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Socio-Economic Transformation of Barpak Post-Earthquake Reconstruction

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Abstract : The earthquake of April 2015 was one of the biggest disasters in the history of Nepal. The epicenter was located near Barpak, north of the Gorkha district. Before the disaster, this settlement was a compact and homogeneous settlement manifesting its uniqueness through the social and cultural activities, and a distinct vernacular architecture. Narrow alleys with stone paved streets, buildings with slate roofs, and common spaces between the houses made this settlement socially, culturally, and environmentally cohesive. With the presence of micro hydro power plants, local economic activities enabled the local community to exist and thrive. Agriculture and animal rearing are the sources of livelihood for the majority of families, along with the booming homestays (where local people welcome guests to their home, as a business) and local shops. Most of these activities are difficult to find as the houses have been destroyed with the earthquake and the process of reconstruction has been transforming the outlook of the settlement. This study characterized the drastic transformation in Barpak post-earthquake, and analyzed the consequences of the reconstruction process. In addition, it contributes to comprehending a broader representation about unsustainability created by the lack of contextual post-disaster development. Since the research is based in a specific area, a case study approach was used. Sample houses were selected on the basis of ethnicity and house typology. Mixed methods such as key informant and semi structured interviews, focus groups, observations and photographs are used for the collection of data. The research focus is predominantly on the physical change of the house typology from vernacular to externally adopted designs. This transformation of the house entails socio-cultural changes such as social fragmentation with differences among the rich and the poor and decreases in the social connectivity within families and neighborhood. Families have found that new houses require more maintenance and resources that have increased their economic expenses. The study also found that the reconstructed houses are not thermally comfortable in the cold climate of Barpak, leading to the increased use of different sources of heating like electric heaters and more firewood. Lack of storage spaces for crops and livestock have discouraged them to pursue traditional means of livelihood and depend more on buying food from stores, ultimately making it less economical for most of the families. The transformation of space leading to the economic, social and cultural changes demonstrates the unsustainability of Barpak. Conclusions from the study suggest place based and inclusive planning and policy formations that include locals as partners, identifying the possible ways to minimize the impact and implement these recommendations into the future policy and planning scenarios.

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