

Stories & Facts from Fukushima

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Essay

In the aftermath of Fukushima: Searching for diversities and true harmony in Japanese Society

Emiko Fujioka



"Philosophy Café," having been held in Fukushima city offers people from various generation and backgrounds opportunity to express their feelings and worries in their mind freely. ©Fukuden

Division of the people caused by the nuclear accident

In March 2011, a devastating accident occurred in the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant, and it released a massive amount of radioactive materials which contaminated Fukushima and the surrounding areas of East Japan. After five and a half years, a huge number of black flexible container bags with contaminated soil are still piled up here and there in Fukushima and about 60,000 people who have evacuated from their home have not been able to return.

Among the variety of problems resulting from the nuclear accident, one of the most difficult issues until now is the division among people

caused by the differences in the level of their concerns about radioactivity and their circumstances depending on the places where they lived. In the cities like Fukushima City and Koriyama City 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 do so by themselves 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 have deteriorated.

The difference of thinking about the health effects of radioactivity, especially about how they can protect their children from 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. There are quite a few cases of such. The small decisions in their daily routine such as whether to eat vegetables and fruits produced in Fukushima, whether to hang out the laundry, 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 you are concerned about radiation and what are the priorities in your life. It created walls among people who had been living together in harmony in the neighborhood.

In the past couple of years, increased numbers of mothers with children who have 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 return 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 government and the prefecture municipality is ringing increasingly more cheerful and louder along with the support of those who want to move on. In such atmosphere, people avoid talking about “negative” things including topics about nuclear accident and radioactivity.



6 years having passed since the nuclear accident, increased number of household hang out the laundry outside.
(fukushima City)
©Fukuden

Society that values “Wa”(=harmony in Japanese), torments the victims

Japan is a society that values "Wa," which is 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,” which means “Ignore the minor differences for the common good.” Those who disturb the harmony 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 the burdens of the 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 you are labeled as “the burden of the society”, you are seen through a stereotype and you will be castigated if you do not fit into such stereotype.

The other day, when the national poverty problem was featured on a TV program, a high school girl introduced in the program received terrible insults on the internet after the program was aired. She was slammed for not appearing authentically “poor,” as there was a scene in the program in which she had a thousand-yen (approx.10 USD) lunch with her friends wearing pretty clothes. She was severely criticized as if she had no right to have a thousand-yen lunch or to wear pretty clothes occasionally, using her modest savings.

Evacuees of the nuclear accident also face similar cases. I recently heard a story that an evacuee from coastal area near Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant was criticized by his neighbors because he walked a big dog with long hair, which appeared fancy and expensive. He was told by his neighbors that the dog was too luxurious for an evacuee.

You can be criticized for being selfish if you do not follow others, and you are bashed if you do not act according to the stereotype in this society. How stifling and stressful it is! It is as if the people have created for themselves a frame that invites policymakers to govern them with convenience. Such frame is constructed, not through public deliberation, but in unspoken manner as people read between the lines, or in Japanese word, “Kuuki wo yomu,” literally meaning “reading the air.” In this frame, decisions are made by the majority. However, it is not by the raising of hands and exchange of voices. It is through the unspoken acts of reading between the lines, which suppress those hands to stay down and lips to remain sealed. The nuclear accident could have been prevented if people had exercised more critical thinking and engaged in open discussions.

India and Japan: completely different societies

Recently, I had an opportunity to attend a lecture on the changes in Indian society. According to Prof. Akio Tanabe of Tokyo University who delivered this lecture, the time when we could discuss politics primarily in terms of the

divide between the elite and the rest is coming to an end, and the political process has become much more complex and dynamic, allowing diverse groups to participate and raise issues on different fronts in the reassembling networks of politics.

I know there are myriads of difficult problems in Indian society. However, I think it is important that variety of different people can deliberate on common concerns by struggling and fighting to express their opinions and aiming to achieve a fairer society.

