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Unraveling the Threads : Weak Governance, Corruption and Disaster Risk in Nepal

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Abstract

Nepal has been facing significant flood, landslide, earthquake, and other natural catastrophes. The extensive crisis occurs during these catastrophes and each society suffers a lot in tackling humanitarian needs, especially the immediate response. Most of the developing countries like Nepal have been facing this during the crisis period. They are not able to timely provide the humanitarian needs to the needy ones. State institutions and mechanisms play a crucial role during the time of crisis. However, existing state institutions and mechanisms are not being able to play an effective role to overcome the crisis. In major disasters, state institutions and mechanisms are not able to function properly. This paper explores the major reasons and causes of this problem. It also assesses why the state institutions and mechanisms are not being able to play a vital role in tackling humanitarian needs in time of crisis. The findings of this paper are the weak governance and corruption as major causes behind it. Similarly, this paper also proposes for rebuilding government agencies, armed forces, anticorruption agencies and local government institutions to tackle humanitarian needs in time of crisis.

Keywords

Crisis, Disaster, State Institution, Weak Governance, Corruption. Nepal.

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1. Introduction

The state institutions are not able to work effectively during disasters in the developing countries. Due to the lack of concrete policy and rules for implementation on rescue, relief, rehabilitation and reconstruction management, the states are not being able to show their strong and effective presence during the time of disaster. The affected people in the devastating earthquake that occurred on 25 April 2015, could not get basic humanitarian needs on time even in the capital city of Nepal (Kantipur National Daily, 2072a). The government of Nepal had announced to distribute an immediate support amount of Rs.15 thousand to the survivors whose houses were destroyed in the earthquake. It was to be distributed within Jestha 2072 B.S. but till the third week of Mangsir this amount has not been distributed in some districts (Kantipur National Daily, 2072b).

Not only in 2015 earthquake, but same situation is also happened in other types of disaster in Nepal. The Koshi River was bristly flooded in 2008 A.D. The flood had devastating impacts in Paschim Kushaha, Shreepur and Haripur villages of Sunsari districts. Initial estimation of damage claimed almost 50,000 population and more than 7000 households were affected (Dixit 2009). According to the government data a total of 42,765 people and 7563 households were directly affected due to the flood (DAO, 2010).

Various kinds of disasters are occurring in Nepal time and again. Earthquakes, floods, landslides, and various epidemics are recurring from time to time (Acharaya & Ghimire, 2071). Nepal is highly vulnerable to earthquake where small and large magnitude of it occurs time and again (NEMRC, 2023). The hilly and mountain regions are vulnerable to landslides and flood due to steep terrain and rivers. Each year the problems of landslides are recurring in Nepal (NDRRP, 2023). The government is not being able to show its effective presence during these kinds of disasters.

Government officials are claiming that the humanitarian help is not being able to be delivered to the victims on time solely due to the natural calamities. Is this the sole reason or are there any other causes? The evidence after the study says, “the weak governance and corruption in the state institutions is a major cause for not being able to provide the victims of the disaster with immediate basic supports.” Not only in Nepal, seeing the international experiences too the weak governance and corruption seem to be the major factor (Lewis, 2010, Ewins, et. al. 2006 and European Commission, 2005). The conclusion of this article is that if these reconstructed institutions and mechanism could be made corruption free and good governance could be established then only their effectiveness could be increased.

There are five sections in this article : *first*, Introduction, *second*, state institutions to tackle disaster : an experience from Japan and India, *third*, existing legal provision and government institutions to tackle disaster in Nepal, *fourth*, weak governance and corruption : the main problem of tackling humanitarian needs in time of disaster and *finally*, strengthening and rebuilding state institutions to tackle disaster.

The research was conducted over a period of two months from October 2020 to January 2021. The research applies qualitative methodologies, as the research targets collect primary as well as secondary data from various sources. Theoretical sampling has been used for the data collection. Similarly, saturation had been used for ensuring that adequate and quality data are collected to support the study. Data collection continued till point data saturation was reached. Four specific data collection techniques were applied to conduct the research. These are content analysis, interview, observation, and case study.

