



Wake-up call

Good government vision will be the key to preventing tragedies on the scale of K

Within the last half decade, five major earthquakes have occurred in the regions within and surrounding the Indian subcontinent: Bhuj in Gujarat, Bam in Iran, Aceh in Indonesia, Sumatra, Indonesia in March 2005, and now Kashmir. All these were severe quakes and resulted in immense loss, both of human lives and property.

In fact, the statistics tell their own story. They also tell us that it's time we consider how we need to change our built environment, if we are to be prepared for further such catastrophes.

Retrospect

Within our own borders, after Bhuj the government in Gujarat went through an elaborate exercise of re-working building regulations and norms for the state. Professional experts helped draft the new rules. That a disaster of the scale and magnitude of Bhuj prompted a closer look at building regulations and norms is but natural. In fact, the first recorded effort of drafting building regulations in history was after the Great Fire of London in 1666. Before that, London had grown or-

has the advantage of being more developed, and the luxury of access to architects, planners and engineers.

Tough call

But is this a pipe dream for Kashmir? Can we bring in architectural, structural engineering and other building services professionals into the rural areas, and the small towns of Kashmir? Or for that matter, any region? Can we reduce damages caused by such natural disasters?

We can't afford to be complacent and wait for the next big quake to shake us out our reverie. Reducing damages during quakes and natural disasters is not an impossible task. It has been done before in many parts of the world that are quake prone.

So what's required? Firstly, we need to create design norms and construction methodologies, which

are region specific. The knowledge of a particular geographical and climatic region, including its seismic geology, needs to be addressed. The solutions in turn need to address local needs, cultures, and problems. In such a scenario, a thick 1,000-word book that deals with both the fragile Himalayan terrain and the coast of Orissa is not the answer.

Secondly, such built environment solutions, whether they are planning issues, architectural details or structural norms and codes need to be demonstrated by building examples of good practices in every block or district. Furthermore, the knowledge needs dissemination

down to the common man like the extension service cultural advancements initiated during the green revolution.

Thirdly, there is a need to move the perception that codes of built environment provisions are meant only for the rich. Needs to trickle down to the poor which face maximum damage when such disasters strike.

Finally, governments need to realise that preparedness is a strategy. The available resources extend not only to structural safety and seismic design, but also to conservation and integration of traditional needs with advanced technology and

aerial view



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Wither Kashmir

In a specific environment like the Kashmir valley, energy saving design, thermal insulation and lightweight structural materials need to be integrated to produce good safe buildings. However, such efforts require professional skills and efforts.

The logical reaction to relief work is over - is for Kashmir to develop its own built environment. Such an effort should

