

3.4 Epicentre Gorkha: Sluggish Post-quake Reconstruction

Background

An earthquake measuring 7.8 in the Richter scale rocked Nepal at 11:56 am on April 25, 2015 with Barpak of Gorkha as its epicentre. In Gorkha alone, 472 people were killed with 1,000 injured. Majority of the government and private structures in the district were fully or partially damaged.

The human and physical casualty that the Gorkhali people suffered as a result of the tremor is still fresh in their minds. As aftershocks continued to jolt them. Such aftershocks also inflicted further damage. The daily life of those who endured the earthquake continued to become worse. However, the reconstruction campaign in the district began with the notion that 'rather than living under the fear of earthquake, it should now be taken as an opportunity for the Gorkhali people, quake should translated into benefit.'

Some months after the earthquake, a competition took place among those making speeches to note that the earthquake had created an opportunity for transforming the façade of the district through development works and reconstruction. Barpak, the epicentre of the 2015 earthquake saw the arrival of President Bidya Devi Bhandari to then Prime Ministers Sushil Koirala, KP Sharma Oli

and Pushpa Kamal Dahal. They echoed the same thing to say 'reconstruction will now be expedited.' Many big political changes took place following the earthquake in the country. The local, provincial and federal elections took place. The country began a federal State. And for all the candidates campaigning in the elections, reconstruction was the major agenda. However, 32 months since the earthquake, reconstruction is yet to gain speed. The problems of the survivors remain the same. After having endured the third monsoon and the third winter in temporary shelters, the problems of the quake survivors continue to rise. But even the National Reconstruction Authority or NRA formed for the reconstruction work does not seem to be concerned over it.

Objective of the Study

Gorkha is the epicentre of the April 25, 2015 earthquake. The major objective of this study is to highlight the state of reconstruction of the district following the damage caused by the earthquake and the state of the survivors. In addition to this, the auxiliary objectives of the study are as follows:

- To look into the rate of acceleration of the post-quake reconstruction and the reasons behind the failure to speed up

re-construction in the district.

- To highlight the situation and the problems of the survivors, 32 months after the earthquake.
- To understand the approach of the government authorities towards the problem of the quake survivors and to draw the attention of the concerned authorities over the slow pace of re-construction in the district.

Rationale of the Study

The problem of the quake survivors is more in Gorkha in compared to other districts. The loss to life and property and human sentiments were greater here because it was the epicentre of the quake. Of course, reconstruction in the 14 highly affected districts has not gained pace. But as the epicentre, the reconstruction of Gorkha should have been prioritized but it was no different than other districts. In this context, as this study would explore the reasons behind the sluggish reconstruction and recommend suggestions, it would help the NRA and other concerned agencies to resolve the problem. Not only the government and NRA but the District Coordination Committee, the local level units and national/international NGOs can also utilize this study as a tool to find and resolve the actual problem, and hence it has a far-lasting significance.

Methodology of the Study

- Field study (in the quake affected village and settlements)
- Discussion and interaction with the quake survivors
- In-person conversation with the heads of the concerned offices responsible for reconstruction
- Recommendations of the stakeholder agencies
- Resource materials, newspaper and media

Limitation of the Study

- This study is focused on the problems facing the quake survivors and alerting the State and stakeholders in resolving them.
- An effort has been made to inform about the challenges experienced in course of the reconstruction work carried out by the government since the past 32 months.
- The problems of the survivors have been collected from the concerned locations and individual/families.

Introduction of the Problem

In Gorkha, the epicentre of the April 25, 2015 earthquake, majority of the private houses, health institutions, schools and government offices were damaged. 'Food and shelter are the most important', Sur Bahadur Ghale of Barpak said, "Who else understood than us about the pain of having to endure the cold and rain in a temporary hut following the earthquake?" It is true as their accommodation has become painful due to lack of a residence. Majority of the survivors continue to spend days and night in the temporary shelter made of corrugated sheets. Some quake survivors are found busy in construction their houses with the 300,000 rupees provided as grant by the Government while some continue to live in the houses deemed vulnerable after being damaged in the earthquake.

