

Helping Nepal

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The Indian Institute of Information Technology, Design and Development, Jabalpur has taken the initiative to put together a consortium of educational institutions which would adopt a village in Nepal and undertake its complete reconstruction, rehabilitation and economic development. Partners in the venture are the Jawaharlal Nehru University of Agriculture, Jabalpur and Madhya Pradesh Medical University, Jabalpur. The consortium will collect and provide the funds whereby the village can be reconstructed with buildings which are earthquake resistant. Medical assistance, physiotherapy and psychotherapy would be provided by the Medical University which would help in treating the villagers who have suffered physical injury and psychological trauma. Schools would be rebuilt and provided full assistance. The Agriculture University would give the technical and other assistance which would enable agriculture to become more productive and help in economic rehabilitation of the villagers. All this, of course, would be done with the approval of the Nepalese Government and in partnership with the people of Nepal. This initiative is quoted because other educational institutions at national and State level might also consider taking up such exercises all over Nepal. In this there would be no element of charity because in partnership with the people the educational institutions would provide the assistance by which the communities can rebuild themselves.

When the Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, was the Chief Minister of Gujarat that State was visited by a devastating earthquake in which Kutch was the main sufferer. The Gujarat Government responded with great alacrity. The State Government very quickly prepared designs for earthquake resistant buildings. About a thousand schools had been severely damaged and needed reconstruction or replacement. Government prepared the estimate for each building and also calculated the amount of material needed for such reconstruction and did stockpiling. The Chief Minister offered to the Panchayats that either the State Government would rebuild the schools or, if the Panchayats so volunteer, government would make available the entire estimated cost at one go and also transport to the site the building material required for reconstruction. Almost all the Panchayats volunteered to do the work and within a year most schools have been reconstructed, which could well be a record for such activity in India. Similarly for the reconstruction of houses government made available the building material and the cash requirements to individual households and they, too, became part of mass participation in reconstruction.

The Gujarat model is available for emulation in Nepal and, perhaps the greatest service that the Government of India could do to Nepal is to suggest to that government that the Kutch model is replicable. Government assistance would reach out to the people and give them a helping hand.

What is earthquake resistant in an area where earthquakes are not common would be different from what is earthquake proof in a highly fragile zone such as the Eastern Himalayan Region, including Nepal. Technology which designs appropriately for such a region would be of utmost importance in the design of buildings and it is suggested that the Indian Institutes of Technology and the various engineering colleges which have some expertise in civil and structural engineering should come together for the design of buildings in an area of high seismic activity. Obviously the building codes which apply to the city of Los Angeles would be inappropriate on account of high cost in Nepal, but nevertheless the challenge of technology is how to build affordable structures which still have the capacity of

withstanding earthquakes in series. Here a study of soil science, strength of materials under different levels of stress and tension and the use of appropriate materials which can be easily available would be of utmost importance whilst preparing a design of buildings in Nepal. We have a great deal of talent, but government has to institutionally bring it together, focus its attention and then use this talent to find suitable technical and technological solutions.

The earthquake has caused great physical damage, cost a very large number of lives and has traumatised an entire nation. Yet we know the indomitable spirit of the Nepalese and their capacity to stoically bear hardship. These people need our help and we should give it generously. Nepal does not need our charity, but does need India's capacity to build an economy. The Jabalpur initiative shows that we have people who are concerned about Nepal and are prepared to contribute to its future. Let us treat this as a national programme.
