

## Stronger than a quake

*Stories from Ramechhap after the April earthquake*



Jit Bahadur Sarki pictured outside his home.

“You can see the cracks,” Jit Bahadur says, pointing his mud and brick house with a hint of embarrassment lacing in his voice.

“One more quake and it might be reduced to nothing but a pile of rubble.”

Jit Bahadur Sarki has built countless houses in his village in Ramechhap district and his skilful hands have been sought after for work even in neighbouring villages.

But when a powerful 7.9 magnitude earthquake hit Nepal, the builder’s own house in Ramechhap's Kathjor village could not bear the brunt. Like most houses in Kathjor, it did not collapse. But, like a cracked shell of a walnut, it was on the verge of breaking up, forcing his family of seven to a make-shift house of corrugated sheets and wood on a patch of land next his house. Their cattle moos and bleats on the side.



Fields in Kathjor village reflect the growing activities of the villagers, in farming and small industries like paper making.

It is a cloudy Saturday afternoon, and Jit Bahadur has just returned from his field for lunch. He summons his daughter-in-law to bring him a plate, and settles on a bed placed outside the shelter.

“The rain is good for planting, but not for construction. My family will have to live in this shelter for a month or two,” he says, as dark monsoon clouds cast a shadow on the ground.



A worker breaks stones on a road building project in Ramechhap district.

A hard life is not new to Jit Bahadur. Born to a “Sarki” family, traditional cobblers who are considered a low caste, the 51-year-old says that his wrinkled eyes have seen worse in life. Jit Bahadur has attended only a day of school and was working as a labourer at a young age of 12, earning only Rs. 6 a day. A culture of discrimination against his people of so-called ‘low caste’ was rife in the village then and life choices for Jit Bahadur were limited.

“But you have to eat.... without education, I had to get hold of another way, another road for myself,” Jit Bahadur says.

A smart mind and a keen learner, Jit Bahadur was quick to make friends at the right places. The friends got him jobs and the 6 rupees wage doubled, and tripled. Soon he was earning up to Rs. 550 per day at a “revolutionary” road project.



A view of Kathjor village.



“It was a Swiss project,” Jit Bahadur says. “They needed people so I joined in, so many from the village got jobs in that project. I worked on it for two years.”

Jit Bahadur was part of a 15-year long district road support programme led by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) in Nepal. The programme began in 1998 and is spread over four districts of this Himalayan country. In Ramechhap, it built over 80 kilometres of road.



Vehicles ply on the road Jit Bahadur worked on, a SDC supported project.

“The road transformed not only my life, but this whole village. Of course, we got the roads, but the villagers also built homes, sent their kids to school... the women even started wearing gold earrings!,” Jit Bahadur recalls. He also had a chance to work on a suspension bridge project, also under SDC.

“There were only porters in village, now there is a mason or a skilled labour in every other house,” he says.

The economic prosperity also brought a sense of respect for him in the village. From a daily wage labourer, Jit Bahadur is a construction contractor now, sometimes handling up to 70 people a day. A few days earlier, he was at the VDC for training on building earthquake resistance houses.



Villagers cross a suspension bridge, built with employing locals from Ramechhap.

“The earthquake will bring more jobs,” he says. “Perhaps another big one, like the Swiss road project?”

Down a rocky road from Jit Bahadur’s house lives Sanjay Bhujel, who was working alongside him in the road construction project.



Sanjay Bhujel and his wife walk their cattle home.

Sanjay had done odd jobs in India for 12 years until he returned home. Then a 34-year-old, the fresh returnee had little idea about construction when he took on the job.

“I had no skills when I started but working there was the biggest milestone in my life,” Sanjay says.

Sanjay remembers that many villagers didn't want to join at first, saying that there will be a lot of work in the road project but that the pay will be less.

“I wish I had not listened to them, or someone had convinced me that the work was beneficial. But we saw changes in lives of the clever ones who joined the work, and then I went to work as well,” he says.



Workers employed in SDC projects had a chance to learn and train in new skills.



Like Jit Bahadur, Sanjay is now a construction contractor with the skills he learnt on the job. In fact, he was at a site when the earthquake struck.

“We had just finished laying the foundation of the house when the ground started shaking. I left everything and ran back home to my family,” Sanjay says.

The quake cracked Sanjay’s mud and brick house and a smaller building where he used to store grains. His family of four is now living in a temporary cottage with metal sheets.



Sanjay, now working as a contractor, supervises construction of a house

But Sanjay has plans to rebuild his house soon and expertly explains how he will reuse the material. Asked if he will ever go back to India, Sanjay promptly dismisses a possibility.

“There is no need, I have work here. Everyone needs to build now.”

Temporary shelters made with metal sheets dot the hillside village in Ramechhap where many have started demolishing damaged houses.

A short walk on a rugged trail from Sanjay's home, a different type of shelter catches one's eye in Sita Bhujel's yard.



Sita Bhujel stands with her mother on the porch of their house, now destroyed by the quake.



Sita is an expert in home gardening in the village, explaining why her shelter resembles tunnels used for growing off-season vegetables.

Sita and her family have expertly replicated the bamboo tunnels, fastening it with tarpaulins and plastic to build a shelter next to their damaged house.

“You do what you know,” Sita says smiling, as she roasts fresh corns she has just picked from her field in wood-fire kitchen under a semi-circular roof made of bamboo sticks.



Sita grows a variety of vegetables in her garden.

A sweet smell of fruits welcomes you as you walk into her yard. Sita also has a variety of vegetables, including tomatoes and bitter gourd growing in her garden along with corn. But 37-year-old Sita remembers a time when good production depended timely rain, and a bad monsoon meant that her family would have trouble even eating two meals a day.

“But then, five years ago I had a chance to take training on farming. The techniques I learned changed my life,” Sita says, adding that women in the village are now more respected because they are earning.



The local market in Ramechhap is vibrant with women farmers who bring their produce to sell.

Sita had joined dozens of women like her in training for home gardening supported by Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation in Nepal. The trained women formed a group to work and learn together, not just farming techniques, but also on how to take their produce to the market and on how to save and invest.

When the earthquake hit, she was at another training for women financial cooperatives. The quake cracked her home and the aftershocks have widened the splits. Two months on, a sense of fear still lingers in her family, too afraid to even bring out their belongings.



Sita cooking in her kitchen, now damaged by the quake.

“At least the quake didn't touch my fields,” Sita says gratefully.

“I don't know how I will rebuild but I can still work. Maybe the people who have supported us before will help us again.”

While they have all lost their homes, a sense of hope binds Jit Bahadur, Sanjay and Sita; that they can build on the knowledge and skill they've earned.

As Jit Bahadur says: “The quake didn't destroy everything, some things are stronger than a quake.”

