An Anthropological Study of Bhutanese Technical Intern Training Program

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An Anthropological Study of Bhutanese Technical Intern Training Program

Yoko Kurita

Introduction

This paper focuses on Bhutanese “Technical Intern Trainees” in Japan, and examines their activities in Japan and their relationship with the socioeconomic development in Bhutan. I will also examine how the governmental policies of both Japan and Bhutan mutually affect each other.

On 1st October 2015, the first group of the Bhutanese trainees arrived in Sendai, Japan. 18 Bhutanese trainees are working as trainees at various companies in Japan now. Bhutan has been known in Japan as “the happiest country in the world.” Therefore, when I learned about their coming to Japan as trainees, I was curious as to why they had to leave their happy life in Bhutan to work overseas. What motivated them to come to Japan? And who did bring the Bhutanese youth to Japan?

The so-called “technical intern training program” is supposed to provide on-the-job training for those from developing countries so that they will be able to go back and apply their newly acquired skills to development projects in their homelands. Do the trainees really contribute to development of their home country? Or, is the program in fact a scheme to import cheap labor to Japan as the critics charge? These are the questions that I would like to answer in my dissertation research.

This paper reports my preliminary findings about the Bhutanese trainees’ actual lives in Japan.

I have served as a volunteer Japanese language teacher in the Japanese language lessons for Bhutanese trainees from October 2015 to July 2016. The language lessons are part of the orientation program provided by a Japanese nonprofit organization. I interacted with the Bhutanese trainees in and outside
After they started their on-the-job training at various companies, I maintained contact with them through Facebook, which the Bhutanese trainees use both among themselves and with their families in Bhutan.

I also conducted interviews in Sendai with people who are closely involved in this project of bringing Bhutanese trainees to Japan.

**Research Perspective**

1. Endogenous development

My research is informed by the theory of “Endogenous Development,” which means that development is not forced from the outside but originates from within the society. A Swedish foundation started using the term “endogenous” first in 1975: in a report submitted to the United Nations, the group insisted that development did not always have to follow the Western pattern and could be guided by diverse values (保母 2013: 130). The idea challenged development policies imposed by the West, and indicated an alternative in which local residents carried out development programs by themselves balancing socioeconomic progress and traditional culture (西川 1989: 3; Esteva 2010: 11).

In the meantime, a Japanese sociologist Kazuko Tsurumi (鶴見和子) also proposed the idea of “endogenous development.” She argued that foreign ideas of development formulated in western countries must be modified to suit peculiar conditions and cultural traditions of non-western countries (鶴見 1974).

After 1978, the concept of endogenous development became an important philosophy in UNESCO (西川 1989; Esteva 2010: 12).

Maekawa Keiji (前川啓治) maintains that “an asymmetry exists between the developer and the developed in the world just as it did under colonialism (between the colonizer and the colonized)” (前川 2009: 612). The concept of “endogenous development” challenges this asymmetry.

I would like to examine if the technical intern training program can help make Bhutanese trainees into autonomous change agents who will foster
“endogenous development” in Bhutan.

At present, however, I am at the preliminary stage of observing and interviewing Bhutanese trainees in Japan in order to find out how they are living and what they are learning as trainees.

2. Key Person

Endogenous development often needs a “key person.” Key person is an individual who goes to other region from their home town, and acts for the development of their own regions or communities (西川 2001: 315-316).

For example, Gandhi is one of the “key persons” in Indian independence movement. He grew up in India, but studied in a university in the UK. This experience triggered him to develop the idea of non-violent resistance in India (西川 2001: 316). Studying in the UK enabled him to look at the circumstances of India objectively (西川 2001: 316). As this story shows, a person who went outside of one’s own world acquires a potential to become a key person for “endogenous development.”

I would like to show in this paper that one Bhutanese man who lives in Japan was a key person in starting Bhutanese technical intern training program. And I describe how he plays this role now.