2. State Institutions to tackle Disaster : An Experience from Japan and India

Japan is taken as a model all over the world in disaster management. The effectiveness of state institutions is a major factor in providing the survivors of disaster with immediate humanitarian support. The earthquake and the subsequent tsunami that struck Japan on March 11, 2011, and the following release of radiation from the Fukushima Dai-ichi nuclear power station, constitute one of the greatest disasters to strike Japan. The initial shock was measured at a magnitude of 9.00 on the Richter scale (Panda, 2012). Japan has an

experience of good management of this disaster at a time. Japan could prevent a huge human loss with the managed mobilization of state institutions (Harvey 2009).

Sakaki and Lukner (2013 : 159-160) have stated major 6 bases for Japan for easy crisis management. *First*, the issue of political leadership and sectionalism in the bureaucracy. *Second*, the need for an information and communication strategy. *Third*, the flexible integration of volunteer efforts. *Fourth*, the use of the Self Defense Forces in domestic and international crises. *Fifth*, the importance of local government- and community-led contributions. *Finally*, the risks of delayed or inept decision-making caused by Japan's political party system. Nakabayashi (2010) argues that the Disaster Countermeasures Basic Act, 1961 clarifies the roles and responsibilities of the municipalities, prefectures, and the national government when faced with a disaster. This is the major reason to immediate response to disaster management in Japan. Carafano (2011) argues that preparedness and response, communication skills, critical infrastructure organization and international assistance are the key factors to manage the disaster properly in Japan.

In 2001 January 26 a major earthquake of magnitude 6.9 on Richter scale occurred in the state of Gujarat in India at 8:46 am local time. It lasted for 2 minutes. More than 7,600 villages of 19 districts were partially or fully affected; 13,805 human lives were lost in the state and approximately 167,000 people suffered minor or severe injury (Mishra, 2004). There was significant damage to the infrastructures with facilities such as hospitals, schools, the electric power grid, water systems, bridges, and roads. Over 1.2 million houses were damaged to varying degrees, and more than 200,000 of them collapsed completely (GSDMA, 2001). The federal and province governments quickly helped in many forms including cash, medical supplies, communication teams, shelters, food, clothing, transport, and relief workers (Tiwari, 2015). Local food markets were active within two days and building construction material was available in key locations in ten days and in less than 60 days in almost all other affected locations (Bhatta, 2009).

It was possible only with the active engagement of stakeholders. According to Price and Bhatta (2009) the major three stakeholders played vital role to provide the humanitarian support in time of earthquake disaster in Gujarat. *First*, the immediate response of the

federal government of India. *Second*, the role of state government to provide support to survivors. A single authority was created with the power to manage recovery and subsequent preparedness and mitigation efforts state-wide. The Gujarat State Disaster Management Authority (GSDMA) was established with the chief minister as chairperson on 14 February. The package established a damage assessment system with teams of local engineers, provided support for public-private partnerships in reconstruction, and made direct payments to homeowners for shelter reconstruction (UNISDR, 2007). *Third*, proper mobilization of I/NGOs to provide support and help to needy people in times of crisis. Local communities helped one another by mobilizing resources and providing food and shelter, ensuring that the roles and responsibilities of communities were emphasized in the disaster management policy declared by the government (World Bank, 2008).

3. Existing Legal Provision and Government Institutions to tackle Disaster in Nepal

Nepal is a trouble spot for disasters, and it ranked relatively high in terms of vulnerability. There are various legal and structural provisions in Nepal to battle against these kinds of disasters carry out the rescue works and provide basic human needs on time aftermath.

The government of Nepal has promulgated the Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Act, 2017 and Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Rules, 2019 to help the victims of likely natural calamities like flood, landslides, fire, earthquake, hurricane, heavy rain, drought, epidemics, road accidents due to natural reason and industrial accidents. Various sectors have been identified for expenditure of amount collected from general people, donors and others in this fund organized under this regulation. In this Regulation it has been stated that the amount shall be spent for rescuing the people affected or to be affected by the natural calamities, protecting their property, temporary camp for immediate relief packages distribution, purchasing the basic goods like food, clothes, medicines, educational materials for the victims. Similarly, this also includes the medicinal expenses of injured people and financial aid for the relatives of those who die in the disaster for funeral ceremony.

The Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Act, 2017 has established a national council under the leadership of the Prime Minister for disaster risk reduction and management to discharge

disaster related functions effectively. Similarly, Act also provisioned the executive committee under the leadership of Ministry of Home Affairs for the purposes of implementing policies and plans laid down by the council. Chapter four of the Act also provisioned the establishment of the national disaster risk reduction and management authority. In the meantime, Act also provision on provincial disaster management committee and provincial disaster management executive committee in chapter six and chapter seven provisioned about the established a district disaster management committee in every district for the purposes of the implement action of disaster management activities under the leadership of Chief District Officer. Similarly, every local level also established a local disaster management committee under the chaired by the president of rural municipality or mayor of municipality. The Act also clearly enlisted the functions, duties and powers of the securities agencies and other agencies in chapter eight.