The lecture entitled "Living together, working together" by Islamic thinker, Prof. Tariq Ramadan, held in International House of Japan in September 2016 was also very impressive and stimulating. Prof. Ramadan said that the secular society is not a society where 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. It is futile for people to co-exist only to avoid conflict and tension. In an interview of Ramadan on the Asahi Shimbun on Oct.21st, Ramadan said "Assert yourself, and recognize and respect each other equally." Although he was talking about the issue on Islam and the West in the interview, I felt his words were directed at Japanese society in which we avoid collisions without claiming 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. Seiji Sugeno, organic farmer in Nihonmatsu city, is one among them. Mr. Sugeno's farming land was contaminated and customers have stopped buying his produce. He explored in every way how he can start over again and continue farming. As a result of various experiments conducted in cooperation with experts of universities and research institutes, he discovered that the organic soil made over time has a strong force to adsorb radioactive cesium, and there was almost no



Mr. Sugeno talks about his effort for making safe agricultural products to the guests from Taiwan, which bans on import of all the food products from Fukushima. He spares no effort in sharing his experience to anybody. ©Fukuden

transition of the cesium from the soil to the crops in his field. Mr. Sugeno wanted to tell these evidence-based research findings to mothers with children in Fukushima. They were the people who were most concerned about the contamination of agricultural products in Fukushima, many of whom ordered vegetables from outside the prefecture. Mr. Sugeno continued dialogue with mothers with patience, and eventually, many mothers now say, "I can buy Mr. Sugeno's vegetables with confidence."

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

Expressing your opinion, even if it means disturbing harmony, requires a lot of courage in Japan. Though 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 which makes it convenient for policymakers to push their policies, and which marginalizes the minorities.

People of Fukushima have come to realize from their hard experiences that when people make very important decision in times of emergency, what they choose as their priorities in lives are very different. Currently, the deep wound of division is still manifesting itself as silence in the community. However, there is increased understanding of the importance of talking together in spite of the differences until they can understand each other through their struggles. 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 opinion to ourselves, but about expressing our different opinions, recognizing the differences and respecting each other.

Emiko Fujioka: Secretary General of Fukushima Beacon for Global Citizens Network (Fukuden)

Translation from Japanese to English: Akina Mikami Koh

Note: This essay was originally written for Asia Leadership Fellow Program 2016 Public Seminar, co-organized by the International House of Japan and the Japan Foundation Asia Center. The contents of the essay are partially revised by the author.

Every Japanese person should learn that true harmony is not about keeping our opinion to ourselves, but about expressing our different opinions, recognizing the differences and respecting each other.

Background Facts

Bullying of young students evacuated from Fukushima comes to light

In November 2016, many newspapers reported the story of a boy whose family had decided to flee Fukushima Prefecture for the city of Yokohama (Kanagawa Prefecture) after the nuclear accident. The boy, a second grader at the time, was told by other students at his new primary school that he “probably had compensation money.” The other students then forced him to bring them large amounts of cash several times. The story shocked not just the Fukushima evacuees scattered across the country, but many other people as well.

Afterwards, cases of bullying against children evacuated from Fukushima were also reported in Niigata Prefecture and the Tokyo metropolitan area. The incidents were similar in several ways. All the children were “voluntary” evacuees whose families did not live in the designated evacuation zones, but decided to flee Fukushima Prefecture on their own initiative. All the children were called “germ” and treated as if they were contagious. Finally, in each case, the homeroom teacher or school did not take the problem seriously and did nothing to help the children. The children suffered such severe emotional trauma that they stopped attending school.

Unsurprisingly, many people feel that this problem did not originate with any children but with the adults around them. There are many people who do not understand the circumstances of Fukushima parents who were forced to make the decision to flee by themselves, while no evacuation order was given. Many of the people who decided to flee even though they lived outside of the designated evacuation zones are women with children. In many cases, the husband stayed behind in Fukushima to work. Many of these families hide their status as evacuees as they go about their lives, fearful as they are of facing prejudice. They also received only a small amount of compensation money. Adding to many families’ financial woes, the housing compensation allowance scheme for “voluntary” evacuees was halted in March 2017. Six years after the nuclear accident, Fukushima evacuees are still plagued by a profound lack of sympathy, misunderstandings, and prejudice.



Report

Talking About Fukushima with Asian Civil Leaders Participation in the Asia Leadership Fellow Program (ALFP) 2016

Emiko Fujioka, Secretary General for the Fukushima Beacon for Global Citizens Network, participated in the Asia Leadership Fellow Program (ALFP) 2016 which was held during September and October of 2016 through the joint sponsorship of The Japan Foundation and the International House of Japan.

This program has been being held since 1996 with the goal of creating personal networks between Asian countries for the realization of better civil societies. Fellows from each nation are given the opportunity to stay in the International House of Japan in Tokyo for two months to participate in workshops for exchanging ideas, field trips, discussion seminars by visiting specialists, retreats, and other intellectual collaborations.