Literature Review

In the colonial era, many anthropologists worked for their governments. Sometimes, they researched in the colonies of their homeland (Crewe and Axelby 2013: 29). In war times, some anthropologists researched the “enemy.” Ruth Benedict studied Japanese culture for the US government (Crewe and Axelby 2013: 30).

After the Second World War, imperialism was replaced by developmentalism. In 1950s, direct economic aids to developing countries were central to the western development policy. Therefore, economists, planners, and engineers were recruited (Crewe and Axelby 2013: 33). Anthropologists’ role, however, was
very limited until the mid-1970s (Escobar 1991: 662).

In the mid-1970s, the priority of development policy turned to the needs of the poorest. Under Robert McNamara’s governorship, the World Bank started ‘Poverty-Oriented’ programs in 1970 (Crewe and Axelby 2013: 34; Esteva 2010: 10).

McNamara had some doubts about the efficiencies of economic growth, and even said that he wanted to remove GNP from development programs (Esteva 2010: 10). The importance of ‘Basic Human Needs’ and ‘Grass-Roots Development’ for poorest people was proclaimed (Nolan 2007: 49). At the same time, other development institutions, notably donor governments of the US, the UK and Sweden, began integrating analysis of local knowledge, attitudes and practices into their development programs for the first time (Crewe and Axelby 2013: 34). Furthermore, some institutes in U.S.A started to insist that the participation of ordinary people was important (Escobar 1991: 664).

This change in development ideology increased the demand for anthropologists. Aid organizations wanted to reflect the local knowledge in development programs, and they requested anthropologists to do the Social Soundness Analysis or SSA (Escobar 1991: 664). In SSA, research objects were social structures, sense of value, beliefs in the region—similar to the aims of anthropological research (Escobar 1991: 664).

At the same time, the interest in development has been increasing among anthropologists. One of the reasons was the revival of applied anthropology in the UK (青柳 2000: 60). Many anthropologists wanted to act as a practical worker of development (ノラン 2007: 65; 青柳 2000: 60).

On the other hand, increasing participation of anthropologists in development created a dilemma. When an anthropologist wanted to work for development, he/she must belong to the organization or government. The anthropologists were asked to accept the institutions’ or governments’ ideology of development (Crewe and Axelby 2013: 34).

Some anthropologists do not think that anthropologists should participate in development programs. Aoyagi Machiko (青柳まちこ) explains the reason:
many anthropologists, particularly Japanese anthropologists, were afraid that they may be criticized by local people because practical research reminded them of the past that anthropological work benefited imperialism and colonialism (柳 2000: 59). Suzuki argues that the reason why they dislike participation in development projects was that they thought development programs violated pristine cultures (鈴木 2011: 52).

**Technical Intern Training Program**

1. Technical Intern Trainee

   All foreigners who want to enter Japan must obtain the “status of residence.” Technical intern trainees are those foreign residents who have the status of “Technical Intern Trainee.” In the present, there are 210,893 technical intern trainees in Japan (法務省 2016). Most of them are from Asian countries; 90% of them are from Asian countries, particularly from developing countries (法務省 2016). The four largest sender countries are China, Vietnam, the Philippines, and Indonesia (法務省 2016).

2. Historical Background

   First, I would like to explain the history of Technical Intern Trainee Program (TITP) and its relation to the labor shortage problem in Japan. TITP started in 1993. Before that, there were few foreign laborers in Japan.

   After the Second World War, Japan’s Economy quickly recovered thanks to the guided assistance and great amount of financial aid from the US through GHQ and the special procurements generated by The Korean War, and soon Japan entered the so-called rapid economic growth era.

   In the 1960s, Japanese economy was booming. Many industries located in the big cities like Tokyo and other major industrial zones required more and more work force. The companies recruited fresh graduates of junior high schools in rural areas—even in Okinawa which was then governed by US. They were called “golden eggs” for they were precious assets that could “hatch” into skilled
workers.

