

Social Dimensions of Post-Quake Programmes in Kachchh, Gujarat (India): Disaster Management Lessons

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Abstract

This article focuses on the social dimensions of post-quake rehabilitation programmes in Kachchh district of Gujarat state (earthquake of Jan 2001) in India. Several rehabilitation and reconstruction packages were undertaken by the state, NGOs, and other organizations, either independently or on a partnership basis. The focus is on rural Kachchh and the different shelter programmes. rehabilitation and resettlement programmes of a large magnitude, are bound to be ridden with problems. The issues covered are loss of village identity, caste/community politics, NGO dynamics in rehabilitation programmes, lack of gender sensitivity in the programmes and dependency syndrome with respect to the affected population. Some disaster management lessons have been derived keeping in mind the needs of the rural population, class and particularly with respect to the role of the government and the NGOs.

Key words: Kachchh, Gujarat, Earthquake, Rehabilitation, Social Dimensions, NGOs, Disaster Management

Introduction

More than two decades have passed since the great earthquake hit Gujarat state in India in January 2001. Kachchh was the most affected district in the state. Immediately after the earthquake the government as well as several external agencies undertook rescue and relief works. Rescue operations came to a halt after a fortnight, whereas relief programmes continued till the end of March 2001. There was a gap of 2-3 months before rehabilitation programmes were actually launched as they had to be planned in detail and further entailed huge funding. In Kachchh, rehabilitation programmes were initiated in full swing in June 2001. The magnitude of devastation was such that it was not possible for the government alone to undertake rehabilitation and reconstruction works in the affected areas. The focus of this paper is on quake-affected villages of Kachchh only. After the introduction, the second section delves into the social dimensions of rehabilitation programmes. Shelter programmes have been taken up as an example for detailed discussion while looking into the social dimensions of the rehabilitation programmes. This is followed by some concluding remarks and lessons. The analysis presented in the paper is relevant in the context of disasters rehabilitation, reconstruction and provision of housing is a priority in post-quake situations anywhere in the country.

In Kachchh, the rehabilitation and reconstruction was typically provided in the form of compensation packages for loss of kin, injuries to the human body, damage to housing and loss of livelihood sources both by the government and non-governmental sources (NGOs, national and international donors, private organizations, religious organizations and various networks). There were several other programmes relating to infrastructure and social facilities

for development of the area as a whole. As of September 2002, there were 185 agencies including 4 state governments working in different sectors of rehabilitation in rural Kachchh. The different sectors of rehabilitation are: Shelter, Water/Dams, Handicraft/Livelihood, Education and Health (Abhiyan/GSDMA/UNDP, 2002). Shelter was the most visible programme of the rehabilitation process in terms of investment and number of housing units constructed. It was a priority for the people affected in the earthquake. What was further seen is that several organizations found it easier to mobilize huge amount of funds for shelter programmes as it involved tangible outputs.

The example of shelter has been taken up in the paper for illustration of a rehabilitation programme. There were three kinds of approaches to provision of shelter. They are as follows:

- a) Self construction by the villagers with the compensation money received from the government (amounts varied according to the intensity of damage to the houses)
- b) Government-NGO partnership (50-50 basis)
- c) Reconstruction done by the NGOs alone

Out of the total of 89 NGOs working in the shelter programme, 68 were part of the public-private (Govt-NGO) partnership, while 21 had been working independently. Similarly, were many villages where no organization had been able to work for several reasons and people had decided to go for self-reconstruction of houses, with the help of compensation money received from the government. The NGOs working independently may operate alone or in partnership with other organizations (a network of NGOs or with private/corporate sector). At the end of August 2002, a total of 140 villages had been reconstructed with a total of 13,930 houses by 53 NGOs (Abhiyan/GSDMA/UNDP, 2002). According to the 2002 report, the number of temporary shelter units provided by NGOs was 81,197 in 877 villages. The requirement for permanent shelter is 1,11,786 units. The plan was to construct 48,379 houses by NGOs.

Rehabilitation and reconstruction programmes continued for two years in rural Kachchh. Thereafter the attention shifted to the urban towns that needed institutional support for reconstruction.

1. Social Dimensions

The analysis presented pertains to observations made during the process of implementation of the rehabilitation programmes and after the completion of the activities in affected villages only. In rural Kachchh, 884 villages were affected by the earthquake, of which there was 100% damage in 178 villages and than 70% damage in 165 villages (Abhiyan/GSDMA/UNDP, 2002). It may be noted at this point that the social dimensions discussed are not similar to cases where rehabilitation has occurred due to evacuations as a consequence of dam construction or multi-purpose projects. In case of the Kachchh earthquake, response in terms of rehabilitation and support had to be immediate and on an emergency basis. Newspaper reports mentioned that the recovery and reconstruction in

Kachchh had been faster as compared with the rest of the country where calamities such as cyclones, floods and typhoons keep occurring every year in the country. However, in spite of the best efforts by the government and various agencies, there were several lapses in the approaches, designing and implementation of the rehabilitation programmes, which had significant social implications for the rural population.

