

Road mania grips local levels Over half of budget for road projects

Local level units in Rautahat district have allocated more budget funds for roads than for any other sector, placing education, health and other sectors in the shadow. Katahariya Municipality has allocated Rs 90 million (over 45 percent), out of a total of Rs 200 million earmarked for capital spending, for road construction. Over-concentration on roads in budget allocations has undermined the other priorities.

Talking to Republica over the phone, Siyaram Kushbaha, mayor of the municipality, said, "More money has been allotted to roads as per the demand and needs of the local people." Kushbaha cited a resource crunch for not being able to prioritize schools and health care. "However, priority is given to the purchase of drugs and equipment for health institutions and mid-day meals for school children," he added .

Similarly, Ishwarpur Municipality in Sarlahi district has set aside Rs 130 million plus (over 50 percent) out of Rs 260 million for road construction including blacktopping, bridges and culverts. Allocation for health and education is a mere Rs 49.5 million (20 percent) of the total budget.

Manoj Devkota, the mayor , defended the budget, saying that more money was allocated for road projects to facilitate mobility.

Chief Executive Officer Hom Bahadur Thapa argued that meeting basic infrastructure needs was their priority. Ishwarpur was declared a municipality in 2016 despite lack of the minimum infrastructure needed for a town .

The roads are also the most prioritized sector at local levels in the mountain regions. All wards of Amargadhi Municipality, Dadheldhura are already linked with roads but roads are again top

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priority. The municipality has allotted Rs 60 million for roads out of a total of Rs 160 million allotted for overall development work for fiscal year 2017/18.

FROM LOCAL LEVEL TO CENTER EVERYONE WANTS ROADS

At the heart of the problem is the fact that everyone from local level leaders to political bigwigs at the center give high priority to road projects. The federal government has a long history of allocating huge amounts for thousands of small road projects, mainly under the influence of political bigwigs rather than any rationale for building the roads.

Tirtha Dhakal, joint secretary at the National Planning Commission, has never found MPs, party leaders and bureaucrats coming with demands other than for roads for their constituencies and districts in his decade-plus experience at the apex policy making body.

With the first local elections in 2017, the federal government disbursed two types of grants for the local levels. But the local levels allocated most of the grants for roads without considering their overall development needs.

Some of the local levels have also allotted money from agriculture, livestock and women's development in addition to roads, according to NPC officials. The federal government allotted Rs 5.12 billion to local levels for small and medium scale agriculture projects. But only Rs 2.66 billion (52 percent) is being spent for the purpose, according to figures from the Department of Agriculture (DoA).

ROADS ARE HAVEN FOR CORRUPTION

A recent report of the Office of the Auditor General shows that the government spent Rs 32 billion on roads at the eleventh hour last fiscal year, while NPC and the government approved projects worth Rs 123 billion out of budget for roads. Infrastructure expert Surya Raj Acharya

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said that the only motive behind spending taxpayer money on roads in an unplanned fashion was to steal from the state coffers.

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