However, as the pace of economic growth slowed down and the rate of high school entrance increased, the number of junior high school graduates directly entering the work force declined. But, this memory of recruiting untrained youths and offering them on-the-job training to make them into skilled workers provided the background for planning and implementing TITP.

**Starting TITP**

As the Japanese economy grew and the need for international trade increased, the Japanese government decided to join the international aid regime as a major donor country. For Japan, Asian countries were both the recipients of Japanese aids and the trading partners. “Colombo Plan for Cooperative Economic Development in South and South-East Asia” was one of the early development projects. Through this project, Japan started accepting foreigners from developing countries as “trainees.” The purpose was transfer of technology through on-the-job training.

During the time of “Bubble Economy,” Japanese industry faced severe shortage of labor. The dire situation required immediate and effective solutions. So, the industry decided to import workers from other countries. In the 1980s, some companies in Japan began to bring in youths from China as “trainees.” They requested the government to establish a system that would enable them to recruit foreign manpower. In 1993, the government went ahead with TITP. Under this program, foreigners were allowed to work as “Technical Intern Trainees.” Technically speaking, they were only “training” although they were paid wages. They were “trainees” not laborers.

The activities of the foreigners who entered Japan under this program were restricted; technical interns were not permitted to apply for work in Japan after completing their “training” and “technical internships” (up to three years maximum) and must return to their home countries afterwards; technical interns were not allowed to enter Japan with their accompanying spouses and
children, they were not allowed to change their jobs even if they were not satisfied with the treatment and the work conditions at the companies they were assigned.

TITP has been criticized for years. In 2006, an organization reported that several trainees worked at 300 yen per hour. At that time, the average of minimum wages in Japan was 673 yen per hour. There were cases like some employers taking passports away from trainees to prevent them from escapes; some had hidden the serious industrial accidents; and some had used violence against the trainees and so on. In addition to these cases, US State department has been calling the program “human trafficking” since 2007, and asked Japanese government to take corrective measures (Department of State, USA 2016). Akashi suggests that the program disregarded the welfare of trainees (明石 2013: 66). In 2010, the law was amended and was put into effect that the labor-related laws and regulations shall be applied to the trainees.

Despite such criticisms, it appears that TITP is here to stay, and more young foreigners will enter Japan under this program. Bhutanese are among the most recent ones coming to Japan as “trainees.” It is for this reason that I would like to investigate this program and its impact upon the trainees and their native counties as well as the trainees’ impact on Japanese society.

Bhutan

Bhutan is a country sandwiched between China and India. The size of the land is as small as that of Taiwan. The population is about 770,000 (National Statistics Bureau 2015: 1). Since 2006, Bhutan has become famously known as a “Country of Happiness” and the Bhutanese “The Happiest Citizens of the World” with its new development policy of promoting Gross National Happiness (GNH) instead of GDP.

However, the country has been suffering from high rate of unemployment, especially among the youths. So, in 2013, the government decided to send the unemployed youths overseas as students or workers so that they would be able
to acquire new skills or earn money. The government hoped that such a policy would alleviate discontent among the unemployed youths.

1. Development and Modernization in Bhutan

In 1958, Nehru, who was the president of India, visited Bhutan (Rose 1977: 75; 宮本 2009: 327). The purpose of his trip was to request Bhutan to stop ‘isolationist policy’ in diplomacy with surrounding countries and to build a new road between India and Bhutan (Rose 1977: 75; 宮本 2009: 327). The president held talks with the third king of Bhutan, and the king agreed to both of the proposals (Rose 1977: 75; 宮本 2009: 327).

The government of Bhutan started its development projects in 1961. Early projects focused on infrastructure. Next, they set out to establish extension services for health, education, and agriculture (Phuntsho 2014: 3). Construction of hydropower and mineral plants followed (Phuntsho 2014: 3). Air service was opened and digital telecommunications networks were set up (Phuntsho 2014: 3). Recently, Bhutan is recognized by international communities as a democratized and globalized country (Phuntsho 2014: 3).