Status of Health Institutions

Altogether 55 health institutes in the district were completely damaged while 22 suffered partial damage in the earthquake. With the support of national/international NGOs, majority of the health institute structures have been rebuilt. According to the District Public Health Office 47 health centre buildings have been reconstructed while among the eight left, some have been completed and

yet to be handed over. However, the construction of the few centres is yet to begin.

The services of the Laprak and Machakhola health posts are still being provided from a tent. The construction of the Machakhola health post is yet to begin, according to Health Assistant at the District Public Health Office Nani Babu Dani. The buildings of Laprak, Namjung, Arupokhari, Thumi, Lapu and Manbu health posts are under-construction. The UNICEF has assumed the responsibility of reconstructing the health posts in Namjung, Arupokhari, Laprak, Gumda and Machakhola while good neighbours' international is entrusted to rebuild the structures of Thumi and Lapu health posts. Though the buildings were targeted to be completed by 16 December 2017, some health post buildings were yet to be completed by then.

The Public Health Office has said that the renovation of the partially damaged health centre buildings has been completed. The health centres that are yet to be reconstructed are providing their service from temporary tents. As a result, health workers have complained of difficulty in storing drugs and for them to provide their service throughout the day. The treatment of the sick is more challenging.

Gorkha Hospital

The Gorkha hospital building in the district headquarters also suffered damage in the earthquake. Soon after the earthquake, the hospital set up tents to continue its service. It is now providing service from the same old building after renovating it. The procedure of construction a new building for the hospital is underway, according to medical superintendent Sriram Tiwari. The hospital building is being constructed by KFW of Germany in coordination with the Health Ministry. The hospital was upgraded from a 15 to 50-bed hospital but it has been difficult to run it in full phase for lack of a new build-

ing. Services continue at present in the same old building after it was retrofitted.

Drinking Water

Water sources and taps in 513 locations of Gorkha were damaged in the earthquake. Of them, 305 sources and tapes have been renovated, according to the Drinking Water and Sanitation Division Office, Gorkha. Works are underway in 75 others through a project, said Ratna Lamichhane, the Chief of the Office. Reconstruction in many areas was hampered due to lack of water and there is no alternative to running big projects there, Lamichhane said. Drinking water has been a big problem following the earthquake in Takukot, Bungkot and Bayakal areas. And this has affected the reconstruction work. Due to lack of water, many quake survivors are waiting for the monsoon to reconstruct their houses. Scarcity of water has become a problem in Bukot, Namjung, Takukot, Paanchkhuwa Deurali, Mucchok, Saurpani, Laprak and Gumda also. 'There is no drinking water, and we have to spend hours in queue to fetch drinking water', Maiya Sunar of Takukot said, "So where can we get water to build our home, we are thinking of building it only after the next monsoon arrives."

Houses Constructed

The third tranche of housing grant for private houses has been recommended for 6,107 quake survivors in Gorkha, the epicentre of the 2015 earthquake. According to the district reconstruction office, 17,492 have received the second tranche of 150,000 rupees. Though 56,726 survivors took the first tranche of 50,000 rupees for private house reconstruction, more than half of them are yet to begin the construction work. In Gorkha, 61,393 quake survivors have been included in the list of beneficiaries.

Some quake survivors have expedited their house construction as of late after the NRA tightened the grant distribution procedures. But the rate of grant contract agreement is not sufficient. The grant distribution procedures say that the quake survivors who received the first tranche of grant support must take the second tranche within January 14, 2018 and the third and final tranche by June 14, 2018. ‘The quake survivors who have not received the first installment must take it by January 14, second by April 13 and the third by July 15, 2018 end as provided in the procedures’, NRA Gorkha Chief Shiva Poudel said, “the survivors are aware about the requirements of the procedures and hence houses are now being reconstructed.”

Reasons of Delay

Shiva Poudel of the NRA says that the quake survivors have not been able to construction their homes due to scarcity of construction materials, lack of skilled workers and problem of water. ‘In some places there is no water at all, stones bricks, sand and wood are also scarce,’ Poudel said, “due to lack of roads in northern Gorkha, construction materials including iron rod, cement and sand have to be transported on mules, which is a problem. And that has delayed the construction.” Scarcity of water has also affected the house construction in Takukot, Bungkot and other places. Some are also found to have not begun construction of their houses, arguing that the government grant of Rs. 300,000 was not enough to build a house. They said that the money is not enough for even buying the construction materials and they do not have money to add to it. ‘What to do with 3 lakhs, the house next to mine is a big building of a rich person, and the money I get will not be sufficient even to buy the materials forget building the house,’ Nanu Maya Ghale of Barpak said,

“It is after realizing that the 3 lakhs is not enough that I have not been able to start with the foundation of the house.”

