

Togetherness in Post-Earthquake Nepalese Society

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Abstract

An enormous earthquake strikes the Nepal on 12 May 2015 with a series of aftershocks that causes thousands of deaths demolish and collapse houses. Similarly, it directly affects the daily life of people in terms of survival. However, the most important thing observed, and experienced by the Nepali people just after the earthquake was "Togetherness" because, it bond the people from diverse community with different religion and culture. That was the unique character shown by Nepali people during the post-earthquake days and was the strength of the Nepali people for a cohesive society. It encourages people to unite, gather at a place, interact and co-operate each other, share the feelings, eat and enjoy together, utilize locally available materials like a living in a joint family with members. That also helps the people to prevent from the fear of the aftershocks and hard life living with psychological tension as well as easy and jointly cope with the worst situation occurred by an earthquake. Finally, Nepali people learned and realized that they are rich in diversity with different ethnicity, culture, and religion. They have their own local knowledge system for survival via managing locally available resources that are vital for coping with disaster and make them resilience to construct and sustain cohesive and secure society. Therefore, togetherness they experience during the crisis should be continued and replicated in normal situation as well.

Keywords: Togetherness; Cohesion; Resilience; Local knowledge; Diversity

Introduction

A strong (7.8 magnitudes) earthquake hit Nepal on 25 April 2015 which epicenter was located 81 km northwest of the capital city of Kathmandu i.e., near Barpak VDC of Gorkha district. It affected 14 districts of Nepal with about 8000 people dead and smashed over 500000 houses [1]. The earthquake followed by very powerful aftershocks (6.7 magnitudes) on 26 April 2015. Another earthquake (7.3 magnitudes) hit in Dolakha District on 12 May 2015. This caused additional death and buildings collapse. Similarly, as a consequences of earthquake and aftershocks many people lost their family and children. They are in a living in a very difficult situation in the absence of permanent shelter to eat and sleep together, schools and health facilities. Therefore, they are looking safe places.

The major causes behind such deaths, injuries, and building collapse observed by Poudel [2] are scantily and spontaneous construction practices in urban area, tower structured by telephone companies and Nepal electricity office. Similarly, the author highlighted that despite of Nepali people and government of Nepal recognized that Nepal is an earthquake prone zone they have not their special attention towards the disaster because they are not serious regarding safety measures and have not alleged the genuine intimidation in terms of making safe homes despite of accessibility of the new technologies (building codes).

Furthermore, he added that government of Nepal should have seriously worked on to make societies more resilient to cope with the earthquake and hazards via it wise actions and efforts, however, there is insufficient coordination among the concerned authorities. They are harshly noticeable at the time of disaster only focusing on rescue and rehabilitation only. Other side, the author observed that Nepali people

are underprivileged in terms of their own safety. They have very limited knowledge to prepare for and cope with disaster.

Hence, the time comes for policy makers, civil society and people to work together to build the capacity of community and adopt preventive measures (awareness program) with the maximum participation of the community people to cope jointly with the disaster and to minimize the damage in life and property if an earthquake hits. However, there is very less studies and recommendations exist in the context of Nepal in this area to perform properly by government of Nepal. Therefore, the author tried here to find out some clues via this study to contribute to the government of Nepal in the area of resilience Nepali society to cope with the disaster.

Methods

Although, the people are in panic by the aftershocks and living in worst situation after the earthquake, the author realized that the best methods of collecting field text would be participants' observation [3]. Therefore, the author used participants' observation as the qualitative research method for this study. He observed in total 12 families affected by the earthquake in Kathmandu and Lalitpur districts of Nepal (neighbor's families of author-6, neighbor's families of author's relative-2, relatives' families-2, household owner of author-1, and household owner of author's relative-1).

Similarly, to know the social process and realities personal experience is also crucial. Using personal and professional experiences lies under the auto ethnography method of qualitative study. Because auto-ethnography encourages author to observe it as human subjects and create a mesh of cultural, and social in relation to the study area [4]. Hence, besides participants observation, the author used another methods of qualitative study i.e., auto ethnography here to make meaning through the multi reality expression of the participants in terms of resilient society to cope with disaster in Nepalese context.

