Goodwill gestures?

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Everyone wants to help victims of natural calamities. But the best help for those who survive is respect. And a listening ear.

The devastation that Nature has wrought on Nepal, that beautiful but poor nation, makes you weep. Pictures of the ravaged land bring back memories of other times when the earth was still, when people smiled, when temple bells echoed through the narrow and crowded streets of Kathmandu.

Nature does not care to discriminate when it strikes. Yet, once the dust settles — and it has still to settle in Nepal — questions will be asked for which there are no easy answers. Already people are asking them. For instance, why does it take so long for help to reach them? And when it does, why is it inappropriate and uneven?

Such questions were asked so long ago closer home. On January 26, 2001, an earthquake of similar intensity hit Kutch and parts of Gujarat. Entire villages were flattened. In towns, buildings collapsed, roads were split open. Almost 20,000 died; 1,66,000 were injured and 4,00,000 houses were destroyed.

While Nepal is in the Himalayas, Kutch is a desert, flat and barren. Even the worst affected places could be accessed by road and air. Bhuj, the principal city, was also badly affected but enough of it remained intact for some kind of relief effort to be coordinated within a few days.

Yet, what was striking at first, as in Nepal, was the absence of the State. In the first few days, people helped each other and community and non-governmental groups working in the region sprung into action. When aid did come, from all over the world, it was often inappropriate. It came from people who meant well, who were moved by the plight of those affected. But with no one to guide them, they ended up sending things that could not be used.

I was reminded of this when I heard of a group of well-intentioned women in Mumbai deciding to make hundreds of theplas (a Gujarati roti that can last for several days) to send to Nepal. No one told them that cooked food was a waste when the basic infrastructure for distributing aid had still not been established.

I saw something similar in Kutch. Tons of used clothing was sent there by truck. Bundles of used clothes, some torn and damaged, were flung out of trucks as they passed by the devastated villages. No one bothered to pick them up. No one had checked the kind of clothing Kutchi women would find useful. So the clothes lay on the road and in time were dispersed by strong winds. Eventually, they found a perch on the dry branches of the few trees that spotted the barren landscape. It was a bizarre sight that illustrated the pointlessness of this kind of goodwill gesture.

The biggest challenge in the aftermath of natural disasters is when it recedes from our consciousness. That is precisely when disaster-hit areas require the most attention. The slow and tedious task of rebuilding and rehabilitation can take many years. The process exposes the divisions that exist in many societies and sometimes even exacerbates them. Inevitably, the better-off, the better-connected manage while the struggle for those at the margins is prolonged.

Disasters also present an opportunity to think afresh about the kind of development that is needed. In Kutch, as in Nepal, many of the villages badly affected also suffered from lack of water and sanitation. Post-disaster, the emphasis is on rebuilding structures with earthquake-resistant features. But the permanent, and sometimes intractable, problems such as providing basic services are overlooked.

This is where affected communities need to be seen as participants and not as recipients of aid. The latter expects them to be passive, to gratefully accept whatever comes their way. The former demands active participation. Those giving aid need to take the viewpoint of these communities seriously and recognise that people who live in such precarious environments also have a deep understanding of survival strategies.

However, such sagacity is not always present in donors. In Kutch, for instance, many business houses came forward and offered to reconstruct entire villages. What emerged were strong, earthquake-resistant concrete structures. They were uniform. They were laid out in a grid with straight lines. And they looked indistinguishable from other new townships in any other part of India. The distinctiveness of traditional Kutch architecture, which incorporates features to deal with the harsh climate, was missing. Worse still was the almost complete absence of consultation with the affected communities.

In one such township, the women setup temporary kitchens outside their concrete houses. Why, I asked. Because the design of the kitchen, they said, was unsuitable for their style of cooking with wood or coal. So they were left with no option but to cook out in the open.

In any case, in the first year after the new structures were built, people continued to sleep outside because they had no faith that these buildings would survive another earthquake. No one had bothered to explain how earthquake-resistant features work. If the benefactors had taken the time to educate people, particularly the women, and also to consult them about the design of the houses, there would have been greater acceptance.

Everyone wants to help victims of natural calamities. But the best help for those who survive is respect. And a listening ear. It is not too much to ask.

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