On the one had, many have already built their houses while the on the other even genuine quake survivors have been deprived of the government grant support. And applications are still being registered as of late. In this process, a survey of the houses left out is has also been carried out. According to the NRA, 12,322 houses have been re-surveyed. Even though the survey was completed in the month of Bhadra (August/September) it has not yet reached a conclusion. Apart from that, around 1,000 people have filed applications at the NRA Gorkha claiming to be quake survivors but excluded from the survey, said Chief Poudel. These are also some of the reasons that is delaying the reconstruction process.

Unnecessary Delay in Translocation of Settlements Too

Many settlements in Gorkha suffered cracks in the ground as a result of the earthquake while some settlements became vulnerable to landslide. Among the settlements that need to be relocated, the houses in Laprak are under-construction. After all the houses that were glued together in Laprak fell vulnerable to landslides, the settlement is being relocated, to Gupsipakha of Laprak. Of the 573 houses, 400 are under construction. The reconstruction is being carried out at the joint initiative of the government and the Non-resident Nepalis Association (NRNA). Also, the process to shift the settlement in Baguwa is underway. The 132 households are being relocated, to erstwhile ward no. 4 of Baguwa itself. The process of translocation of the settlement in Karaunja, which is in a vulnerable situation following the earthquake, is confined to talks only. The NRA however says that the report by the geologists about the situation there is about to ar-

rive. Translocation of other settlements too has not begun. Twenty six houses in the Dalit settlement in Ghopte, and houses in Sabadur and Ramche too needs to be relocated.

Likewise, even though 13 houses in Rana village of Aruarbang in Arughat rural municipality-5 needs to be relocated, the process is yet to begin. The process of relocating 32 houses in Mandre of Barpak also remains stalled. All these settlements suffered cracks in the ground in the earthquake and were deemed inhabitable. However, besides Keraunja and Baguwa, the geologists are yet to carry out a detail study. Locals however say that they cannot live in the same location, as it has suffered cracks in the ground. 'There is a landslide below as well,' Sun Bahadur Gurung of Keraunja said, "we are still living in a place that has been termed inhabitable."

What do the quake survivors say?

Many quake survivors in the district are demanding a multi-floor house design. 'They say if we add floors then we will not be entitled to the grant, but we built a house with 300,000 rupees from the government and another 300,000 in loan. But the two-room house does not fit anything,' Khadka Bahadur Alemagar of Ashrang lamented. They say that if they had a house built with at least two floors then it would be easier to store food grains. 'The ground floor should be built with cement and the first floor using mud,' Khoparaj Pokharel of Takumajha Lakuribot says, 'a house without floors, like a cow shed is of no use to us.'

Sabina Khatun of Ashrang complained that even though she was living separately and her mud house collapsed in the quake, she was not included in the list of beneficiaries. Chairperson of Bhimsen municipality however claimed that those left out from the grant support will be provided the support at any cost.

The quake survivors say that they are in a state of confusion over what to do next as the Rs. 300,000 to be given in grant by the government to reconstruct private houses is insufficient. 'The amount pledged by the government is not enough even to purchase construction materials, I received the 50 thousand but cannot decide to start building the house, nobody will give us loan,' Dilli Dhakal of Saurpani said. It is also due to such reasons that they have not been able to rebuild their houses, and are forced to live in the same damaged house with little repairs.

So living in such condition is not what they have chosen but is a compulsion and share the pain of having to stay awake whole night due to leakage during the rain and dew drops during the winter. 'There are various conditions to build a two-room house, we have received the 50 thousand, but that is not sufficient even to bring down the quake-damaged house,' Lok Bahadur Thapa of Takumajha, Lakuribot said. The survivors have also demanded that the the houses that were rebuilt before the government introduced standards should be compensated with a lump sum amount. On the other hand, lack of workers is also delaying the house construction. The workers that were available for a daily wage of 200 to 300 rupees are now not available even if one is ready to pay 1,000 rupees day.