Although there were some evaluation studies of the different rehabilitation interventions but the social dimensions of rehabilitation and reconstruction programmes were not documented systematically, although they did surface at times in discussions with NGOs and professionals working in the area. The social dimensions (latent or manifest) of rehabilitation discussed in the paper are based on observations made with respect to the approaches and the process of implementation of different interventions as well as after the programme had been completed. Rehabilitation works started in June 2001 and continued for 2-3 years although many shelter programmes were completed within one year. The issues discussed in the ensuing sections are based on observations at the micro-level.

Loss of Village Identity

After almost three years of continuation of rehabilitation and reconstruction programmes, involving several NGOs and other organizations including 4 state governments engaged in building houses, one is struck by the huge hoardings and arches (both temporary and permanent) carrying the names of the organization, donors, number of houses and other infrastructure provided. The hoardings were meant to display the achievements of the organization. These organizations had intervened both in terms of in-situ rehabilitation as well as relocating parts or entire villages. Most of them were not Kachchh based, working in affected villages for a short term basis. The investments made by the organizations for the shelter programmes were also mentioned on the boards/hoardings in some cases. The name of the village was invariably changed or had the term "New or Navi" prefixed to the old name, meaning that it had been newly reconstructed. The new name of the village may be taken after the leader of that organization engaged in the shelter programme. The old name is written in small letters and at times mostly invisible. The traditional housing structures had been completely replaced by new ones (modern seismic resistant designs developed by the organization with technical assistance from renowned institutions). The new structures had given an identity to the organization engaged in the reconstruction works. From a distance, one is able to make out the identity of the organization. The newly constructed villages look like independent urban colonies and not like villages anymore. The new settlement structure of the village does not blend with the habitat of rural Kachchh. They were typically regimental structures with no regard for cultural space of the communities. After occupation, people made extensions of wooden twigs and dried leaves to accommodate their livestock, which was not planned in advance by any of the intervening organisations. Bathrooms and toilets provided by the organizations had been invariably converted into storage rooms for hay and firewood. People found it difficult to adjust to the new type of concrete structures. The older people in the villages were not happy with the way the NGOs and other organizations have overshadowed their identity. It should be noted that the identity of the Kachchhi people comes from their clothing, housing and lifestyle. What was observed is that

the NGO space has ascended on the life space of the people of the rural communities, thereby diluting their identity. One NGO professional remarked,

“Villagers are unable to give up their rural lifestyle and identify themselves with the urban population. That is the reason why villagers feel out of place in such new surroundings”.

In contrast there were a few Kachchh-based NGOs like the Abhiyan network of NGOs and others who were sensitive to the traditional lifestyle of the people and thereby encouraged them to adopt housing structures that were closer to the ones they owned. One such example is the traditional housing structure called *Bhoonga* housing, which is round shaped and functional for women, because a rural household in Kachchh would normally possess 2 such structures, one for cooking and storage and, the other for living¹. As part of the shelter package, the NGOs upgraded the *Bhoonga* with additional features for seismic resistance and offered to the villagers for adoption. However, only about 30 villages adopted *Bhoonga* type of housing in Kachchh. The rest adopted the typical reinforced cement concrete structures (one or two room units), as they resembled urban housing and were considered superior to the traditional type of housing.

Social Divisions and Caste/Community Politics

Rural Kachchh is inhabited by 7 Hindu and 8 Muslim groups with several sub-divisions. Caste and religious differences were strongly represented in villages, although no major communal conflicts have occurred in Kachchh district unlike other parts of Gujarat. There were several faith-based and other organizations working in Kachchh towards various rehabilitation programmes. Some of them tend to work with certain castes or ethnic groups, in terms of providing housing and other facilities including cash donations. The motive of such organizations was to help those people (followers) who show allegiance to them. There were cases where faith-based organizations had been instrumental in relocating some groups out of the original village, either to a close-by location or to an entirely new area. They may even provide new housing to the groups in the same village. Such sectional assistance to specific communities had created latent tensions in the villages. Those who had not got preferential treatment or had been left out expressed their anger about the same. NGO functionaries feel that such latent tension may lead to conflict in the future, on caste and communal lines as existing social divisions get sharpened over time.

