Secrets of survival

Ratna Bharali Talukdar

explores how indigenous architecture has helped the villagers of North Sikkim escape major devastation during earthquakes.

Thus, these traditional structures could resist the tremor, whereas some 53,172 houses, almost half of the entire households of the State, either collapsed, were damaged or developed cracks due to the tremor, according to official statistics. In the North district, with a very small population of 43,354, against its geographical area of 4,226 sq.km, 7,120 houses have been identified by the district administration as having either collapsed or damaged.

Narating what happened to her house during the September 18, 2011 earthquake, Pepu Lachungpa, a village of Singi grooming, a village with 20 families in the B Salah area of Siringah revenue circle and a mother of three, said they suddenly experienced massive shaking of the house over the boulders that lasted for several seconds, resulting in removal of portions of boulders from the main plinth. Thus, although the boulders moved away — causing huge damage to the lower part — the upper parts of the house remained safe for habitation. “We now have to set the boulders accordingly and properly. The upper part that we live in is however safe,” says Pepu. Like other victims, the family too, received Rs. 25,000/- as rehabilitation grant from the government.

“If our indigenous architecture of housing pattern can enlighten us in understanding the adoption of a new technology suitable for the mountainous region, we should definitely go for it,” says T.W. Lepcha, member of the Lachen-Mangan legislative assembly constituency. Lepcha has also asked the Department of Mines and Geology to conduct a “Vulnerability and Stability Mapping” of his constituency to help in identifying the safest places, which are ideal for human habitation. Stating that as certain indigenous architecture have proven to be successful in minimising the impact on human lives in certain localities, modern buildings and most unfortunately, the government buildings in his constituency have been severely damaged during the tremor.

Replicating the Lachung experience, in Lachen too, another Bhutia hamlet at 9,200 ft, houses were not damaged or did not collapse during the tremor. Significantly, Lachen and Lachen, two high altitude tourist hotspots bordering China, are identified as most protected and restricted areas and one needs special permission to visit them.

When indigenous architecture has proven to be useful in providing material relief to overcome trauma, a strong community bond to help each other during the devastation, too, was equally instrumental in healing the pain of the affected people. Community people joined hands not only in the process of rebuilding, but the psychological support has worked as a magnificent tool to start a new life.

Showering rare examples of such community bond, N. Nema Lepcha, the Panchayat Secretary of Pashing, has provided shelter to 19 earthquake affected families of his community living in Bay village in Dzarguk, the pristine land of the Lepchas, the original inhabitants of the State, in his own house. Bay, a Lepcha village, was seriously affected during the tremor, leading to the death of seven people. The Panchayat Secretary has shown his generosity by providing not only living space for these families, but also made the arrangements for the performance of the community death rite ceremony, for all the seven who died during the tremor on November 5, to mark the 49th day of the deceased. Thousands of people from the surrounding Lepcha villages thronged to his house to console the families of the victims.

“It was such an unprecedented and horrifying experience. We were just relieving at the end of the day. All on a sudden, a portion of the hill-top fell down on us and washed away half of the village in front of our eyes, telling my elder brother’s wife and children with seven others... The Panchayat Secretary has been so kind to provide us some space to live in; otherwise we would have had to live under tents like refugees,” says Rishi Lepcha, a member of the affected families, who is staying in the Panchayat Secretary’s house.

While modern and complex societies in transition often have to encounter difficulties in searching for indigenous coping mechanisms to overcome trauma in the aftermath of a devastating situation; successful examples of such tribal societies may help in understanding such situations. There is also room for institutionalisation of such efforts of addressing psychological trauma in the modern world.

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