Security Personnel Under Tents

The police posts in Bungkot, Arkhet, Saurpani, Manbu, Ratmate, Baluwa and Ghyampesal are still running from tents and huts. The Area Police Office in Harmi too is based under a tent. Providing service through a tent and hut is troublesome, says Deputy Superintendent of Police Bhesh Raj Rijal. Bungkot, Ratmate and Ghyampesal police posts are under construction. The Area Police Office, Paluntar building has been com-

pleted. This condition of the security personnel who should be providing shelter to those in trouble and pain can help one understand what the pace of the reconstruction in Gorkha is.

Situation of Education

Schools

Majority of the schools in the district suffered partial and complete damage in the earthquake. But of the 444 schools, 205 have been reconstructed, according to the district project implementation unit chief Ram Prasad Acharya. Likewise, in the quake, 3052 class rooms were completely destroyed while 1,158 class rooms were partially damaged. A total of 109 schools are under-construction, according to information provided by the District Education Office. Majority of the schools are presently operating under temporary huts.

The schools are being re-built with the help of various non-government organisations. The remaining school buildings too will be constructed as per the standard prescribed by the Department of Education, including toilets, drinking water and quake-resistant, as claimed by the Education Office. The DEO says that schools with grades one to three require six rooms, one to grade five will require eight rooms while the schools with grade one to grade eight will need 12 classroom. And the buildings are being constructed accordingly. Likewise, the schools providing education from grade one to ten will require 15 classrooms while those running classes from grade one to 12 will require 18 class rooms.

The Office has also said that a surrounding fence/wall needs to be constructed in 244 schools in the district. However, even toilets have not yet been built in those 244 schools. Likewise, there is drinking water facility in 153 schools while 291 schools do not have facility of drinking water. The education office said

that it is in the stage of receiving the final schools reconstruction data.

School Builders

Twenty-eight school buildings in the district are under construction with support from JICA. The construction process in all these schools followed a tender process while 30 schools are in the phase of survey for being reconstruction with loan assistance from JICA.

Ten schools were support to be reconstructed through the Indian Embassy but that is yet to begin. The detailed project report or DPR for five schools have been developed but others are still awaiting a survey, the District Education Office said. Construction of the building of the Himalaya secondary school in Ghairung had begun before the earthquake through the Indian Embassy and is currently under-construction.

The process of construction of the building of the Sinjali secondary school in Taklung, the responsibility for which was taken by the Government of China, has also not yet begun. Of the 99 schools that the district implementation unit had begun reconstruction in the fiscal year 2016/17, only 30 have been completed. In the fiscal year 2017/18 too the implementation unit has begun construction of 99 more schools. Save the Children has taken the responsibility of constructing the four school buildings and all are under-construction. Likewise, good neighbours' international has taken the responsibility for two school buildings while Nepal Youth Foundation has taken one school building construction to the final stage.

As it has been a problem to transport construction materials to north to northern Gorkha, the construction of the school buildings in the erstwhile 10 VDCs is yet to begin. 'We changed the design and are ready to begin the construction', Acharya of the implementation unit said, "but it has been a problem to transport

construction materials to construct an RCC building.”

In the absence of school reconstruction, teaching and learning activities are taking place through temporary learning centres. A total of 861 temporary learning centres have been established. According to the District Education Office, the major challenge of school building reconstruction is also the lack of workers. ‘Construction materials are scarce, but it is also difficult to find construction workers,’ Acharya said.

Scarcity of Woods Too

The wood said to be provided in subsidized rate by the District Forest Office to the earthquake survivors is yet to be distributed. The DFO had planned to bring wood from Chitwan to be distributed to the quake survivors in the fiscal year 2016/17. But it has not been possible due to lack of transportation, the Office said. The Department of Forest had prepared to provide 10,000 cubic feet of wood at the rate of 30 cubic feet per family in the first phase. But now some quake survivors have already started constructing their houses by using the wood from their old (damaged) house. Some have purchased it in coordination from the community forest. But many are still in a state of confusion for lack of wood.