Whereas, there are some pro-people organizations that had planned to provide housing of the same type to the entire village regardless of their caste and religious affiliations. Such initiatives had often also been met with resistance from the richer castes (Patels) who would decline to accept one or two room units. Their argument typically would be that the rich and the poor cannot be treated alike. Whereas, the lower castes and tribals (Harijans, Rabaris and Kolis) were willing to accept whatever came their way. There had been many cases where due to lack of single consensus among the people in the *gram sabha* (village council), the organizations would get discouraged and abandon the affected village.

The other side of caste politics related to restricting entry of NGOs to the villages for reconstruction by the richer/higher castes. It is a well-established fact that the earthquake had

affected the poorer sections of the society much more than the rich (land owning Patels) and upper castes. In many cases, the latter did not want NGOs to facilitate reconstruction programmes in the villages, as it would empower the lower castes (poorer groups) and subsequently threaten their hegemony and dominance. Some of the richer castes went to the extent of bribing the NGOs not to enter their villages (based on personal communication with NGOs in Bhachau, Feb 2001).

Another aspect of how social divisions within the community get perpetuated through external agencies is the relocation packages offered by the government in the form of titles for housing purposes. The government of Gujarat announced certain entitlement norms for village relocation (although only 16 percent of the villages opted for either partial or complete relocation). They are: a landless agriculture labour was entitled to 100 sq m of plot area and 30 sq m for construction; a marginal farmer up to 1 hectare landholding was entitled to 150 sq m of plot area and 40 sq m for construction; a small farmer with 1-4 hectares of land was entitled to 250 sq m of plot area and 40 sq m for construction; and a farmer with more than 4 hectares of land was entitled to 400 sq m of plot area and 50 sq m for construction (Gujarat State Disaster Management Authority, 2001). There was a clear discrimination in provision of land for constructing new houses by landholding size and class and not by the extent of damage to the houses.

NGO Dynamics in Rehabilitation

Several NGOs (national and international) were engaged in rehabilitation programmes in different parts of Kachchh. Although there was a regulation on paper, where the NGO had to obtain permission from the district administration to intervene in a particular village, it was observed that there would be more than one NGO in the village working in the same programme e.g housing or livelihood. Each wanted to establish their credibility in undertaking rehabilitation programmes in Kachchh and therefore would want to ensure that they have the support of the community. They would resort to use of several methods to obtain the support of the people like a particular section of the village or some groups within the community in order to capture their area of operation. They would engage in handing out cash doles, food, drink (alcohol) and in merry making. Such NGOs were mostly from outside the Kachchh district and were based in the earthquake-affected area for short periods. It is obvious that their credibility in terms of achievements and popularity is linked with the sustenance of the organization for future donor funding.

It is common to find NGO leaders addressing a crowd of villagers. An example can be cited here. It happened in Rajansar village of Bhachau taluka (sub-division of Kachchh district). A NGO leader was addressing a group of poor villagers belonging to one particular community. His address was as follows:

“All of you are poor people. Nobody cares for you. The rich and the powerful have cornered all the benefits. The government is useless and cannot do anything for you. It is blind to the needs of the poor. It is not sensitive to the needs of the people and this is reflected in the policies, which are anti-poor. The poor are being cheated and given housing which costs

much less than what the rich get. We want to help you. All those of you who want help, may mention their problems and names in the list that I am circulating....” (taken from Nitin P. Agarwal’s field notes, Jan 2001) ².

Based on personal discussions with professionals working with Abhiyan³ and GSDMA, the author was informed that such instances (mentioned above) were very common, where NGOs address villagers, maligning the work of the government and other NGOs. As a result, villagers were confused as to whom to trust and which programme to accept. NGOs have their own agenda and at times are not concerned with the true welfare of the people. It is common to find a number of hoardings publicising the works of different NGOs in one village. Such villages are generally located on transportation routes that have easy access from the main urban centers. There is a tendency among NGOs to select those villages that are socially homogeneous with minimal caste politics. In addition, they would want to intervene in such a manner so that they could complete construction work in short periods and leave early (e.g construct 400 houses and leave in 2-3 months’ time). The contractor would be interested in such an approach as it brings good profits. An interesting example can be cited here of relocation of village *Dudhai* by the former Chief Minister of Delhi under the aegis of *Swabhiman Trust*. The village was renamed as Indraprastha and was the first village to be reconstructed in 3 months’ time. The Prime Minister of India inaugurated the village on June 4, 2001. It contained 800 one room units of cement concrete blocks. It was reported that 200 Patel families refused to move into the new houses, which they felt was below their dignity (Mahadevia, 2001). The new village had all the facilities, such as, their own power supply, water supply, school and health centers. Yet people do not want to leave their traditional lands and homes. Most of the occupants of the village belong to lower castes and found it convenient to relocate because of their already disadvantaged position in the village.