Nepal has a very strong disaster management act and federal, provincial, and local level administrative mechanisms for disaster risk management. Though these mechanisms do not seem to be effective in risk management and providing the survivors with immediate rescue, relief, and basic needs during and after the disaster.

A devastating earthquake occurred in Nepal on April 25, 2015. There are over 8,790 killed and 22,300 injuries. It is estimated that the lives of eight million people, almost one-third of the population of Nepal, have been impacted by earthquake. The physical infrastructures worth billions have got destructed (NPC, 2015).

The Government of Nepal made an official request for international assistance within hours of the 25 April earthquake. The first meeting of the Central Disaster Relief Committee (CDRC) was held two hours after the first earthquake, with the National Emergency operation Centre providing an initial report to the CDRC recommending a focus on search and rescue and lifesaving actions. Financial resources from the prime minister's disaster relief fund were immediately allocated (NPC, 2015). Over time, 134 international search and rescue teams from 34 countries responded to Nepal's request for help. The Ministry of Home Affairs reported that for search and rescue, 4,236 helicopter flights were used with 7,558 persons rescued by air and 4,689 persons rescued by land. More than 90 percent of the security forces were mobilized to focus on

search and rescue. Emergency relief and humanitarian assistance to the affected population was provided with the active support of the contribution by over 60 countries as well as the United Nations and other international agencies (NPC, 2015).

Despite all this, after the devastating catastrophe the survivors did not get even the basic human needs on time. The effectiveness of the government could not be seen during this. The state failed in case of providing the basic human needs to all the survivors and affected people on time. Barpak Gorkha, which was the epicenter of the earthquake did not get relief packages till one month aftermath. It was found that the state mechanism did not show its presence and the people did not get relief packages till the month and earthquake survivors were more affected (Nepal National Weekly, 2072). It was also found that the relief package was distributed haphazardly. For example, where there was no need for food materials it was distributed and where the *tripal* was needed other materials were distributed (Kantipur National Daily, 2072c). Neither the government could collaborate nor was the effective monitoring done. Due to this many of the affected people could not get even the minimum support during the earthquake.

Sindhupalchwok where there was maximum physical and human losses, the state could not show its effective presence till one week. The local people themselves went to the rescue works and the effected people remained starving. Not only outside the capital city, in Kathmandu valley too government could not provide the human support to the affected people on time. The status of sick people, elderly people, and mothers of infants coming to the open ground for shelter was dreadful. The government organizations and mechanisms were almost passive and ineffective at that time. The Nepal Police, Nepal Army and Armed Police Force worked actively in the rescue works. Though, the government could not provide the essential basic needs like food, medicines and *Tripal* (Nagarik National Daily, 2072). Rather many events of corruption on the distribution of relief packages by the government came into publicity one after another. The Centre of Investigation of Abuse of Authority (CIAA) formed an investigation team on 16 August 2015. This team submitted a 411 pages long report on 1 December, 2015. This report has included various evidence of corruption during the rescue, relief and rehabilitation works for the affected people (CIAA, 2072).

Similarly, Mahakali River was flooded briskly on 16 June 2013. It flooded away 109 houses in the Headquarter of Darchula, Khalanga, Brahmadev, Dhap, Dantu, Uku and Lali villages. More than 2500 people from 350 houses have been displaced. This devastating flood destroyed many offices buildings and private houses (Rawal, 2013).

The government could not provide food and shelter for the affected people on time when the whole district Headquarter had been flooded. When the government could not provide the minimum basic humanitarian support like food and shelter to the survivors. After three days of flooding on 19 June only the meeting of the related officials was held in the Prime Minister's residence. The meeting had announced providing immediate relief packages to the survivors and 40 thousand rupees each for the affected families. Then, after only one week 200 *tripal*, 400 *kambal*, 20 *relep*, some medicines and pius to the district headquarters which was inadequate.

