

On September 18, Bimola Rai's world was reduced to rubble. A student of Class III in Bop village in Chungthang block of North District in Sikkim, a Himalayan border state, she was left traumatized when a devastating earthquake of 6.9 magnitude on the Richter scale, flattened her home and school building, located at an altitude of 5,500 feet.

Today, Bimola joins 26 other children of her village to walk the four kilometre stretch, filled with quake debris, to reach the Tasa Tengay Government Secondary School. This trek has become a daily feature in her life, ever since her earlier Bop Primary School, made alternative arrangements for her schooling.

This brave band of youngsters sets out from their village early in the morning, overlooking 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 an ancient village. It lies in one of India's most restricted and protected areas and any visitor here has to first acquire a special permit from the district administration. The quake damaged the approach road to the village and it has



older who lived in the majestic Rumgom Monastery, established in 1852 at Mangan, the district headquarters of North District, and travelled a 58-kilometre 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 enrolment at the 'Special Residential Training Centre', established this year at the Hee-Gyathang 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 totally 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, priority was accorded to the resumption of education.

## In Sikkim, earthquake or no earthquake, school must go on



**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**

moved quickly on two fronts after the quake: They set up temporary sheds for schools that 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 Rs 20 crore (US\$1= Rs 51.35) 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 colourful 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 Dussheera 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 Lendup 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

so that the growth in the education sector is sustained. However, many challenges remain. Says gram panchayat president Lepcha, "One can easily notice signs of trauma and anxiety among these children, as their parents have to face so many problems, including rebuilding their damaged houses."

Recovery will be a long, arduous process given the scattered population, tough geographical terrain and the general devastation. But TW Lepcha, MLA, Lachen-Mangan constituency, speaks for many when he says that his people will overcome.

If little Bimola Rai and her classmates are to have a promising future, his words must hold true.

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remained blocked because of continuous landslides from the towering mountain sides that straddle it. The road is yet to be opened for vehicles.

Though the trek to school is long and difficult, Bimola and the other tiny tots 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, just see, my books and uniform are fine. I love coming to school," she exclaims.

The school register at Tasa Tengay Government Secondary School had marked the presence of 18 new students on November 8. Of them 13 were girls, all neatly dressed. Says Sita Ram Singh, the head master, "This provisional arrangement has ensured the prompt restoration of schooling after the tremors, which is very positive. Our secondary school is now running on two shifts to accommodate the new students."

The district administration's list of schools buildings that had been damaged during the earthquake has the following remark about the Bop Primary School:

"Classes are attached with Chungthang, till new site is found". This indicates that Bimola'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 have had access to schooling for a long while. In fact, according to Singh, there are many young ones studying in even lower classes 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



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