Bhutan is dependent on foreign aid from many countries. Japan is one of the important donor nations.

2. Overseas Employment Project

Nowadays, Bhutan faces several social problems. As mentioned earlier, one is youth unemployment. In 2014, the unemployment rate was 8.7 % for the 15-29 years old cohort (National Statistics Bureau 2015: 1). This is much higher than the overall average of 2.6 % (National Statistics Bureau 2015: 1).

One of the reasons of youth unemployment is rapid population increase. In the 1960s, the national population was only 200,000. However, in 2015, the figure topped 770,000. And, about 50 % of the population is under 24 years old. Another reason is the spread of modern education. The government of Bhutan emphasized education as an important factor for development. “Educate our youth first, and then modernize” was the slogan (Rose 1977: 131-132). Bhutan’s
educational system was improved. Consequently, the number of students who advance to higher levels of education increased. In 2013, 93% of the students entered low secondary schools, 91% entered middle secondary schools and 93% entered high secondary schools (桜井 2016: 147). Young graduates with advanced academic training wanted to have good jobs in urban areas but those jobs were few.

In recent years, highly educated young Bhutanese do not wish to take blue-collar jobs. Those menial jobs today are done by guest workers from India and Nepal. A teacher reportedly pointed his finger at those foreigners working at a construction site and said to his Bhutanese students, “Study hard! Or you will have to work like them” (上田 2006: 166).

In Bhutan, job opportunities in private sectors are limited. Many parents expect their children to become government officials, but vacancies are very few and there are always far more applicants than the number of positions available (Phuntsho 2014). So, competitions among Bhutanese youths over governmental jobs are intense. Moreover, there is a mismatch between supply and demand in the labor market.

In 2013, the government of Bhutan launched a project to send 30,000 Bhutanese youths overseas. They were sent to India, Thailand, and so on (Dawa Gyelmo 2016). However, by 2016, the number of employment overseas remains only at 1,432 (Dawa Gyelmo 2016).

Some reports indicate that some youth became victims of fraud. Even worse, some became victims of crime such as murder. Therefore, opposition party claimed that this project is in crisis and the policy of sending youth abroad is unacceptable.

Yet, some young Bhutanese continue to go abroad, and now some of them are coming to Japan, but how and why?

3. Bringing Bhutanese as “Trainees” to Japan

Why did some Bhutanese choose Japan as their destination and come as trainees? In the course of my fieldwork in Sendai, I found out that one
Bhutanese, Mr. Dorji (pseudonym), played a pivotal role in bringing young Bhutanese to Japan.

He first visited Japan for three months in 1997 through Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA)’s project. After completion of the project, he went back to Bhutan, and married a Japanese woman who was working for JICA. He arrived in Japan in 1998 again as a spouse of Japanese national. He now resides and works in Sendai.

In 2013, he read the news of a Japanese government project on a newspaper, and hit upon an idea that he should bring Bhutanese youths to Japan through this project. He and his wife both thought that this would give Bhutanese youths an opportunity to learn advanced skills and gain latest knowledge necessary for Bhutan’s development. It was these young Bhutanese they thought who will take on the responsibility of building Bhutan.

His sister-in-law was an acquaintance of an expert member of TITP. This expert instructed him how to manage a TITP project and guided him to establish a company for bringing Bhutanese to Japan.

In December 2014, application for TITP was publicly solicited in Bhutan. The applicants gathered from all over Bhutan. They were taxi drivers, tour guides, hotel employees, and so on. Mr. Dorji and Mr. Suzuki, an officer of a non-profit organization that supervises the TITP project, interviewed the applicants. Ten men were selected. They enrolled in a Japanese language school in Thimpu, which was managed by a Japanese woman, who was a friend of Mr. Dorji and his wife. Mr. Dorji asked her to teach Japanese language to the trainees-to-be. The language training there consisted of 160 hours of lessons and lasted for about three months. Unfortunately, one of the trainees-to-be could not to come to Japan because of his family problem.