4. Weak Governance and Corruption : The Main Problem of tackling Humanitarian Needs in time of Disaster

In the time of every disaster occurring in Nepal the people are not getting even the minimum humanitarian needs on time. It seems that due to the weak governance and corruption in the state institutions, the state is not able to provide the basic humanitarian needs to the needy people. Due to the governance system, state structure, transition, and problems in the entities of the government, the human rights of people have been violated during the crisis (Donohue, 2014). Due to the weak governance and corruption in the state institution, the state cannot show its strong presence during the time of disaster and crisis (Tum, 2001). Most earthquake related deaths occur in countries that are corrupt and state institutions are not able to fulfill the humanitarian support to victim aftermath (Ambraseys & Bilham, 2011 cited in Donohue 2014). In case of Nepal, due to the weak governance and corruption the state is not able to help the victims at the time of crisis. This includes six major problems.

First is the weak governance and lack of accountability. Nepal is not able to provide the basic humanitarian needs to the people during disaster due to the weak governance in the government institutions. It is not only due to the natural reason that the people suffer aftermath but due to the weak governance prevailing in the state institutions since long. The weak governance and corruption play a major role for not being able to deliver the basic humanitarian

needs on time in the time of disaster (Upadhyaya & Ghimire, 2072). In the earthquake of 2015 A.D., the government of Nepal could not provide the essential basic humanitarian needs to the survivors in a well managed way. A great amount of relief package was collected from all over the world, but the actual victims could not get those on time (Kantipur National Daily, 2072d).

Second is corruption. There is a suitable situation for corruption in every disaster. The existing law cannot work properly while the watch dog organizations also cannot be active during this situation and so corruption can occur. (Ewins et al. 2006) Corruption is a threat to humanitarian action because it can prevent assistance from getting to the people who most need it, and because it can potentially undermine public support for such assistance (Maxwell et al. 2012). While analyzing the events of calamities and crisis in Nepal corruption is seen to be a major threat. For example, 96 percent of 4 lakh 50 thousand *tripal* bought by Urban Development Ministry after about one month of the earthquake of 2015 was qualityless. CIAA investigated on this and filed case against two second class officers, three other employees and some businessmen on 6 September 2015. By claiming a fine of 2 crore 36 lakh 76 thousand 1 hundred 91 rupees, the case had been filed against them. Due to this kind of corruption in the relief packages the survivors could not get the basic humanitarian needs on time.

The *third* is Lack of proper coordination among stakeholders. It is not due to the lack of institutions during the disaster but due to many institutions working for the same aim and lack of proper coordination among them a state cannot work properly during a time of need (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2013). Similar is the case of Nepal. Various institutions have been formed for working during the disaster in Nepal. Though, there does not seem proper coordination among the institutions. As a result, the government is not being able to work effectively during the disaster.

5. Conclusion

The developing countries like Nepal are not able to provide the very basic humanitarian needs to the survivors during and after the disaster. This situation especially arises due to the weak governance and corruption in the government institutions. In the countries where there exists good governance and corruption is low; people of those countries get immediate basic needs from the government. So,

for tackling the disaster and providing the victims with basic humanitarian needs on time, the state institutions should be rebuilt and strengthened. If the state institutions could be re-built to be crisis management friendly, then it would bring positive results.

It is necessary to improve the existing mechanism to monitor the irregularities and delays in the rescue and relief works and make these tasks more transparent, accountable, and effective. The National Vigilance Centre should be provided with the responsibility of monitoring the irregularities and delay in the rescue, relief works and creating the awareness on these. This should be equipped with the necessary means and resources. There should be a clear provision of punishment for the employees who try to get rid of responsibilities. A special unit should be formed under the CIAA. This unit should be equipped with necessary resources, skills, and capacity for investigating against the irregularities and corruption during the disaster. Similarly, third party monitoring should be implemented institutionally. The third-party monitoring team should be formed including the publicly recognized persons like economist, sociologist, anthropologist, engineer, journalist, and lawyer. This unit shall help with the rescue and relief works to make it more effective and monitor these tasks.

The coordination of I/NGOs and mobilization through one door policy is needed. After the post disaster period, I/NGOs are not distributing the humanitarian support equally in all needy places. They are mobilized and distribute the goods and services in easily accessible places. However, remote parts of affected areas are not getting proper support on time. So, the government needs to establish the desk and one door policy of I/NGOs mobilization. Local governments can play a key role in taking the initiative to protect human life and provide the proper support to survivors of disaster (Marie Col, 2007). The local level entities need to be developed as an important body for disaster management.

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