

A Report Based on Recent Trip to Rapchha

June 13, 2015

Great Quakes

Five year old son of Man Bahadur (math teacher at Basakhali Secondary School) is terrified to go even near their house which is relatively in better shape than other houses in the vicinity. Ram Kumar at Glamnya (a community in Rapchha) has stopped rebuilding his house further as the process was interrupted by the second quake when he was about to complete the first story of his house which he started from the very foundation after his house was badly damaged by the first quake. Anywhere from two to twelve families throughout Rapchha now spend the night together under the tarpaulin roofed temporary shelters. Some of the Foundation provided plastic tunnels are now being used as temporary shelters.



A Plastic Tunnel is now a home for this family

After having experienced the second large quake in their respective classrooms, students from all four schools in Rapchha are now more comfortable in studying out in the open in a shelter made of zinc sheet walls and roofs, or of bamboos and tarpaulin roof.



A temporary classroom at Lop pre-primary School

For the first time in many decades, Rapchha people are not really concerned about farming around this time. But they are concerned that the quake will be followed by a severe famine in the coming years as that was what happened after even greater quake that shook the nation more than 80 years ago.

During both the bigger quakes this time, and many of the strong aftershocks to this date, there are no human casualties in Rapchha. Rapchha sees its damages as minimal compared to what has happened in the most affected areas of the country. And Rapchha is very sad for those who lost everything, literally. Nevertheless Rapchha has lost a great deal too as by now almost all of the houses in there are uninhabitable - some of them are completely destroyed and others are damaged to the extent that it is suicidal to live inside.

What's Next?

Rebuilding Rapchha. Or perhaps even rebuilding 'a better Rapchha' as put by the Foundation Chair Mrs. Carroll. And this rebuilding process is going to be a lot of work and challenges on part of everybody involved in the process.



One of the damaged houses in Rapchha

Right now, everybody in Rapchha regardless of their age (same throughout the country) is pretty shaken up by the experience of these earthquakes. People are engulfed with the fear that there could be yet another powerful aftershock as it has already happened once. Except for saying that it is 'unusual' to get such a strong aftershocks, even the experts are unable to give some convincing explanation to people, and so people are coming up with all kinds of speculations on their own which are perhaps baseless but

definitely very disturbing psychologically. Only the passing of time will heal this trauma in everybody's mind it seems, or rebuilt their confidence on the situation.

A New Terror

On May 25 at around midnight, Asarman and Tula called me and I woke up right away. Just three days ago, one of the brightest young men (Nir Kumar – 25 years old) from Rapchha has committed suicide near his school in Takshindu where he was a science teacher. I feared there was something urgent or even bad news being brought by Asarman and Tula at this odd hour. As we were sleeping out in the tent, Asarman shared the news with me (that he got from Bikumar, the most educated untouchable from Rapchha and a renowned teacher at Namche) about breaking of Imja Lake. He warned us to be extra cautious that night.

The communities closest to the Dudhkoshi River in Rapchha (Andheri, Lop and Bodu) is at least 500 meter up from the River and it is unlikely that even if Imja Lake was broken, the flood would reach as high as one of the houses situated closest to the river. But huge landslide throughout the river bank would have been very likely. Our bunch of people decided not to sleep so spent rest of the night talking.

First thing we did at daybreak next morning was to see the river and Dudhkoshi (means 'Milk-like River') now looked like more of a river of dark chocolate than milk-like river. The river had grown but not to the extent that it could cause some problem (like landslide). Throughout that morning, we knew that every single family living in the lowest area of Bodu, Lop and Andheri had moved to higher places during the night.

The local FM radio broadcasted in the morning news that one of the smaller lakes was broken in Khumbu area and not Imja Lake which is tagged a 'Time Bomb' by even the experts in the field.

Support coming in Rapchha

The Nepal Government was the first to react (as it should have) but soon the better support started coming into Rapchha from international organizations like 'Classroom in

the Clouds' and 'Re-Help' and other organizations via connection of some of the individuals from Rapchha like Sat Bahadur, Rase, Arjun, Nirkumar and Amrit.

At the beginning, the government provided a 12X15 feet tarpaulin and Rs. 7000 rupees to some of the families who were worst affected by the quake. Later on, occasional distribution of tarpaulin followed but not everyone from Rapchha had yet gotten one.

I understand 'Re-Help' has raised and contributed some fund for the Rapchha community, and more recently, 'Classroom in the Clouds' has contributed a significant amount to 'reconstruct' Thulodhunga school and it has also provided big size good quality tarpaulin to the Ward 9 and part of Ward 8 households. 50 pieces of this tarpaulin has been given to Basakhali Secondary School.

Just recently one of the mainstream political party members (there were two groups each consisting 50 members) came to Rapchha to help dismantle damaged houses as well as build temporary shelters for the villagers, but because of some politically motivated conflicting leadership role from within the community, this group has not been as useful as it could/should have been.

Hopefully Unlikely but a Real Threat

Rapchha for you who have not yet visited the area is a very vertical terraced geography. The recent quakes have cracked the earth in many places and soon arriving monsoon rain is going to go through these cracks. This can erode the soil inside and it can cause landslides. People are worried about this situation and families in the landslide-prone area are already thinking about moving into safer places. Sadly, most of the families in Rapchha this fall will not have a carefree and comfortable sleep.