Landless Settlers with a Unique Problem of their Own

The landless settlers who had been living on a public land in Naya Sanghu since many years also had their houses damaged in the 2015 earthquake. But but they did not receive the housing grant provided by the government to the quake survivors. ‘We have been living here since ages, our houses were damaged by the quake, but we are not listed as beneficiaries, and since we do not have a land ownership certificate we are not able to rebuild our homes’, Man Bahadur Pari-

yar complained. Durge Pariyar said that they had been residing on the public land in mud huts since the past 40 years and making a living through daily wage labour. ‘But now we don’t even have a hut, which was destroyed in the quake, and we have been asked to produce a landownership certificate to build a new house,’ Pariyar said.

Majority of the settlers here have demanded that the government should provide them the grant of 300 thousand rupees while also giving them land to build houses on it. No government office holds a record about the number of landless settlers in the district who have not been able to reconstruct their houses. The NRA estimates that there are around 1,000 landless settlers who were affected by the earthquake. The NRA says that the rural municipality is now collecting the data. Even though the government has announced grants for the landless settlers to purchase housing plots, the process has not yet begun in Gorkha. ‘First you need to have an official identity card of a landless settler, and we will work towards resolving the problem of the settlers and landless’, Poudel said.

About the NRA

The National Reconstruction Authority was formed at the centre 9 months after the earthquake, i.e. on 27 December 2015. In Gorkha, the NRA office was established a month later in late January 2016. The office was established under the leadership of an Under-secretary with one engineer, two sub-engineers, a section officer, and an assistant officer, accountant and computer operator. But after 21 October 2016, the office is being run under the leadership of the assistant officer. With three posts for technical staff, none are working at present. As a result, the NRA is not in a possible to provide technical advice to those coming to seek for it.

What do the stakeholders say?

Community committee would have been appropriate

When the National Reconstruction Authority was established, there were no clear guidelines about how to move ahead with the reconstruction of the private houses. So, the five months after the formation of the NRA passed away in a state of confusion. The signing of grant contracts with the beneficiaries began in mid-June 2016. Then I was based at the NRA in Gorkha.

We deposited the first tranche of 50,000 rupees in the bank account of 17,000 quake survivors within mid-July 2016. And by mid-September 2016 we had provided the first tranche to 54,000 beneficiaries. The contract agreement was signed in cooperation with the NGOs. We provided the first tranche in the mountainous region by deputing employees in helicopters.

After receiving the first tranche, we thought the survivors would begin constructing their houses and would shift to permanent homes. The first tranche to 54,000 of the 58,000 quake affected was provided in four months through a fast track process. Gorkha had become the first district in providing the first tranche to many quake survivors. Then the NRA had even awarded me for the same. However, the rate in which the survivors received their first tranche was not the same in the beginning of the construction of the houses. Coincidentally, now I am back to the district as the Chief District Officer. I increased the activeness of the district-level implementation unit under the District Coordination Committee. Meetings were held.

We have worked a lot for reconstruction of the Laprak settlement. Efforts were made to transfer the ownership of land from the forest to the project. Lately we initiated a campaign for distribution of the first tranche but I personally feel that the campaign to build houses has not been successful. This campaign would have been expedited had a community committee been formed in every community to move ahead with the reconstruction of houses.

Unavailability of skilled workers, scarcity of workers and other problems has stopped the quake survivors from beginning constructing their houses as we have liked. Based on an action plan of the NRA, the quake survivors are presently forced to begin building their houses. But now things have become expensive and had the construction taken place soon after receiving the first tranche, it would have been lesser.

In my understanding the reconstruction of private houses is not satisfactory. So far only 25 per cent of the quake survivors have received the second tranche of housing grant while only 10 per cent took the final and third tranche. However, by this time 70 per cent quake survivors should have constructed their houses. Only then we would have said we have been successful. But now we will move forward by making a serious assessment of this matter.

Jitendra Basnet, Chief District Officer, Gorkha

Rural municipality has been active

Now when all the survivors began construction their houses at once, the price of construction materials has gone up. They are working with a target to complete the DPC by mid-January 2018. As everyone is constructing the house at the same time, there is scarcity

of workers. So, the survivors have been doubly affected. We are presently collecting a data of the landless settlers in the rural municipality. We support the financial poor and those who have not been able to construct houses even after receiving the housing grant. We have been mobilizing the people who were trained as masons/carpenters by the Building Division Office. The houses in Siranchowk rural municipality-4 and Choprak-4 and 5 are being constructed by trained masons. Our target is to complete all the houses within mid-August. A total of 5300 houses of our rural municipality has to be reconstructed. Currently, 35 per cent of the houses have been completed. I feel that many houses will have been completed by this time next year. We are encouraging the construction of the private houses.

