

THE AFTERMATH OF THE MARATHWADA EARTHQUAKE : A TUSC SURVEY

The Trade Union Solidarity Committee, a coordination of independent trade unions, sent a team to study the various earthquake affected areas in Latur and Osmanabad districts. The team, which toured the area from October 23-27, made an exhaustive survey of the damage and destruction in the various villages, the impact of government relief operations, as well as the effort of Non-Government Organisations (NGO'S). Also, the various housing schemes and other problems related to the rehabilitation of the earthquake affected came under scrutiny. The team spoke to a cross-section of people: the Collector of Latur, Praveen Singh Pardeshi, the Addl. Collector of Osmansbad, Mr. Arun Bagde, as well as sarpanchas, health workers and NGO volunteers. Above all, anonymous villagers provided the team with invaluable information, insight and inspiration.

The salient features of the team's findings:-

1. Estimates of deaths

The government statement issued on 23.10.93 states that the death toll does not exceed 10,000. The official figure for Osmanabad was 3,856 while for Latur district the panchanama was still being processed. To back up its claim the govt. had obtained statements from all sarpanchas that no more bodies lay under the rubble. However, interviews with the villagers revealed that govt. figures were a gross underestimate. For example, in Chincholi Kathe village, the official figure was 106, while the villagers reported 217 deaths. Similarly, for Makni village the govt. claims only 18 deaths, while villagers said at least 150 people had died. If the villages visited by the team are at all representative, then the number of deaths could reach 30000.

2. Causes of extensive damage

In its survey of various villages, the team observed that some villages like Sastur, Holi, Chincholi Kathe, etc. had become one heap of rubble, while in certain villages 20 to 60 per cent of the houses had collapsed. However, most of the surviving structures were also damaged beyond repair and were uninhabitable. The government has declared a list of 93 worst affected villages - 61 in Latur district and 32 in Osmanabad district. It was also considering adding another 10 villages to the list. But the extent of structural damage is certainly more widespread than these figures suggest.

It was observed that the *scale of the damage far exceeded the intensity of the earthquake* (6.4 on the Richter scale). One of the main reasons for this was the quality of construction. The construction materials commonly used

were huge uncut stones, bound with mud and lime, without cement. The lack of cement, the absence of plastering and pointing inherently weakened structures and meant that collapse was inevitable when disaster struck in Killari, the epicenter of the earthquake. It was found that R.C.C. slabs had been erected on weak stone foundations which came crashing down with the quake on the unsuspecting sleeping inmates. On the other hand, many of the brick houses which had been plastered properly were still standing, even though the walls had developed cracks. In fact, some volunteers from Nirmala Niketan pointed out that none of the sarpanchas in the affected villages had died. Reason: they had brick and cement plastered houses !

3. Transit Accommodation

The govt. is in the process of providing transit houses to the earthquake victims before permanently rehabilitating them. The team's survey indicated that insufficient transit housing is a major grievance. For example, though Makni village requires 500 sheds, only 150 sheds have been provided so far. Chincholi Kathe is 63 sheds short of its requirement. The govt. figures also reveal this problem. As against 29,859 homes destroyed or damaged in the two districts, the govt., till October 23, had provided only 5,500 sheds and 412 tents in Osmanabad, and 1,183 sheds and 390 tents in Latur district.

The quality of the transit sheds - made of corrugated tin sheets - was also found to be extremely poor. There were complaints of leakage in the rain. Furthermore, tin, as a building material, absorbs heat making the insides of the sheds unbearably hot, while affording little protection against the cold. Doctors working in the area said that many children were suffering from convulsions and heat stroke caused by the extremely high temperatures generated inside the sheds. Many villagers, therefore, camped outside the sheds during the day and only moved inside at night.