In September 2015, the first nine Bhutanese trainees-to-be arrived in Sendai, Japan. Eleven more followed in June 2016, and seven more in July that year. At present, 18 Bhutanese reside legally in Japan as “technical intern trainees.” They are “training” in such diverse fields as construction, car maintenance, tunnel engineering and so on.
4. Giving Initial “Lessons” to the Trainees

After arriving in Japan, the trainees had to take “lessons” in Japanese language and in the Japanese way of life. The lessons were given in a one month period. All the Bhutanese trainees took lessons in Japanese language at a facility in Sendai. The facility was run by an organization in which Mr. Dorji’s sister-in-law worked. A textbook specifically designed for technical intern trainees was used as a teaching material. This textbook was written only in hiragana and katakana; no kanji was used. Practicing conversation skills necessary at workplace was the main goal of the lessons in Japanese language, and writing was not emphasized. That is why kanji was not taught.

During this “lesson” period, the trainees lived together in a “dormitory.” The dormitory was in fact a flat of a condominium near the language lesson facility. The trainees received financial support from the supervising organization, but no care at the dormitory. So, they had to do the cooking, the washing, the cleaning and so on by themselves. Since they did not know where to buy foodstuffs and other daily necessities, Mr. Dorji had to help them shop around.

When they completed the lessons, they started internship as technical intern trainees at companies assigned to them.

5. Living as foreign “Trainees” in Japan

The Bhutanese trainees receive a monthly salary of 140,000 yen for their work at the companies where they are “trained.” The amount of salary was determined by the supervising organization that overseas this TITP project. The amount is higher than the average of all foreign trainees in Japan, which is about 123,000 yen (国際研修協力機構 2013: 87). But it is much lower than the average salary for Japanese workers. The trainees know this. One of the trainees said in a disappointed voice, “(The salary is) high for Bhutan, but low for Japan.”

Many Bhutanese trainees like Japan and Japanese people. They have come to know something about Japan before coming here. Some had seen an ODA
project by JICA or by other Japanese volunteers in Bhutan. Bhutanese children like watching Japanese animated cartoons such as “Doraemon” broadcasted by Indian channels. Consequently, they felt close to Japan before they actually came.

However, Japanese customs are different from Bhutanese customs. Bhutanese technical intern trainees had to adjust to Japanese life in a number of ways. I will describe their efforts to adapt themselves to the new circumstances through some examples.

First, the food. Many Bhutanese trainees said “Japanese meals taste ‘sweet’.” Many of them don’t like such “sweet” Japanese food because Bhutanese food is usually hotter. One of the most famous foods in Bhutan, called “Ema datzi,” is a good example. “Ema” means chili, and “datzi” means cheese. I ate “Ema datzi” with the Bhutanese trainees but it was too hot for me and I struggled to eat it up. Some Bhutanese trainees add dried red pepper (shichimi-tougarashi) to Japanese dishes when they eat at a canteen. Japanese add small amount of dried red pepper to spice certain food such as Japanese noodles in soup, but the Bhutanese trainees add them to ordinary dishes that no Japanese would consider spicing with dried red pepper.

Next, the stimulant. I noticed that many Bhutanese trainees smoke cigarettes. One of the trainees explained, “We cannot find doma in Japan.” Doma is a piece of betel nut rolled in a leaf. Bhutanese, from children to adults, love doma. They always chewed doma in Bhutan. But, it is impossible to get doma in Japan, so they use cigarettes instead. From 2004, Bhutanese government prohibited smoking cigarettes in public space. The Bhutanese trainees therefore did not smoke in Bhutan. Yet, to satisfy their need for a stimulant, they turned to smoking in Japan.

