

Thirty years ago, in the suffocating twilight of the Soviet epoch, an infernal earthquake of unprecedented magnitude ravished many towns and villages in Armenia, killing more than 25,000 men, women and children in the aftermath. The city of Gyumri, widely considered to be one of the architectural jewels of Armenia, and its surrounding townships were laid to waste. In mere moments, the earthquake ravaged forty percent of the national wealth that generations accumulated over decades, completely nullifying the industrial potential of northern Armenia. Those gifted with the anguished fortune of survival, with the mournful burden of their dearly departed on their souls, stared into a bitter winter season and a vacillating future in an unrecognizable homeland.

In those days, Armenia was a part of the Former Soviet Union, and had not yet emerged from behind the Iron Curtain, which despite having been significantly diminished due to the Gorbachev's liberalization policies, still wore the badge of "Iron" with apprehensive honour. International news agencies such as CNN and BBC were welcome only to document festivities and otherwise kept a safe distance from the Soviet borders. International calls were considered rare privileges, meanwhile Internet and mobile phones were pretty much relegated to the realm of science fiction. However, despite altogether non-trivial political and logistical obstacles, it took only several hours for the global community to react in force to the unfolding humanitarian crisis in Armenia. In a show of unprecedented solidarity, world leaders and their representatives transcended political boundaries to visit the epicentre and extend a vital helping hand to my country.

The Indian diplomats stationed then in Moscow, the capital of the erstwhile Soviet Union, also travelled to Armenia in the bitter December cold to assess the scale of the damage and report back to their government which initiated and coordinated aid efforts across the country. Despite facing more than its share of socio-economic challenges, and let me remind you that in 1988, India had a GDP per capita that was almost 20 times less of that of the Former Soviet Union, your country, in a true show of generosity, sacrifice and compassion, contributed substantial sums of vital financial and in-kind donations to aid the rescue and recovery efforts in Armenia.

Recalling their experiences, two Indian diplomats, Ambassador Suresh Babu, who has joined us today, and the former deputy of national security advisor Mr. Arvind Gupta, who is regrettably out of the country nowadays, upon acquaintance told me the moving story of the fundraising that your school organized in response to the tragedy in my country.

For that generation of students of the Springdales, some of whom could even be your parents, the contribution they made may have been their first experience of extending help to foreigners and demonstrating compassion toward strangers. I'm sure that they experienced the profound joy that comes from giving and sharing as opposed to having and hoarding. Demonstrating altruism and solidarity, they chose to orient themselves towards the world instead of self, and truly honoured the school's motto: "The World is a Family."

As Armenians around the world commemorate today the 30th anniversary of the Spitak earthquake, I am here with a group of my fellow Armenians to extend to you and in your person to the people of India and its government our sincere gratitude and appreciation for being with us when we needed you most. We'll revere that act of benevolence manifested by the people of India. God bless you all.