In 2016, fellows including civil activists, journalists, and scholars attended the program from seven nations: India, Korea, The Philippines, Vietnam, Indonesia, Bangladesh, and Japan.

Topics covered in the program range from international relations to history and beyond. This time, we had the chance to speak with these fellows about the events that took place in Fukushima and the risks of nuclear power, the present condition of nuclear power plant production in each of their home countries, and other related topics.

Indian antinuclear activist Mr. Sundaram participated quite energetically in an assembly to oppose the looming execution of an India-Japan Nuclear Agreement during his time in Japan. Mr. Lee Taeho, one of the leaders of the Korean NGO People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy (PSPD), was quite interested in the legal action being taken by the victims of the Fukushima Daiichi disaster. During the program, he visited Fukushima and, along with the France-based German Japanologist and antinuclear activist Eckhardt Momber, visited farmers and activists in the prefecture to speak with them.

One of those individuals, Kenichi Hasegawa, former dairy farmer and leader of Maeda District, Iitate Village, spoke with them about his experiences from the disaster and nuclear accident at his home in Iitate Village to more current events. Iitate Village was approximately 40 kilometers away from the power plant but, due to wind conditions, received a high level of contamination and the milk from cows in the village was found to contain radioactive cesium. Mr. Hasegawa was forced to give up his cows and, while living in temporary housing in Date City, Fukushima, performed negotiations with the Tokyo Electric Power Company to demand reparations be paid to the residents of the area.

The residential land of Iitate Village was decontaminated but the mountains and forests which make up the majority of the village retain high doses of radiation and the plants and mushrooms there are still contaminated. However, evacuation orders for the area are set to be lifted at the end of March 2017 and residents have already been granted permission to stay at their homes in the village.



Mr. Kenichi Hasegawa (right), Mr. Lee Taeho (Left), Emiko Fujioka and Mr. Eckhardt Momber ©Fukuden



ALFP 2016 fellows: From the left, Criselda Yabes (Philippines), Kumar Sundaram (India), Ayan Utriza Yakin (Indonesia), Lee Taeho (Korea), Phan Ngok Diem Han (Vietnam), Amran Hosain (Bangladesh), and Emiko Fujioka ©Fukuden

Even after the evacuation orders are lifted, the children and grandchildren from the village will not return. Even so, Mr. Hasegawa spoke of how he wishes to at least return the agricultural land to a usable state while he is still able and how he cannot bear to watch this land, which has been handed down for generations, go to ruin.

The visitors experienced first-hand the gravity of what the nuclear accident robbed from the residents of the area and showed great respect to Mr. Hasegawa, who continued to fight in the face of hardships.

Report

A symposium was held in Bangladesh to mark the launching of "10 Lessons from Fukushima" Bengali version

On the December 24th, a symposium to mark the launching of Bengali translation of the booklet "10 Lessons from Fukushima: Reducing Risks and Protecting Communities from Disasters" was held in Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, and approximately 60 people including NGO staff, scholars and students participated in the event.

In this event, they organized a panel discussion titled "Nuclear Disaster: Reducing Risks and the Alternative" with Bangladeshi civil activist, journalist, and scholar as panelists, and Mr. Ohashi, one of the co-chairperson of the Fukushima booklet committee, also joined the panel.

He presented the effect of the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Accident, talking to the audience " who will bear the enormous cost for the nuclear accident, which is estimated 21.5 trillion yen at this time? The people of Japan. Are you ready to pay such money if the same thing happens in your country?"

Mr. Arup Rahee, Secretary-General of Center for Bangladesh Studies and who made the Bengali version of the booklet, moderated the event.

In Bangladesh, construction of the first nuclear power plant is going on at Ruppur, besides the Ganges (Padma) River. We hope this booklet will help the people in Bangladesh to learn the risks of the nuclear power plant and start the action.

To browse and download the contents, see ⇒ <http://fukushimalessons.jp/en-booklet.html>



About this news letter

Stories & Facts from Fukushima is a newsletter presenting real stories of Fukushima and its background after the nuclear disaster of Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant happened on Mar.11, 2011.

Having more than 6 years passed since the disaster, this newsletter aims to introduce

present situation of Fukushima people (both living inside and outside Fukushima) and to explain the facts behind their life.

Some of the contents are linked to our website, Fukushima on the Globe (www.fukushimaonthe-globe.com). Please see the site as well as this newsletter.

We welcome your feedback.

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