Raju Gurung, Chair, Siranchowk rural municipality

Preparing for the reconstruction Year

In our rural municipality, 90 per cent of the quake survivors are preparing to get the second tranche. Now the house construction work has expedited but there is lack of workers. The price of construction materials has skyrocketed. An issue has come up after the NRA failed to respond to the complaints of those left out from the list of beneficiaries. The rural municipality is trying to observe the next two years as the reconstruction year. We are facilitating those who have not received their installments and also encouraging people to construct their houses.

Bishnu Bhatta, Chair, Sulikot rural municipality

We will complete next year

Majority of the schools are under-construction. Only few schools are yet to have their source of funding ascertained. The source of funding to rebuild 129 schools with classes from Grade 1 to 5 have not been guaranteed. This year we will determine which agency will rebuild which school. Next year, we will not have to wait for agencies to build the school buildings. Presently, the Indian government and the Chinese government side that assumed responsibility to rebuild schools have been slow to start with the work. Currently, majority of the schools are in the phase of reconstruction. Along with the reconstruction of the schools, we are also focusing on toilets, school boundary wall, sports ground etc as per the safe school concept. Presently, only 191 schools have toilets. And toilets needs to be construction in 120 schools. Now we will be moving forward with all the required work. By next fiscal year, we target to complete reconstruction of all the schools in the district.

Dipendra Subedi, District Education Officer

However, NRA chief or assistant officer Shiva Poudel claims that there has been no problem in the coordination with the Building Division Office, District Co-ordination Committee Office and others. 'Initially there were some legal hurdles, with no procedures available it was a problem to even recommend for the grant installments, but now its not a problem,' Poudel said. The confusion in the quake survivors has also been cleared, as every

household wanted to receive the installment in their homes. But that has now been understood. We have facilitated the process as well as the legal matters, he added.

There has been more complaints from the quake survivors about the lack of workers in reconstruction, as confirmed by Poudel. Majority of the workers at present come from the Tarai and from Rukum, Rolpa, and Jumla. If the recon-

struction moves ahead in the current pace then 43 per cent of the private houses will have been reconstructed by mid-June. 'With this pace, we will probably reach the final phase of reconstruction of the private houses by next fiscal year', Poudel said. Presently, the NRA has been working in grievance handling at the rural municipality and municipality level, encouraging the reconstruction of houses and informing the quake survivors about the policy and legal matters.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The earthquake victims continue to live a miserable life in the tents even 32 months since the quake. Listening to and looking at the quake survivors who have endured three monsoon and winters in tents shows that they are in a sorry state. While, many quake survivors have not built their houses even after receiving the first tranche. They need to be encouraged to rebuild their private houses. Many survivors have not even started with the foundation of the house, claiming that the 300 thousand rupees given by the government is not enough to build the house. They also need to be encouraged to build their houses.

Likewise, the house construction process has also been affected by lack of workers and construction materials. The Building Division Office and other government/non-government agencies concerned with reconstruction must pay attention towards producing and manag-

ing skilled workers. Likewise, the District Administration Office needs to take the initiative to facilitate the availability of construction materials for the quake survivors. Furthermore, the grant support provided by the government is not even sufficient to transport construction materials to some wards in Chum Nubri rural municipality and Dharche rural municipality in northern Gorkha due to difficult terrain. So, providing an equal amount of grants to people living in the urban and the remote areas is injustice to the people in the remote parts. This needs to be reviewed. Also, the political parties need to also provide support from their side to the extent possible in the reconstruction process.

Reference Materials

- Nepal Human Rights Year book 2013 and 2017
- Local newspapers
- Meeting with concerned office chief or representative
- Chief District Officer
- District Education Officer
- District Public Health Office, Health Assistant
- Assistant officer at the National Reconstruction Authority
- Rural Municipality chairpersons
- Earthquake survivors
- Statements by survivors in the public hearing programme organised by INSEC on the status of the quake survivors