What kind of support is needed?

The most immediate or short term support is to make sure every single family in Rapchha has a temporary shelter to go through this fall to protect themselves and whatever valuables (mostly grains) they have. Thanks to the international organizations' support and support from the Nepal Government that over 80% of the families in Rapchha now has tarpaulin to roof their shelter. Many families have already built a

temporary shelter for themselves using locally available materials like bamboo and wood.



A temporary shelter of a family to go through this fall/monsoon

Rapchha still lives pretty primitive life and the good news about communities like this is, it is self sufficient in terms of food supply; the most essential thing for living, for a considerable amount of time. People here won't die of hunger (this can happen in some other parts of the country in such situation) even when there will be no help (food) coming in from other places.

But it is a different story when it comes to having some finance ready at hand. Bluntly speaking, people here are poor in terms of having hard cash. Most of them have land, and so food, but they don't have money or at least 95% of them do not have money enough to be able to build a brand new house right away. Supporting those families financially to rebuild their houses (who lost it) can be a major rebuilding process where all the international organizations can collaborate together, or independently towards the same direction.

Very important aspect of this project should be the concerned organizations should have a common or different (and plausible) conditions and rules about obtaining this fund (perhaps free but with some kind of condition to ensure the fund is used in the right place) and they (donor organizations) should, via their local members or facilitators (this can be the leader figures of the community), regularly check the situation that the fund is being used properly on the right subject.

Rapchha will identify those families who have lost their houses and who genuinely qualify in obtaining the fund and based on this consensus; we can begin making the fund available to the right families.

After short term support is adequate, this is the kind of support (funding for building houses) Rapchha is willing/wishing to receive from its friends in international organizations.

When Rapchha (we) says, 'funding for building houses', we are certainly not requesting for fund enough to build all the houses in Rapchha, but this means any size of fund you could raise in this subject. No matter what the size is that 'a help in need is a help indeed'.

For more immediate period, of course tarpaulin and tent is highly appreciated but as for the long term support, it is unanimously agreed that a help in the form of 'money to build houses' can be the best help.

And any or new and varied information on suitable technique, technology and design of earthquake proof buildings (private and public) is equally highly appreciated.

Status of Public places and Infrastructures in and around Rapchha

Four permanent metal bridges are still standing alright. Two small hydropower plants managed to stay unharmed as well all this time.

The pre-primary school in Lop requires the biggest (in percentage) rebuilding process if not 100% followed by the Basakhali Secondary School. The toilet of Bodu pre-primary school was originally built in a very unstable piece of land and now it requires a complete reconstruction perhaps in a more stable ground. This school has only one toilet so it is urgently needed to be rebuilt. Basakhali is the only school which has now

actually more than enough toilets as a brand-new two room toilet is being constructed right at this moment given by the government prior to the great quake.

Many houses within this particular community have been severely damaged but the old block of Bodu school has amazingly escaped any serious damages. If funding is available, the community would certainly want to replace this old building with a brand new one which is also now very much outdated but in lack of funding from the government or international organizations, it can be repaired by the community and start using again. The newer block is absolutely unharmed.

In a mass meeting, there were two ideas coming from the people who know construction job (masons and carpenters) that the new building of Chandrodaya Primary School should go through: firstly they advised that it is best to rebuilt the school from the very foundation as it is not yet too late and perhaps this is the best solution to ensure that the school building will stand alright for many years to come, and secondly some of these experts suggested all the walls should be at least dismantled from the height where window frames stand and there should be a horizontal cemented support layer put in the middle of the wall to enhance the strength of the wall. When one commonly agreed idea seemed difficult to come up with, the school management committee and the contractors agreed to call Mr. Dawa and request with him to bring an engineer to inspect the condition of the wall and get his (engineer's) suggestion.

During another mass meeting, Panche Rai (Rapchha) and Dhana Rai (from Takshindo) agreed to bring in a brand new school block each in Basakhali Secondary School through their international contacts. Sat Bahadur and Arjun also announced at the same meeting that they will coordinate with their personal contacts abroad to bring in as much help for this school as possible. ANUVAM (French association) has been continuously supporting this school financially for over a decade now, and the Nepal Foundation has been doing the same for last many years.

The healthpost and five community buildings (including a church at Bodu and Community Forest Building in Lawale) got damaged too but they do not require complete rebuilding.



A broken ply on the ceiling of a healthpost room (hit by fallen stone from the wall above)

What does the community say about upcoming projects?

Drinking water and water for irrigation is one of the scheduled projects of the Nepal Foundation in Rapchha going to begin after the festival (Nepali) season, and the community is still hoping it will continue despite the fact a lot may change due to the quake. ANUVAM's project of putting metal electric poll from the main transformer box to the healthpost is going to take place within few months. It's another project of smokeless oven (or improved oven) in Rapchha is perhaps one of the projects that needs to be rescheduled (these are all community opinions) and postponed for some time as many families in Rapchha at this point do not know where their new house is going to be built and they obviously want to build a kitchen with smokeless oven near or in the house itself.

And a big THANK YOU to all (on behalf of everybody from Rapchha) who have been helping Rapchha for last many years and who have started helping us fairly recently and who are going to help us now. Thank you all.

- Yadav Kumar Rai