Another example can be cited here regarding the different housing packages of the NGOs. The packages are as follows: one which costs Rs 45,000 (approximately US \$ 1000 by 2001 rates) with owner’s contributory labour, another package for Rs 100,000 (approximately US \$ 2,000 by 2001 rates) with no contributory labour and yet another for Rs 200,000 (US \$ 4,000 by 2001 rates) with added incentives. With an influx of NGOs offering different housing packages, confusion among local people is inevitable and can potentially hamper the progress of rehabilitation. The poor villager is inundated with offers, which she/he has never experienced in their life-time. Additionally, in such situations, it is difficult for villagers to arrive at a consensus and this can lead to further divisions among the village community, where several factions spring up aligning themselves with different NGOs. In one such village in Rapar taluka (sub-division of Kachchh district), an NGO had come to an agreement with the people regarding the assistance including house design and accordingly unloaded raw materials in the village. After a week or so, the villagers declined the offer and wanted the materials to be removed from the village. No amount of persuasion mattered and the raw materials had to be removed and further the organization had to pay rent for the space in the village. The reason for such an attitude by the people is obvious. They were offered a better package by some other organization.

It may be noted, that NGOs in Kachchh have been able to operate after the earthquake because it was not possible for the government to provide rehabilitation support to all the affected villages. As the number of NGOs working in the area were too many, there was competition among them to establish their credibility, which was eventually linked to their future funding and sustenance. Instances of animosity and in-fighting among NGOs leads to mistrust with the people. People take advantage of the situation and add fuel to the fire. In such situations, local communities inadvertently become dependent on external agencies for support, which can potentially prove harmful for the future development of rural Kachchh.

Lack of Gender Perspective in Rehabilitation Programmes

In the entire rehabilitation operation, it was observed that except for 4 organisations, none were inclined to include gender in their agenda. This was because it was commonly assumed that earthquake affects the entire population regardless of gender. And further, the household or the family is the smallest unit of common interests wherein all the members shared benefits of existing policies, which of course includes women. However, it was observed that women and children are the most vulnerable due to intra-household inequalities that already exist in the levels of literacy skills, health, nutrition etc. Such disparities tend to get aggravated during times of stress such as earthquake, particularly between the end of relief and beginning of the rehabilitation phase. It was observed that women could not move out of their villages during the reconstruction of housing, as they felt insecure to leave their belongings in the open. As a result, they lost out on wage work, available outside the village.

Similarly, there is a lack of gender sensitivity in all the policies and plans that govern rehabilitation and reconstruction as they go by ownership of land or property to be eligible for the same. Since women seldom have ownership rights over property and with no affirmative action to back them, they were automatically left out. In Kachchh villages too the situation was no different. However, there were NGOs like the Kachchh Mahila Vikas Sangathan (KMVS) and the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) who work only with women for all post-quake programmes. Such NGOs ensured that in their housing programmes, women not only, select the design but also, obtain joint-ownership of the housing unit after completion. They also ensured that the housing design is conducive to the traditional lifestyle of women (e.g *Bhoonga* housing) and wherever possible provided means for roof rain-water harvesting and storage in underground tanks close to the house in order to facilitate collection of water. None of the other housing packages have thought of this need of women. Besides KMVS and SEWA could secure the support of local communities as they have engaged in livelihood provision through women's collectives.

Some organizations wanted to show that they were gender sensitive and would encourage women to speak up in the gram sabha (village council). The men-folk would sense that there is some gain in the form of cash or incentives and would encourage their women-folk to participate in public meetings. But such gestures had minimal impact. However, many organizations felt that their approach left out women and the programme could have been better implemented in a much better manner had they participated in the planning phase

(personal communication with NGO professionals and several donor agencies working in Kachchh, December 2002).

Dependency Syndrome

Rural communities in Kachchh were known for their resilience and hard work. They would not prefer to ordinarily accept doles from external agencies during emergency times. This attitude was reflected during the relief phase when food, clothes and other items were being distributed. People would refuse to accept more than what they needed and after the initial hardship were prepared to work for their living and not depend on relief camps. It was reported in various Newspapers, how the Kachchhi villagers would refuse to accept relief and always took pride in their tradition of being perfect hosts. However, today with so many organizations intervening for different programmes and with huge amount of funds flowing in, villagers had become dependent on outside agencies. They were not willing to work as long as there was support from outside. Discussions with various established NGOs (professionals and workers at the grassroots level) reiterates the fact that villagers had become too much dependent on outside agencies for support. All activities in the villages seemed to be donor driven. Such dependency poses a danger to the future of the people and could hamper indigenous development.