4. Non-inclusion of many villages in 'affected list'

A major cause of complaint in the affected areas was the *non-inclusion of villages in the list of earthquake affected*. Once the state government recognises villages as earthquake-affected, it commits itself to the rehousing and rehabilitation of such villages. In these villages each of the families is entitled to free foodgrains and other relief material distributed by the government, on the basis of cards issued by the tehsildar. The government has tried to limit the numbers of those entitled to such relief by making the number of deaths the basis for inclusion/non-inclusion of villages, rather than taking into account the actual damage suffered by them. As advocate Panditrao Musande, zilla parishad member from Makni village, put it, 'We are being penalised for not having sufficient deaths in our village!'

For example, Karasgaon in Umerga talukka, where more than 60 per

cent of the huts were irreparably damaged was not put on the affected list, because not a single person had died in the September 30 earthquake. (However, in the October 28 tremour, one person, Sadashiv Ramu Gawli, was killed when a porch collapsed on his head.) The people's demand for inclusion in the list was only accepted after a two day mass hunger strike in front of the Umerga tehsildar's office. Similarly, in Latur district, we found the residents of Mogerga village conducting a rasta-roko agitation on Oct. 25th, protesting against their non-inclusion. The villagers claim that most of the 600 houses in the village have been damaged but government refuses to give any aid and only 40 temporary sheds have been put up. Such scenes of protest are increasing in the tehsil headquarters of both districts.

5. Government's long-term rehabilitation programme

From the discussions the TUSC team had with various senior government officials, the team learnt of the ambitious rehousing plans of the state government. The government approach, as put forward by K. S. Sidhu, Rehabilitation Commissioner for Osmanabad, was to acquire new gaothan lands for the villages and develop each of the affected villages afresh. The reason: the old villages are on unstable black soil, now associated with death and traumatic memories.

Some architects have expressed apprehensions about this approach. They say that this means a waste of the massive building resources available at the old gaothans. Secondly, the old village gaothans, which represent a certain history and culture, need not to be abandoned if the proper foundation and structural material is used. However, villagers interviewed were firm about not wanting to go back - except those of Karasgaon village where no deaths had taken place.

Government officials claimed that the acquisition of land for the new gaothans is already over. For most of the villages. In Umerga taluka, for instance, land has already been acquired for 27 of the 33 'worst affected' villages. The people's principal complaint was that *the government was reducing the size of the new gaothans as compared to the old sites*. For instance, advocate Panditrao Musande said that in his village, only 127.5 acres had been acquired compared to old gaothan area of 250 acres. Similarly, Chincholi Kathe, previously on 30 acres, will now be settled on only 20 acres.

On the new gaothans, the government - in direct admission of the class nature of rural India - will rehabilitate people in three sizes of houses linked to the *size of landholdings of the families concerned*. The landless and those owing less than one hectare of land will be given houses of 262 sq. feet in a compound area of 1581 sq. feet. Owners of holdings between one and seven hectares will receive houses of 395 sq. feet in compounds of 2517 sq. feet.

Finally, those owning more than seven hectares will be provided houses of 571 sq. feet in compounds of 5001 sq. feet. Families with more than ten members will be entitled to an additional plot.

However, there are signs that the *government is seeking to back out of its earlier commitment of rehousing all the 'worst affected' villages.* The Osmanabad Additional Collector, Mr. Bagde, revealed that of the original list of 32 worst affected villages in the district the government would now rehouse only 22; the rest, along with newly identified affected villages, would be given plots plus cash compensation for building their own houses. Compensation would also be given where structures could be repaired.

The State Government, committed to completing the rebuilding by May 1, 1994, is already feeling the resource crunch. Its declared aim of collecting Rs. 900 crores appears to be falling short, with private donations barely exceeding Rs. 100 crores and the World Bank yet to make any firm commitment. It is obvious, therefore, that instead of mobilising government resources with the required determination the chief minister has preferred to go in for the softer but more onerous policy of linking rehabilitation to private sponsors. In the six Latur villages where the rehousing programme was inaugurated on Oct. 24, reconstruction has been entrusted to Hindustan Petroleum, Maharashtra Chamber of Housing, Tapadia Construction, Malayalam Manorama, and two international NGOs, CASA and Caritas. Three Umerga villages (Holi, Rajegaon and Salegaon) have also been 'adopted' by HDFC, the Tatas and the Solapur Rotarians respectively. The government is hoping that private organisations will bear the bulk of the cost of rehousing.

