

## Introduction

# STUDIES ON THE DYNAMICS OF SOCIO-CULTURAL CHANGE AFTER THE 2015 NEPAL GORKHA EARTHQUAKE BY JAPAN-BASED RESEARCHERS

Tatsuro Fujikura

This special section consists of four articles that are concerned with socio-cultural changes in Nepal after the 2015 Gorkha earthquake. All the authors were members of a joint research project, titled “Disaster Ethnographic Study of Reconfiguration of Societies after the 2015 Nepal Gorkha Earthquake,” led by Makito Minami and funded by the Japan Society for Promotion of Science (Grant number 16H05692). There were fifteen members in the research project, all of them based in Japan, and whose backgrounds were in anthropology, geography and related disciplines. All of them had substantial research experiences in Nepal *prior* to the 2015 earthquake. As Dipesh Kharel and Katsuo Nawa note in a footnote to their contribution, the choice of co-investigators was deliberate. Rather than visiting a geographical or social location for the first time after the earthquake, the researchers went back to milieux that they were already familiar with in order to better locate the effects of the earthquake in the context of longer-term changes in each place. Masako Tanaka, in her contribution, notes that post-disaster periods are often perceived as “windows of opportunity” for social change, but those changes are not often studied empirically. Elsewhere, Mark Liechty (2022) has argued that we should explore how disasters trigger the emergence of new and destabilized “epistemological fields” that present new “conditions of possibilities” within which new ideas and actions become thinkable and possible. The contributions to this special section represent efforts to assess the new opportunities and limits presented in the post-2015 situation, placing them in the context of longer-term changes in each social location.

The contribution by Seika Sato focuses on a new form of religious practice that emerged after the earthquake, namely Buddhist scripture-reading

by women in a Hyolmo village she has studied since the mid-1990s. This is definitely a new phenomenon in a village where men always occupied the central place in religious practices, including scripture-reading. Sato locates this phenomenon within the context of longer-term changes in the Hyolmo village, including demographic changes. She also points to the accumulation of educational and organizational skills among women, through their contacts and experiences with development interventions prior to the earthquake. She argues that the new religious practice by women is certainly pushing towards gender equality within Hyolmo Buddhism and may well be promoting gender equality in Hyolmo society at large. However, she also cautions against simple optimism, because secular public sphere is still predominantly occupied by men and women's increased devotion to Buddhism may need to be located within the process of privatization and feminization of the religious sphere.

The article by Kharel and Nawa builds on nearly two decades of visual anthropological research in Alampu, Dolakha by Kharel. Their article focuses on the process of building and dwelling in post-earthquake situation. The building and dwelling in the earthquake resistant *bhūkumpa ghar* is very different from that associated with the older *dhuṅgāko ghar*. *Bhūkumpa ghar* needs to be built in strict accordance to techniques laid down by outside engineers. The living space is much smaller and is colder in the winter than *dhuṅgāko ghar*. However, with a longer-term perspective, we learn that *dhuṅgāko ghar* cannot simply be regarded as a “traditional” form of dwelling, because it was itself once “new,” which replaced *kharko ghar* which used to be the predominant form within the living memory of the elders in the village. This perspective helps us better understand the extent of the “newness” of the *bhūkumpa ghar* in the village, and the ways in which villagers were able, despite many difficulties, to build and dwell in these houses, using, among other things, the same ritual techniques they used when they built and dwelled in *dhuṅgāko ghar*.

The contribution by Tanaka is a case study of the efforts to provide “female-friendly spaces” in Dhading District. Although the article's immediate focus is on the post-earthquake period, the research builds on Tanaka's long years of research and practical experiences working with INGOs and NGOs in Nepal, including on projects related to gender-based violence. The NGO that Tanaka began to work with immediately after the earthquake had already been working on the problems of gender-based

violence prior to the earthquake. Female-friendly spaces that were created after the earthquake became new entry points for help-seeking for women who suffered from gender-based violence and had no access to external assistance prior to the earthquake.

The article by Tatsuro Fujikura relates to political repercussions of a process that was set in motion by the earthquake, in a region that was not physically affected by it—namely, western Tarai. Fujikura, who has been engaged in fieldwork both in the hills and plains of western Nepal since the mid-1990s, discusses Tharu indigenous activism prior to and after the 2015 earthquake. After 2009, demand for a Tharu federal province had become one of the most prominent agendas for the Tharu activists. However, the “fast-track” constitution writing process initiated by the influential political parties in Kathmandu produced a new constitution that virtually abandoned the idea of “identity-based” federalism that Tharu and many other groups had demanded. However, this did not mean the end of Tharu indigenous activism. Fujikura argues that many activists are engaged rigorously in the work of reinvigorating Tharu cultural practices and social spaces, taking advantage of institutional possibilities opened up by the new federal republican constitution.

Although this special section derives from a joint research project by Japan-based researchers funded by a Japanese public agency, no explicit efforts are made to engage in reflexive exercise on the modes of knowledge production about Nepal in Japan<sup>1</sup>—although Kharel and Nawa, and Fujikura provide small footnotes on the complexity of using English terminologies in discussing situations in Nepal or Japan. A systematic discussion on the topic needs to be reserved for another occasion. Here, we simply note that there is a substantial number of researchers in Japan currently studying socio-cultural processes in contemporary Nepal. As mentioned earlier, in the joint project from which this special section is derived, there were fifteen co-investigators who had substantial research experiences in Nepal prior to 2015. Four of the contributors of the section, Sato, Nawa, Tanaka and Fujikura, belong to a generation of researchers who began their long-term research in Nepal in the mid-1990s, a generation that benefited greatly from the advice and joint research projects organized by Hiroshi Ishii who began his long-term research

<sup>1</sup> For a bibliography of books on Nepal written in Japanese between 2001 and 2018, see Nawa and Niwa (2018). For earlier surveys of Nepal Studies in Japan, see Ishii (1991, 2001).

in Nepal in 1970. There is also a new generation of Nepal researchers based in Japan, who have completed their dissertation research on Nepal in the past decade, including Kharel.<sup>2</sup> We can expect more studies on post-2015 socio-cultural dynamics from Japan-based researchers in the days to come.

## References

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<sup>2</sup> They include, to list only those who have contributed article(s) or book review(s) to, or whose book was reviewed in *Studies in Nepali History and Society*, the following researchers: Maiko Annen, Misa Aoki, Yasuko Fujikura, Fukachi Furukawa, Sanae Ito, Dipesh Kharel, Kanako Nakagawa, Yuka Nakamura, Mitsuru Niwa, Tina Shrestha, Yuko Takamichi and Mizuki Watanabe.