Characteristic of Nepali society seen during Post quake days

Hami Sangai Basau Hai Sangai, author experienced togetherness first time where he was living with his family (wife and two daughters) in Sinchahity, Lalitpur since 7 years on rent. There were another six families living with him in the same house for rent. They all were from diverse communities (eastern part of Nepal, Terai, Kathmandu, Sindhupalchok and Lalitpur) and with our own religion (Buddha and Hindu) and culture (Newari, Tamang and Maithili). Therefore, their daily living life was different. Due to that, there was no any kind of communication in terms of sharing of feeling among each other, coordination, i.e., for a united and cooperation (being friendship and understanding each other) at all before the earthquake. They all were engaged in their own work and living own way. Those were the characteristics met with the urban society defined by Merram-Webster that urban society is a typical one. It has modern industrial civilization, heterogeneous in cultural tradition. It underlines secular values that are individualized rather than integrated and contrasted via folk society [5].

The author observed, togetherness was the unique characteristics of Nepali society seen during post-quake days. Online Cambridge Dictionaries [6] defined that togetherness is the enjoyable sensation of person that unites the people, develops friendship and sympathy.

Hence, the author came to understand that togetherness is the part of social cohesion because United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs [7] highlighted that a cohesive society generally centered towards the enhanced prospect of the people and families. This type of society guards the life jeopardy of people, belief on their neighbors. Furthermore, social cohesion determines inclusiveness, active and meaningful participation if people and generate opportunities for their aloft mobility. That glue holds society together.

Finally, the author learned that social cohesion mainly talks about the major ideas like social capital, social inclusion, and social mobility. Social capital stands here for a belief between people and institutions in terms of belonging to a society. Social inclusion stands for the extent to which people can participate on equal grasp in the economic, social, and political life with protection in times of their need while social mobility represents to equal opportunity to go ahead [7].

However, after the earthquake the author, along with the neighbors gathered at one place that day in a compound nearby the residence. He passed the whole day together with our families and kids. They interacted with each other, shared our feelings and eat (lunch, breakfast) together. It was like a joint family because joint family is a type of comprehensive family poised of parents, children, spouses and offspring in a single household [8]. The author realized that generally they all had their own family at own places, however, they were missing them at that time. People generally preferred to live as a nuclear family, but they realized the significance of joint family. In this regards, Christia and Helleve [9] pointed out that it is very important to be with family during and after the disaster because the sense of togetherness is very prominent rather than individuality that time.

Therefore, in the evening, the author discussed with the neighbors and decided to live all together in his flat because it was at ground floor with enough spaces for living to all with toilets and easy to move outside from home if earthquake repeated within the next 72 hours as announced by news channels and local FMs and finally lived together. However, there was a great fear in their mind because aftershocks repeated many times in that night, but still they stayed in the house in

spite of knowing the high risk. They have no any other alternatives that time. Therefore, they slept by turn. Some of them guard and take care of kids. They mostly chat to avoid the fear because there was no other option likewise watching TV, hearing news in the absence of electricity to get ahead of time.

The next day also they all lived together whole day at the swimming pool compound, Satdobato, Lalitpur. They isolated from our residence due to the frequent aftershocks. They all tried to escape from the fear of earthquakes, its damages, and psychological tension as well by sharing feelings and experiences. They lived like a family by sharing and serving our foods among each other. They cooperated with each other to construct a tent and coordinated each other to collect the materials for sitting, sleeping, and cooking etc.

In this way, togetherness helped them easily cope with the effects of earthquakes in terms of fulfillment of required resources and need of the family.

Strength of togetherness

In observation of the author, the strength was the use of maximum locally available resources. Generally, people do not know and give the importance of resources (materials) those are available in their own home. They do not use them properly. They think those are useless and take as wastage.

