My Turn: Redefining Hindu Charity
Category : March 1994
Published by Anonymous on Mar. 01, 1994

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The earthquake struck on the night of September 30, 1993, just after a ten day celebration of Ganesh Chaturthi. It measured 6.1 on the Richter scale and caused the loss of nearly 10,000 lives, most of which could have been saved had the government heeded the warning signs which came a year in advance in the form of two to three hundred tremors. This was dismissed by the government scientists, and they assured the people that the Marathawada region was safe from a major earthquake. In countries with much bigger earthquakes, loss of life is much less because earthquake resistant design features are required in government building codes and people are made aware of the precautions they must take before a disaster strikes. The epicenter of the earthquake was near Killari village in the Latur district of Maharashtra, where more than half the population died. Here, virtually all the homes totally collapsed because they were built of stones haphazardly put together with mud as the binding material and earthen roofs two feet thick. Most of the dead were from the upper class families. They could afford to build the stone houses. The poor who lived in simple huts survived. The karma theory, which made some people rich supposedly because of the good deeds of their past, quickly took their lives because they believed the government scientists. Bad karma indeed! Thousands of volunteers from as far away as

1,000 miles poured into the area with relief supplies, forcing the police to seal off the area. Nevertheless, the massive response of the people of India showed the basic spiritual unity. Government machinery moved in and did an exemplary rescue operation to save the survivors and to provide temporary shelters to the nearly 300,000 people rendered homeless in just a few seconds. The task before the people of India now is to first provide mental and emotional support to those who lost their loved ones and to help put them back on their feet. This is where the real challenge to the Hindu concept of charity lies. Until now, Hindus have by and large neglected long-term development, social equality and harmonizing of the higher and lower castes to knit them together as one family. This is why Islam, with its idea of brotherhood, and Christianity, with its promise of a casteless society, have made deep inroads into many parts of India while Hindus are content to give alms for charity and leave everyone to their fate because their karma had predetermined the outcome. But now, this earthquake gives an opportunity to provide economic rehabilitation, emotional counseling and education about earthquakes, as well as to remove superstitions and provide training to rebuild homes with earthquake resistant features. Nature has already equalized the rich and the poor. So today we can all work harmoniously. While offering a helping hand to the people, we must not make them dependent and helpless. In this process we will not only be doing a favor to the victims of the disaster but also setting an example to others on how to rebuild a society brick by brick just as we rebuild the homes brick by brick based on equality. According to our Shastras, each Hindu is supposed to contribute one-sixth of his income to the society. But how many of us actually do that? Here is an opportunity to pitch in together and stand united to help those in need, and that is truly the Vaishnava way! Shrikumar Poddar, a social leader

and businessman, travels between Bombay, India, and Lansing, Michigan, USA. He has extensively toured the Marathawada region.