With the wholesale onslaught of the privatisation lobby (from the World Bank downwards), this may well be yet another form of privatisation, but private commitments are far from reliable and there is risk of private sponsors abandoning projects mid-way. Besides there are indications that not all private proposals are prompted by considerations of charity. For instance, many companies and builders have indicated that a certain number of free houses will be built as long as the govt. agrees to a specified number of houses being constructed at commercial rates. With the government hiking its estimate of construction costs, within weeks, from Rs. 180 per sq. feet to Rs. 230, and with the quid pro quo of the builders, it is doubtful whether the free houses will in fact be 'free'!

What struck the TUSC team was the total failure of the government to involve the earthquake affected in their own rehabilitation. Right from designing the new houses and choosing the new gaathan sites to working out a system of allocation, the government's decisions were totally unilateral. Neither the institutions of self-government nor village opinion was

sought or given weightage. The Relief Commissioner, K.S. Sidhu, and the District Collectors did call some meetings of sarpanchas, but only to brief the village chiefs about decisions already taken and obtain their ratification.

6. Caste and Class

When the Collector of Latur, Mr. Pardeshi, was asked about the rationale behind the allotment of house sizes based on landholdings, he replied: "Those with more land naturally need more space to store their foodgrains, the landless have nothing to store". But while the government was consciously reproducing class divisions through its rehousing policy, it was simultaneously making a pretence of breaking caste barriers. This, the chief minister had announced, was to be done by allotting houses by the simple method of drawing lots. "If we don't do it this way, you will blame us for perpetuating casteism", was the justification given by Mr. Pardeshi.

However, the government has conveniently provided some loopholes in the lots system. Families getting more than one plot will be allowed to have adjacent plots too. " There will be adjustments, and the village will settle down along its old 'group' lines", said Mr. Arun Bagde.

In the village transit camps that the team visited, it was found that camps had been set up along caste lines. The scheduled caste Lamans, Wadmis and Mahars were found to be in settlements away from the main upper caste temporary shelters- as they had been in the villages before the earthquake. It is hardly possible that the lots system can cut through the deep caste divisions in the region.

7. Government Relief Measures

The initial government response to the earthquake was immediate and massive. Hundreds of medical workers were brought in from other districts, the army was deployed to extricate bodies and survivors, bore wells were dug at the transit camps, and the MSEB provided temporary lighting at short notice. However, the team's survey noticed certain serious shortcomings in the govt.'s relief work:

(a) No compensation for minors, destruction of property

The state government has arbitrarily decided not to compensate the next-of-kin of those killed who are below 18 years of age. Arun Bagde, Additional Collector, Osmanabad, justified this policy on the grounds that compensation is for the loss of able-bodied breadwinners of the family only. However, the real rationale behind such discrimination seems to be to reduce the government's compensation burden. This has led to ridiculous situations. For instance, in Chincholi Kathe. Ram Gujante will not receive a single rupee in compensation even though he has lost all his five children in

the earthquake. Reason: they are all below 18 years of age.

There was widespread indignation against this decision. On Oct. 24-Dassera day- residents of Holi village returned their compensation cheques in protest against the government's refusal to compensate the death of minors. (The Compensation amount of Rs. 50,000 was also felt to be too meagre, with people comparing it to the Rs. 1 lakh granted to the next-of-kin of riot victims in Bombay.) The failure of the govt. to announce any compensation for destruction of property has also generated considerable anger. In particular, death and injury to livestock not being compensated has created resentment (Government figures say 1983 head of cattle were killed in the two districts), particularly since much of the livestock was purchased with unrepaid loans.