After the earthquake, they all collected such locally available resources (old carpet, dry goods, blankets, mat, and mattress) available in their residence by coordinating each other and utilized for sitting and sleeping purposes in the compound. They constructed a tent for living. For that, they collected bamboo, plastics, plastic thread, etc. whatever available at their own residence.

In this way, they identified locally available resources, managed, and utilized them properly. That time, author realized the importance of the things available at own home and learned the use of the maximum utilization of those resources in my daily life too.

Similarly, author learned that togetherness helps people to comprehend the best as well as worst moments and encourage them to re-gather at a place even after a long time afterward so that they could reunite and spent some better moments together, share their experiences. That helps them to feel relaxed, enjoyed, and free from the tension of daily life. Because, about one year later the author along with all flat holders, house owner and neighbors discussed and decided to celebrate the Nepali New year 1st Baishakh 2073 jointly at a place via remembering that moments spent together just after the earthquakes. They also agreed to celebrate the other Nepali festivals as well at a place to enjoy together, share joys and sorrows among each other.

Polarization of people

The weakness found by the author was the sustainability of the best practices that was adopted during post-quake days i.e., togetherness. On the third day of the earthquake, a polarization occurs among them. They started to search their friends, well-wishers relatives, and family members. Because they feel that relatives and family members are crucial at that moment to share the feelings. Religion, tradition, and cultures are hindering us in living together in terms of eating, sleeping, etc. However, they were at a place due to the consequences of quake only. After the contact with relatives, some of them moved to nearby relatives with their resources. Gradually their temporary residence

destroyed in the lack of appropriate and enough materials and they isolated. That time a miserable environment created. They feel that they are losing something.

After the normalization of the situation, they all again back to their rental houses from various places. The author felt the situation was the same as before the earthquake because he was expecting the environment (togetherness) that formed during the post-quake days. He tried to continue the same. However, he failed. Again, they all became busy in their businesses.

It also observed in pre-disaster community that social system has numerous proportion of social life that provides the structure in terms of relationships and connection. Due to the political, cultural, and occupational reason, people are far apart [10].

Therefore, the author realized that the togetherness was for a short time and constructed due to the disaster only and it was not sustainable.

Cope with the disaster via togetherness

There was an enormous fear among family members on the third day due the deaths occurred by an earthquake and it frequently broadcasted in the news. They are in grief by seeing, hearing and experiencing such things. Really, they were in stress that moment due to the frequent aftershocks. Neither, they can go back to the residence nor stay at Satdobato after destroyed temporary tent. In the meanwhile, uncle in law (Sasura Uncle) called the author. They shared their experiences among each other. After knowing the situation, he requested to come at Chapali where he was living with his family. He shared that he had a "Tahara" which was very safe and where his neighbors (including house honor) were living with them after the earthquake. He added that it would be easier for them also to live together, support each other, and share resources those days. Finally, the author convinced and decided to go over there. Luckily, he has the motorbike that time, so it was easier for him to move with family members to Chapali.

After arrival, another family member i.e., sister in law who was also living in Kathmandu with her husband, son and brothers invited to come there and sit together to cope with the disaster jointly. In the evening, they joined us. They stay two more days there. He experienced many things there also. It was togetherness of nuclear families to joint family. He feels that joint family is very much helpful in terms of cooperation with each other (in cooking; cleaning and sleeping etc.), contribution financially, and appreciate common family sentiment etc. They supported each other, and share resources those days. They lived together by sharing the sorrows and joys. It helped us to minimize our fear of earthquake in spite of facing aftershocks. After that, they moved to their destination at Janakpur, Dhanusha and came back to Kathmandu after opening of schools of kids and normalization of the situation together.

From the above scenario, the author learned that disaster played a crucial role in terms of binding people together, sharing of feelings among each other living with sorrows and joys, united, being friendship, and understanding each other and use of optimum locally available resources. One of the studies also shows that collective culture creates togetherness with other people in the community and is one important factor that supports people in coping and recovering from the worst situation generated by disaster [8].

