

In the Aftermath of Fukushima: Searching for Diversities and True Harmony in Japanese Society

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Division of the People Caused by the Nuclear Accident

In March 2011, a devastating accident occurred in the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant. It released a massive amount of radioactive materials, which then contaminated Fukushima and the surrounding areas of East Japan. After five and a half years, a large number of black flexible container bags with contaminated soil are still piled up here and there in Fukushima and at least 90,000 people who have evacuated have not been able to return to their home.

Among the variety of problems resulting from the nuclear accident, one of the most difficult issues that have emerged in society up until now is the division among people caused by the differences in the level of their concerns about radioactivity as well as in their circumstances depending on where they lived at the time of the accident. In the cities such as Fukushima and Koriyama where radiation dose after the accident was considerably high but where the residents were not given instructions to evacuate, there were people who decided to evacuate voluntarily without any support of the government. Though it was a hard decision for them, some of them were criticized by their neighbors for abandoning their hometown. The relationship between them and their friends who chose to continue staying in Fukushima has deteriorated.

The difference in the way of thinking about the health effects of radioactivity, especially about how one can or want to protect one's children from possible health risk, divided opinions between husbands and wives. Cases such as this have sometimes led to divorce. The gap between the younger generation with young children and their aged parents also caused discord within the family. Small decisions people make in their daily routine, such as whether to eat vegetables and fruits produced in Fukushima, whether to hang laundry outside, or whether or not they should let their children play outside, became like "Fumie" (a plate with a crucifix or other Christian symbol to be trodden on in order to prove oneself a non-Christian in Edo period) to prove how far they are concerned about radiation and what are the priorities in their lives. It created walls among people who had been living together in harmony in the neighborhood.

In the past couple of years, an increased number of mothers with children who had taken refuge in other prefectures in East Japan have been returning to Fukushima. On the other hand, in many other cases, people who took refuge in faraway places decided to settle down there. Mothers who returned to Fukushima after evacuation for some years have become very anxious about radioactivity, but they cannot speak out what really concerns them.

The tone of the “Reconstruction of Fukushima” promotion by the national and prefectural government is ringing more cheerfully and loudly along with the support of those who want to move on. In such an atmosphere, people avoid talking about “negative” things including topics about nuclear accident and radioactivity.

Society that Values “Wa (harmony)” Torments the Victims

Japan is a society that values “Wa,” which in Japanese means harmony among people. In other words, it is a society which avoids friction and appreciates the concept like the Japanese saying “shoui wo sutete daido ni tsuku (ignore minor differences for the common good).” Those who disturb the harmony in society are treated as selfish or troublesome and are required to implicitly follow the majority with patience. Now, in Japanese society, this trend has become more and more intense. Many people are being reserved, trying not to cause friction as much as possible, and to not bother others as much as possible. In particular, people who need special assistance are treated as if they are burdens to society. Such people include but are not limited to the elderly, those with young children, and those living with an illness or disability. They are made to feel small and insignificant, as if they did something wrong. Once one is labeled as a “burden to society,” he or she will have to live with such a stereotyped image, and if one does not fit into the given category, he or she then will be castigated.

The other day, when the national poverty problem was featured on NHK TV program, a high school girl introduced in the program received insults on the internet after the program was aired. She was particularly castigated for not appearing authentically “poor,” as there was a scene in the program in which she was having a 1,000-yen lunch with her friends wearing pretty clothes. She was severely criticized as if she had no right to have a 1,000-yen lunch or to wear pretty clothes occasionally, using her modest savings.

Evacuees of the nuclear accident also face similar cases. I have recently heard a story that an evacuee from a coastal area near the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant was criticized by his neighbors because he was walking a big dog with long hair that looked fancy and expensive. He was told by his neighbors that the dog was too luxurious for an evacuee.

One can be criticized for being selfish if one does not follow the rules others follow, and one is bashed if one does not act according to a given stereotype in this society. How stifling and stressful it is! It is as if people have created for themselves a frame that invites policymakers to govern them in accordance with the convenience of the state and policymakers themselves. Such frame is constructed, not through public deliberation, but in an unspoken manner by people reading between the lines, or in Japanese “kuuki wo yomu,” literally meaning “reading the air.” In this frame, decisions are made by the majority. However, it is not by people raising hands and exchanging opinions. Decisions are made through the unspoken act of reading between the lines, which suppresses anyone with

different opinions and makes them stay quiet with their lips sealed. The nuclear accident could have been prevented if people had exercised critical thinking and engaged in open discussions more.