(b) Medical relief

Apart from those admitted to central and rural hospitals, the govt. set up a rural health service throughout the affected areas. Government officials claimed that every village in the affected zone had been provided with at least one doctor, two nurses and two attendants. The team's survey revealed that this was not true and that *a large number of villages had woefully inadequate medical facilities*. While larger villages like Sastur had a round-the-clock medical facility, smaller and more remote settlements were neglected and only serviced by mobile medical vans. Later, many medical personnel who had come on deputation from other districts, began returning, thus further squeezing medical services.

More worrisome was the callous attitude of senior medical officers to voluntary help. The Nivara Hakk Suraksha Samiti, a Bombay based welfare organisation which was running a mobile medical unit, complained of being constantly discouraged from rendering services on the plea that the government network was adequate. However, the response of several hundred patients being treated each day belied the official claim. Psychiatrists of the 'Andhshradha Nirmulan Samiti' also complained of lack of cooperation by government medical officers. They stated that there was no line of treatment for those suffering from shock, depression and other post-earthquake psychotic disorders. Another incident reported by Dr. Yash Lokhandwalla, took place on October 28, when in a major tremor a villager from Karasgaon, Sadashiv Ramu Gawli, died when the porch collapsed on him. The government doctor in this case performed the post-mortem in an open field, leaving his blood soaked gloves in the field, despite protests by the local villagers as well as by other volunteers.

(c) Distribution of foodgrains and other relief

The government godowns in Latur and Umerga were bursting with household relief material and foodgrains. The govt. through its network had organised distribution of relief as distinct from NGO relief. Cards had been issued to each family in the affected villages, and a policy of free rations for three months had been announced. The amount of relief was paltry - milk and grains at Employment Guarantee rates - while the policy of ration-card identification was felt to be discriminatory.

We heard many complaints of corruption in respect of relief material - that goods were being pilfered and sold in the market, that even medicines were being diverted for sale, etc. We could not verify these complaints, but found sufficient evidence that in foodgrain distribution there was massive corruption. In Makni village, residents claimed that only two kgs. of grain were distributed per family unit, when the declared policy was five kgs. every 15 days. Though the owners of the 'fair price' ration shops, entrusted with the distribution were caught red-handed by the people diverting ten bags of jowar and six cases of cooking oil, the authorities were yet to take action, they claimed.

Similarly, the team saw a mass protest fast on Oct. 26 before the Umerga tehsil office by residents of Savalsur village. Their complaint was that though declared 'quake-affected', the village had not received any government aid yet. The villagers blamed their sarpanch from the nearby Babalsur village - which for administrative reasons is treated as part of Savalsur village- for cornering all the grain.

The Government's decision to entrust the sarpanch and police patil with the distribution of grain and relief material has obviously led to a lot of corruption and nepotism. It was evident that *upper castes and rich peasants were cornering all the relief, at the expense of the dalits and the poor and landless peasants.*

A peculiar situation has arisen in some areas. The landlords and rich peasants are facing a serious labour shortage in the region and, even though wages have doubled to Rs. 25 and Rs. 10 for male and female agricultural workers respectively, labour is still not available. The landowners are blaming the government's policy of free rations, claiming that the hand-outs have made the agricultural workers lazy. In fact, there is a move in the region by rural employers to curtail the free-ration programme. This approach, typical of employers, ignores the upheaval the quake has wrought in people's lives. Continuing tremors, with one death recorded as late as Oct. 28 (in Karasgaon village) have set off a panic mass migration of people. Moreover, the shock of fatalities and injuries and total destruction-suffered by almost every family- has made it difficult for people to return to normal life.