Third, language. They learned Japanese language in Bhutan and Japan. But, they do not have many chances to use the kind of expressions they studied. One reason is local dialects. One time, a Bhutanese trainee sent a text message to me. He wrote “what is the meaning of ‘chosuna’?”. The term is one of the dialects in Tohoku region, and means “Don’t touch” or “Don’t move that”. Many
companies to which they are assigned are located in rural areas. Therefore, Japanese employees mainly use dialects at workplace. That often confuses the trainees.

Moreover, trainees were taught polite forms of standard Japanese such as honorifics in their language lessons. But many trainees work at such places as construction sites and factories where conversation is casual and vernacular. As a result, they do not hear honorifics much at work. Furthermore, many trainees’ writing ability declined. To begin with, they learned only hiragana and katakana, so their writing ability was minimal. Then, once they start their “training” at companies, they do not face many occasions in which writing is required. Mr. Dorji said that the Bhutanese trainees cannot even write their own names in Japanese now.

Forth, relationships between the Bhutanese trainees and their Japanese colleagues. Of course, whether they can get along with their co-workers depend on the atmospheres of each companies and personalities involved. But, language skill is very important in establishing and maintaining good relationship. The trainees basically have only four months of language training: three months in Bhutan, and one month in Japan. This is not enough for acquiring sufficient communication skills.

As a result, some Bhutanese are not good at speaking in Japanese. One of the trainees said, “I cannot make friends because I cannot speak Japanese well.” He thinks that his low Japanese language skill prevent him from communicating with people around him.

Some Bhutanese trainees can and do develop good relationship with Japanese colleagues. One of the trainees said, “my colleague is my Japanese teacher, and I am his English teacher.” Teaching languages to each other is a good way to develop close ties if trainees can find an interested Japanese partner.

Finally, contacting with their families and friends in Bhutan. Making international phone call to Bhutan is much more expensive than the trainees expected. One trainee said, “I made international calls to my family, and then
the price tag was 40,000 yen per month.” To save money, the trainees mainly use social network services (SNS). Bhutan government opened the country to internet in 1999. At present, 450,000 people use internet service in Bhutan (National Statistics Bureau 2015). Moreover, over 90% of Bhutanese use cellphone now (National Statistics Bureau 2015). Many Bhutanese are familiar with such SNS as Facebook, WeChat, LINE, and so on. 75% of SNS users in Bhutan is under 34 years old (藤原 2013: 277).

Conclusion

In concluding this paper, I would like to make two points. One is about the benefit of TITP for Japan and Bhutan. The other is about the role played by Mr. Dorji.

1. Technical Intern Training Program Benefits both Japan and Bhutan

For Japan, “Technical Intern Trainees” are very important as labor force especially for small to medium scale businesses in rural Japan. The foreign trainees fill in the shortage of labor many rural industries now face. Some Japanese managers welcome them saying that these young diligent foreigners remind them of the “golden eggs” in the 1960s. For Bhutan, the program offers an outlet for unemployed youth. Moreover, some technics may be transferred from Japan to Bhutan when trainees return home. And those technics could help develop Bhutan as both the government and Mr. Dorji expect. If properly managed, TITP therefore may benefit both Japan and Bhutan.

2. Technical Intern Training Program May Induce Endogenous Development

I would like to argue that “Bhutanese Technical Intern Training Program” may induce genuine “endogenous development” in Bhutan. The role of Mr. Dorji is very important here. It was he who came up with the idea that bringing Bhutanese youth to Japan could be beneficial for Bhutan. He asked his relatives and friends in Japan and Bhutan to help him realize his dream.
Truely, the Technical Intern Training Program is a scheme created by the Japanese government, and as such it is exogenous to Bhutan. But, Mr. Dorji is a Bhutanese citizen concerned with the future development of his homeland. Knowing both Bhutan and Japan well, he was able to envision that TITP could be used by the Bhutanese for the Bhutanese. Mr. Dorji was a “key person,” often identified in the anthropology of development, necessary for any successful development project.

The fact that his networks reach across Bhutan and Japan suggests that in this age of globalization, such a person with transnational web of very personal ties plays a vital role in international development.

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