India and Japan: Completely Different Societies

Among the several seminars we participated in during the Asia Leadership Fellow Program (ALFP), there was a seminar on changes taking place in Indian society. According to Professor Tanabe Akio of Tokyo University who delivered this lecture, we could no longer discuss politics primarily in terms of the divide between the elite and the rest, as the political process has become much more complex and dynamic, allowing diverse groups to participate in and raise issues on different fronts in the reassembling networks of politics.¹ I know there are myriads of difficult problems in Indian society. However, I believe it is important that a variety of people can fight to express their opinions and deliberate on common concerns while aiming to achieve a fairer society.

The public lecture by Tariq Ramadan (Professor of Contemporary Islamic Studies at the Oxford University) which was held at the International House of Japan during the ALFP was also very impressive and stimulating. Professor Ramadan said that a secular society is not a society in which people become the same but one that acknowledges the freedom of different lifestyles and values diversity. To realize such society, it is important for people to communicate more effectively and understand each other's differences. As Professor Ramadan argued that in the truest sense, coexistence cannot be achieved if people ignore each other and avoid conflict and tension. In an interview on the *Asahi Shimbun* on October 21, Professor Ramadan said that one needs to assert oneself, and recognize and respect each other equally. Although he was talking about the ongoing issue on Islam and the West in the interview, I felt his words were directed at Japanese society where people avoid collisions by not expressing different ideas and opinions.

People Who Try to Overcome the Division

Although many people tend to choose silence to avoid conflict in Fukushima, there are some people who are trying to overcome this situation for a more positive dialogue.

Mr. Sugeno Seiji, an organic farmer in Nihonmatsu City, is one of them. Following the nuclear power plant accident of March 11, Mr. Sugeno's farming land was contaminated and customers stopped buying his produce. He then explored all possible ways to start over again and continue his farming. As a result of various experiments conducted in cooperation with experts of universities and research institutes, he discovered that the organic soil made

¹ Taberez Ahmed Neyazi, Akio Tanabe, and Shinya Ishizaka, eds., *Democratic Transformation and the Vernacular Public Arena in India*, (London: Routledge, 2014).

over time has a strong force to adsorb radioactive cesium, and there was almost no transition of cesium from the soil to the crops in his field.

Mr. Sugeno wanted to tell these evidence-based findings to mothers with children in Fukushima. They were the people who were most concerned about the contamination of agricultural products in Fukushima, and many of them had been buying vegetables from outside the prefecture. So, Mr. Sugeno talked with them, and after a series of dialogues he had with these mothers with patience, many of them now say, "I can buy Mr. Sugeno's vegetables with confidence."

In Iwaki City—a coastal city in south part of Fukushima where the friction between evacuees from the area near the nuclear power plant and local residents has become a hot topic—there is also a group of people who have launched a project for both evacuees and local residents to do farming together. In addition, in Fukushima City, there are people who organize a salon called "Philosophy Café" where people from different backgrounds can frankly exchange opinions on various topics.

Expressing one's opinion, even if it could disturb harmony, requires a lot of courage in Japan. Although listening to others who have different opinions and respecting them should be the foundation of democracy, it cannot be realized easily in Japan. However, a society in which people have extreme fear for disrupting harmony and disturbing others is a society that is advantageous to policymakers to push their policies while marginalizing minorities.

People of Fukushima have come to realize from their hard experiences that when people make important decisions in times of emergency, what they choose as their priorities in their lives could be very different from that of others. Currently, the deep wound of division is still manifesting itself as silence in the community. However, there is an increased understanding of the importance of having continued dialogue among people with different opinions or in positions until they can understand each other. I believe this important learning will be a key to improve our society. Every Japanese person should learn that true harmony is not about keeping our opinions to ourselves, but about expressing our different opinions and recognizing the differences and respecting each other.

It was a precious opportunity for me to participate in the Asia Leadership Fellow Program and to discuss with fellows from various Asian countries. This experience made me think about the importance of having a common ground for discussion with Asian people about the social contexts that had caused the nuclear accident in Fukushima, as well as the social problems that were surfaced by the accident, rather than just disseminating information about what happened in Fukushima. I would like to keep in touch with my fellow friends of ALFP and try to create opportunities for discussion with people of their countries and Japan, especially with the people of Fukushima in the near future.