(d) Import of outside labour

With the region's economy under pressure the govt. should have used the labour of the affected villages for the construction work in transit camps as well as other casual labour required in the relief operations. However, the team found that most of the labour, both skilled and unskilled, had been brought in from outside. Not only was this a denial of work to the most needy, it was also an unnecessary drain on resources since transit camps and arrangements had to be created for the outside labour by the government

8. Waning government effort

Considering the fact that continuing tremors are creating panic and mass migration in the region, the sudden drop in government effort and commitment after the inauguration of the rehousing work on Dassera day, Oct. 24, is condemnable. Even with an official death toll of 10,000 and destruction of 30,000 houses, and a severe blow to the economy of the region, the withdrawal of government personnel on a large scale barely three weeks after the disaster is both callous and unwarranted.

The Army had been withdrawn as early as October 14, because the chief minister claimed "there was no work for it". Similarly, medical officers and other officials drawn from neighbouring Solapur and other districts began going back after Dassera. Even while the team was there, a visible drop in the number of govt. vehicles and visits to the villages could be discerned. On Oct. 25, a visit to the Latur collectorate showed that the compound, earlier jammed with government and voluntary aid workers and vehicles, was now full of contractors.

Then the chief minister, who made a show of camping at Latur for two weeks and had made unattainable promises of funds and relief, retreated from those commitments and abandoned the area- no sooner had public memory faded and the media put the news of the earthquake on the back burner. It was obvious that the state government's reactions at every stage were ad hoc and prompted by considerations of electoral gain. There was no evidence of any long-term, disaster-management strategy! In fact, within a month of the earthquake the central control room in Mantralaya, Bombay, and Umerga, Osmanabad, had virtually been disbanded.

9. NGO involvement

The general retreat of the State, brought about partly by powerful neo-liberal attacks on the need for any sort of state intervention, has left the field wide open to the influx of NGOs (non-government organisations) of a political (e.g.R.S.S.), developmental and pseudo-developmental nature. Their involvement reinforces the illusion that disasters can be most effectively

tackled by a co-operation of public and private effort. In fact, the cooperation is largely haphazard, and the commitment of private organisations far from certain. What is most striking about the aid effort is the lack of co-ordination both among NGOs and between such organisations and the government, and also the lack of a consistent policy on the sort of aid that should be given as well as the identity and nature of the donors themselves. Whereas the medical help of groups like 'Medecins sans frontieres' was ultimately discouraged, organisations like the R.S.S. and Shiv Sena are given a clear chance to consolidate political support through relief work.

10. Practical recommendations

On the basis of our survey we feel the following measures should be taken into consideration and implemented:

(1) The list of affected villages should be immediately updated to include villages which have suffered structural damage, even if the houses are still standing and irrespective of the number of persons who have died;

(2) All families in the affected villages must be provided with transit accommodation designed so as to avoid the drawbacks of the tin sheds which are presently in use;

(3) The government should enforce a proper system of distribution to make sure that the poorer and in particular the lower caste households are not deprived of the relief they are entitled to. Moreover, the distribution of relief should also be based on a clear accountability so that the public can know how relief aid has been disbursed;

(4) There must be compensation for the loss of children below 18 years of age;

(5) The government must also provide compensation for the loss of property and in particular of livestock destroyed in the quake;

(6) As an immediate form of relief, all outstanding loans made for largely agricultural purposes should be written off;

(7) The rehabilitation programme should mitigate existing inequalities rather than reproduce them, and should be based on a participatory style which makes an effort to involve villagers and what they perceive to be their needs.

Members of the Trade Union Solidarity Committee team:

1. Sanjay Singhvi : Advocate and Secretary, Akhil Maharashtra
Karnagar Union
2. Jairus Banaji : Union Research Group
3. C. G. Chavan : Rep., Nicholas Laboratories Employees' Union
4. D.G Kagal : Rep., Nicholas Laboratories Employees' union
5. R.N. Oza : Rep., Hindustan Lever Employees' Union
6. A.D. Thomas : Rep., Griffon Laboratory Employees' Union
7. Gurbir Singh : Jt. Convenor, Nivara Hakk Suraksha Samiti,
Gen. Sec., AMKU.

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