electricity, telephones and all amenities lay disrupted. The SEWA bank and many of the SEWA offices had developed cracks. There was no telling about the safety of the buildings. On taking stock the next day, we found that SEWA organizers were out on the streets, with many seeking to be relocated with their relatives.

As an organization with an extensive network of experienced coordinators and organisers, SEWA has an active base in some of the affected areas of Bhuj, Radhanpur and Surendranagar. Three teams of 27 organisers visited these areas. Other teams followed suit in Ahmedabad city and taluka areas. These teams conducted a village-wise house-to-house survey of the damage to houses, household goods, tools, and equipment. The extent of injuries suffered and damage to childcare centers and community centers was

## In the Wake of a Quake

### SEWA's Relief Efforts in Kutch

○ Renana Jhabvala

*By now the story of the devastation caused by the Gujarat earthquake is well known. This account focuses exclusively on the work by Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) which has a large membership in both urban and rural areas of Gujarat. Quite characteristically, SEWA remained focused on rebuilding the lives of their own members rather than spread out their efforts among the earthquake victims at large. In this piece Renana Jhabvala gives us an account of the nature of relief required and the priorities set by SEWA.*

surveyed. Our findings revealed 80 per cent damage to houses and extensive damage to salt pans, which have been the predominant source of employment in some of these areas. There has been caving-in of wells, sinking of motor pumps of tube wells, loss of crops and fodder, destruction of water systems, tanks, ponds and dams. The artisans who work from their homes have been rendered jobless as their houses have

collapsed. There were many injured but most of the rural members were safe. They said that they were able to escape so quickly because of their small houses and also because the children were out in the open ground celebrating the Republic day. They said the flag had saved them.

Our main concern was to get food, blankets, water and tarpaulin sheets reach our members in the villages. Unfortunately, there was an initial



Whole towns reduced to rubble

Courtesy: India Today

confusion at Bhuj, as all government offices had collapsed. Relief supplies began arriving, but the problem was of distributing them where they were needed. Within our own constraints, we set up a distribution system.

### **SEWA's Distribution Setup**

In teams of 20, field organisers were put in action in each district. The teams divided roles and responsibilities of coordination with government agencies, distribution of items to villages, maintaining distribution and stock records. The relief materials were first transported from Ahmedabad to the district centres at Bhuj, Dhrangadhra, and Radhanpur. From the district centers, the materials were loaded into trucks or jeeps and transported to the villages as per the route. It was then distributed to the families as per the list prepared during the survey. Since the field conditions were quite difficult, the teams were rotated every four days.

Most of the SEWA organisers spending their days and nights in relief work are young and came to work despite family apprehensions and reluctance to give them permission. It was most difficult for them to face and experience the horrors of death and destruction in Bhuj, Bhachau, and Anjar. However, there was still a lot to be done for those still alive and these volunteers recognised this.

It was heartening to find that there was an outpouring of help from a whole range of people. Cooked food was provided liberally by the Swaminarayan mandir, and later trucks of food began arriving from the Punjab gurudwaras. Blankets came from Punjab and Haryana. Teams of doctors arrived from all over the country and worked in the hardest possible conditions. The first team of 20 doctors came to us through the Medical Association on January 27, from Mumbai, and were followed by many others. In Ahmedabad, our office

was flooded by offers of help from local residents, local organisations, national NGOs, as well as friends and well-wishers, and from international agencies like UNICEF. With the help of the Embassy of Denmark, a 14-bed hospital was airlifted from Denmark, and has been setup at Gandhidham with the required facilities. We were very moved by the help that came in, and eventually we had to ask people not to bring in any more.

A lot has been written about the confusion regarding the distribution of relief supplies. In the first days after the earthquake, the supplies came in, but the district administration was unable to deal with the situation. The collector's office had collapsed as had the civil hospital and many structures of administration. Their officials were sitting on the road along with everybody else. Furthermore, the deaths cast depressing shadows in the minds of the living. Bhuj, Anjar and Bhachau were highlighted in the media, but thousands of remaining villages were hardly noticed, and so their need for supplies has been neglected. Many unscrupulous people also cornered supplies for their own use or profit. In the first few days, many foreign agencies began flying into the area, with supplies and good will, accompanied by their countries' media. In the early days, the administration did not know how to coordinate the flood of help that poured in.

But, within a week, senior administrators of the Gujarat government were rushed to the area, and distribution began to be taken care of adequately, but everyone felt the need for a team of 'disaster managers.'

### **Rebuilding after Disaster**

We now need to think about the rehabilitation and what should be the approach and who should do it? Since SEWA was helping the women in

many of the Kutch villages to upgrade and market their embroidery products, when we went to the villages with the relief supplies, the women asked us, "Have you brought work"? They want to re-start work to earn a livelihood. Since this is also a drought year, work is scarce, water is scarce, fodder is scarce. People are living in the open. In many villages some more houses have broken down in the subsequent tremors. In fact, the aftershocks are still continuing, creating a continuing fear. Children are more traumatized than their elders, many of them crying, clinging and unable to sleep at night. The parents say, "We want our children to start school, it will occupy their minds and take it away from the tragedy." The teachers are available, but there are no school buildings.

The relief response to the earthquake shows that there is a tremendous spirit of self-help among Gujaratis as well as a caring response from agencies and individuals outside the state. However, the rebuilding of people's lives depends on the governmental policies. It seems that funds for rebuilding will be coming to the state government. This includes aid from the Centre and loans from the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank, aid from other donor countries as well as industry and the NGOs. The question is how will these funds be spent? Already there are indications that various lobbies have different ideas about the process of reconstruction. The media, the industry, the builders and the middle class are all focusing on the cities and towns — on Ahmedabad, Jamnagar, Bhuj, Anjar. In fact, less than 15 per cent of destruction is in the urban areas. If proper resources are put into the rural areas we could have a more balanced rural-urban development.

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*Renana Jhabvala is among the leading organisers of Self Employed Women's Association, Ahmedabad*