The dependency syndrome created by the NGOs and other external agencies was a manifestation of too many organizations attempting to help the rural population of Kachchh. Influx of NGOs for rehabilitation works and their concentration in those villages, which had easy access in terms of transportation, had led to a situation where the supply is much more than the demand. Consequently, there was competition and conflict among different NGOs. This had in a way diluted the credibility of Kachchh-based organizations. Kachchh-based NGOs felt that the greatest challenge for them was to get rid of the dependency of the local populations for external support.

2. Concluding Remarks and Some Lessons

The foregoing sections provides an account of the social dimensions of rehabilitation after the Gujarat earthquake of 2001. Rehabilitation and reconstruction programmes in Kachchh after the earthquake was bound to be ridden with problems. It was observed that the rehabilitation policies and programmes of the government had been favourable to the rich than the poor and this had accentuated the existing inequalities. Similarly, the programmes of the NGOs focusing solely on specific religious communities or deprived sections of the society had generated resentment amongst the privileged sections of the society and it had exacerbated the existing social differences and tensions. Women's concerns had largely remained neglected in the rehabilitation programmes. Some villages had lost their old identity due to partial or complete relocation. Unhealthy competition among NGOs and overcrowding in rehabilitation works created problems for both the NGO sector itself as well as the efficacy of the rehabilitation works.

Lessons

Keeping in view the immediate needs of the rural population in Kachchh post-quake and the fact that certain interventions had potential to create social tensions, some lessons were derived followed by suggestions relating to the role of government and the NGOs. Such disaster management lessons are applicable to any post-quake situation, where external agencies are engaged in relief and rehabilitation including reconstruction. They are as follows:

- 1) Government could play a more pro-active role in the rehabilitation process. Although the partnership approach to housing is in place, government's role in support and monitoring progress was minimal. At times people have objected to NGO intervention and demanded that the government pay more attention to the programmes.
- 2) The government should regulate entry of different NGOs to the village. There has to be a restriction on too many NGOs trying to intervene in similar programmes. Only those NGOs should be encouraged to intervene in bigger programmes, who were familiar with the social milieu (gender and other equity concerns) and had already established their credibility in the area.
- 3) The policy of financial assistance/compensation should be changed. For example the relocation entitlement norms should be based on the nature of damage and not the economic class of the household. Similarly, compensation packages could be designed according to the economic class of the people, e.g the rich and those who can construct their own houses should be given the least. Higher amounts could be given to widows, destitute women, poor families and the aged who had no kin-support. However, technical assistance could be provided to all irrespective of caste, class and community affiliations. In the relief phase all should be included. Criteria for differential assistance should be strictly followed in a transparent manner.
- 4) The involvement of the NGOs in the rehabilitation activities viz shelter construction should be in line with the broad government guidelines and policies which were developed through joint consultations including NGOs. The latter should not have dissimilar shelter packages, which may cause latent tensions and even conflicts among the people in future.
- 5) Given the magnitude of the rehabilitation works and limited capacity of the NGOs, the most effective contributions of the NGOs could be:
 - (a) Facilitating the formation of village rehabilitation committees and their continued operation;
 - (b) Need assessment and monitoring progress of the rehabilitation works;
 - (c) Two-way information dissemination regarding rehabilitation i.e. from the villagers to the government and other agencies engaged in rehabilitation and vice versa;

(d) Advocacy work – lobbying and pressurizing the government for appropriate policy formulation and rehabilitation programmes. Towards this the NGOs have to come together and develop their networks like Abhiyan to be effective in their activities. This will facilitate accountability and transparency in relief and rehabilitation works.

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Notes

¹ *Bhoonga* is a round shaped housing structure comprising a single room. They are the traditional housing of the rural population of Kachchh. It was observed that these structures were less damaged during the earthquake. Women particularly preferred the *bhoonga* housing design because of its functional nature.

² The speech was taken from the field notes of a Post-graduate student of the Institute of Rural Management who was in a village in Rapar undergoing his training (Jan 2002) for rural orientation as part of requirement for the Masters programme.

³ The Kachchh Nav Nirman Abhiyan popularly known as the Abhiyan is a network of 29 NGOs that has been working in Kachchh for the past 5 years. It has contributed to a great extent to the rehabilitation policies and programmes in Kachchh. Abhiyan periodically brings out a document called “Coming Together” which was a compilation of all organizations working towards rehabilitation of Kachchh.

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