However, the journey of grief did not end there. There was a formal, informal message from an individual and in the media about the prevalence of communicable diseases like diarrhea, cholera and swine flu, etc., due to the open urination and defecation occurred by unmanaged residence (roadside, open ground, park) of people as well as damaged houses and kills under such houses after earthquake. Thousands of people left Kathmandu due to that. Government internal strategy was also to vacant the city so that easier for them to operate the rescue operation, clean the damages properly as well as to prevent the people from communicable diseases.

Another side school of kids also announced the closure and M Phil class of author also closed as well for a month. There was a psychological tension among us what to do. There was another problem like very hard to collect the money from ATM, purchase the food items from the market because shops closed due to damages. Therefore, it was very difficult to survive in Kathmandu with kids for such a long time. The family members of the author were also pressurizing him to leave Kathmandu and back to mother home. Finally, they decided and left the Kathmandu next day. However, it was not easy for us because roads were damaged (cracked) and closed due to landslides. Anyway, they moved and reached their destination at Janakpur, Dhanusha. After a month, they came back to Kathmandu after opening of schools of kids and normalization of the situation. In this way, they cope with earthquakes.

There was another angle of the story also. When author gathered at an uncle's residence at Chapali a conflict occurred between house owner and uncle. The cause behind it cut off the water supply and locked the toilet by house owner. They are familiar with the limited source of water in Kathmandu. Therefore, they requested with him for the supply of water and use of toilets and bathrooms. They tried to convince him that this is for a short time and it occurred due to the earthquake only otherwise we have our own residence and live there. However, had he neither agreed nor supported them. They shared the scenario with neighbors and took a support from them. They shared uncle in law that house owner did so due to the guests.

House owner perceived that uncle ignored them after coming of his family members, but it was not in real because they all were living together in a "Tahara" with other neighbors also after earthquakes. The issue did not end there. Uncle in law had to leave one of the flat out of two those he was using on rent after our return from home. He had the ultimatum to leave other flat also within next three months from house owner. Therefore, he searched the land on lease in that area. He constructed thatched roof. After the completion, he shifted to his residence.

In this way, one side, he was isolated from that particular house, but other side, he is appreciated by the society due to his great effort of providing the shelters to the neighbors who had lost their houses by earthquake and supporting to construct such type of cost effective "Thatched roofs" in that area.

Finally, the author experienced that an incidence both creates and breaks the relationship among the people.

Resilience

On the third day, the author (with sister in law's family) lived together with at uncle in law's "Tahara" in Chapali, Kathmandu for two days. On the post quakes, day's uncle in law had not only provided the shelters to us, but also the neighbors who had lost their houses by

earthquake for a month in that Tahara. It was very safe to stay and no any kind of fear of damages.

After a month, he observed that Tahara becomes famous in that area because people realized that it is more comfortable than the buildings. There is no any threat of damages, easy to move outside if earthquake comes and cost effective either. Therefore, people requested to support them to construct that type of Tahara for them. Most of people constructed such type of Tahara and staying there after quakes rather than using buildings. They are feeling comfortable and living fearless right now.

Uncle did not only supported community people to construct the Tahara with a minimum wages but he also constructed Tahara for him for living purpose by taking a land on lease.

Hence, the author learned that type of Tahara was a safe, protective and cost effective than the buildings in quake prone area.

Conclusion

Via critically analyzing the characteristics shown by people after post-quake days, the author found that Nepali people are very rich in diversity with different ethnicity, culture, and religion. They have our own traditional knowledge system like togetherness (work, survive, and die together), identification, management, and utilization of locally available resources, behave with people (being friendship and understanding each other), and cope if disaster occurs. People know acceptance and recognition very well. Other side, people are very weak in sustaining the best practices due to the change in our attitude, behavior, and institution level. All those things happened were for a short time and due to an incident i.e., earthquake only.

Finally, the author suggested for the togetherness here for our cohesive and more secure society that have respectful habitat, make people behave positively, work, survive, and die together for prosperity after the earthquake and sustain it forever.

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