On September 18, Binola Rai’s world was reduced to rubble. A student of Class III at Bop Primary School in Chungthang block of North District in Sikkim, a Himalayan border state, she was left traumatized when a devastating earthquake of 6.8 magnitude on the Richter scale flattened her home and school building located at an altitude of 5,000 feet.

Today Binola joined 26 other children of her village to walk the four-kilometer stretch, filled with quake debris, to reach the Tasa Tangay Government Secondary School. This trek has become a daily feature in her life, even since her earlier Bop Primary School made alternative arrangements for her schooling.

This brave band of youngsters set out from their village early in the morning, overcoming the chilly frost in the air, and make sure to reach school by 7.30 am.

Bop, about 100 kilometres from Sikkim’s capital city Gangtok, is a remote village. It lies in one of India’s most restricted and protected areas and no visit here has to first acquire a special permit from the district administration. The quake damaged the approach road to the village and it has remained blocked because of continuous landslides from the towering mountain sides that surround it. The road is yet to be opened for vehicles.

Though the trek to school is long and difficult, Class IV students are quite happy to attend class at the new site. She displays her books with such enthusiasm that her lovely face lights up. “Our homes got damaged but our books and uniform are fine. I love coming to school,” she exclaims.

The school register at Tasa Tangay Government Secondary School had marked the presence of 18 new students on November 18 and the mark sheet arranges itself neatly among. Sitas Ram Singh, the head master, is proud of the prompt restoration of school after the tremors, which was very positive. Our secondary school is now running extra shifts to accommodate the new students.

The district administration’s list of school buildings that had been damaged during the earthquake is as follows: Bop Primary School.

“Classes are attached with Chungthang, till new site is found”, this indicates that Binola’s old school will have to be built again on a new site and if the authorities had not acted so promptly she would have not had access to schooling for a long while. In fact, according to Singh, there are many young ones studying in class, who have not made an appearance because they are too young to walk the distance to their alternate schools.

What has helped to re-establish schooling in these parts is the mid-day meal programme. The lunch provided every day even under the tough post-quake circumstances, has given these young students a much needed nutritional supplement, a necessity now considering they leave home very early in the morning.

Sonam D Bhutia, Joint Director, Human Resource Department of North District, puts it this way, “Restoration of education and ensuring mid-day meals in schools almost immediately after the tremors has proven to be a very successful aspect in the process of rebuilding lives here.”

In fact, school authorities in the district moved quickly on two fronts after the quake. They set up temporary sheds for schools, which were partially damaged, in addition to making alternative arrangements for those whose schools were destroyed. “These temporary sheds are expected to last for at least for two to three years. We made a detailed assessment of the damage to school buildings, and have submitted it to the higher authorities. We have identified 75 school buildings in this district that need major repairs and six that require minor work,” says Bhutia. He adds that a proposal for its 20 crore (US$3.5 to $5.5) has been forwarded to the higher authorities and construction activity is expected to begin shortly.

It is a measure of how seriously the authorities took schooling that despite an estimated 642 government schools being damaged all over Sikkim, school authorities could organise colourfull programmes to celebrate National Education Day on November 11 — less than two months after the quake — giving students a feeling of normalcy. “Schools reopened on October 10, immediately after the Dashehra festival vacation. Thus, although schooling began 22 days after the tremor, students lost hardly 10 days of school,” says TN Kaji, District Collector, North District.

Given the message sent out by the government that schools should carry on despite all odds, even private educational institutions made alternative arrangements for affected students. Take the Moonlight High School, a private educational institution in Chungthang. It now runs its classes in the camp of Indo Tibetan Border Police (ITBP), on a specially demarcated site. “Before the quake we had 150 students. The number has now come down to 85,” says TB Gurung, a teacher in Moonlight High School. He attributes this decline to the fact that the children of the employees of a major hydro-electric project in the area, who had constituted a significant section of the student community there, had left the area with their parents. The lack of proper toilet facilities in the camp is also another factor, especially among the girls.

In Chungthang, every house, even if it is still standing, has developed some cracks, according to Lepcha, president of the Chungthang Gram Panchayat. But Lepcha is grateful that the local people joined hands to ensure the education of their children carried on without disruption. There were many acts of spontaneous generosity. For instance, the proprietor of Mount Everest Academy, another school in the area, offered his own home after the quake severely damaged the school building.

Authorities of religious institutions, including local Buddhist monasteries, also got busy. Today, around 42 monks, some very young, others much older who lived in the majestic Rangmonastery, established in 1582 at Mangar, the district headquarters of North District, and travelled a 56-kilometer stretch from Lachen to take religious teaching in Tibetan Buddhism, are now studying in temporary sheds provided by the district administration. The education department has introduced formal education with religious teaching in all these monasteries, having appointed two teachers under the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) mission for this purpose.

If these alternative arrangements still prove insufficient and some find themselves out of the schooling system because of the quake, a special provision has been made for direct enrollment at the ‘Special Residential Training Centre’, established this year at the Hojy-Gyang Senior Secondary School of the district under the SSA.

Joint Director Bhutia says he is determined to carry forward the mission to make Sikkim a literate state by 2015, despite the disaster. Sikkim has made progress. For instance, the literacy rate in North District increased to 77.39 per cent in 2011 from 67.21 per cent in 2001.

After the earthquake struck, it was acceded to the resumption of education.