

## OSAKA'S BURAKU COMMUNITIES BEING REVITALIZED

Millions of people in some 4500 communities in Japan are still faced with traditional prejudice and, more often than not, discriminated against in employment and marriage, due to their origins associated with Burakus ("outcast settlements"). The Buraku Liberation League (BLL) has been struggling for a century advocating their rights. In the mid 1960s, the government admitted the political responsibility for eradicating discrimination and rectifying disparity, and a series of heavily subsidized projects were implemented for settlement improvement. In 2002, however, such preferential subsidy programs were terminated, and buraku communities could no longer expect government assistance specifically for burakus.



Yoshihiko Yamamoto, who has been long associated with ACHR, was the leader of the Asaka branch of BLL in Osaka. Asaka is the community that in the 1970s challenged the city's development planning against their riverside poor settlement and strenuously negotiated with success for redevelopment of the site as parks, playgrounds, housing and schools. But Yamamoto understood that the BLL strategy of pressuring government to deliver preferential services and subsidies could not be

sustainable, and searched for a more self-reliant strategy. Yamamoto and his colleagues in Asaka started in the early 1990s mobilizing community assets, motivating people to contribute, establishing community enterprises, setting up nursing homes and other welfare establishments, and managing community centers, small shops and public bath, many of which were located on municipal lands. The idea behind these enterprises was to wean themselves from

government funding and find their sources of income to fund their BLL movement. Furthermore they extended such service support also to communities outside burakus with the aim of community-initiated social integration. Asked to comment on the "integration" policy of making buraku people indistinguishable from others, Yamamoto said, "I am proud to be from a buraku, where we have built mutually-supporting communities of people who live together and help each other. But this doesn't mean we should be an island. Because we have been discriminated against, we have become aware of other forms of discrimination against women, against elderly people and against those with low income. That is why the Asaka BLL has built welfare programs and organized so many community activities over the years, to give space to these various groups, not only inside but also outside burakus. Through this process, real "integration" will be possible."



However, the present central government is pursuing market-oriented neo-liberal policies, while Osaka's mayor is selling off public land and closing or privatizing buildings in buraku and other low-income settlements, threatening collective space and opportunities so far managed by local communities. Furthermore, an amendment was made to Public Housing Act in 1996 to introduce income-adjusted rents in place of flat rents, and in 2007 the income level qualified for cheap public housing, which accommodates 70% of buraku residents in Osaka, was lowered. Therefore, active young people with more income have left buraku areas and rather purchased private housing outside than kept paying relatively higher rents inside, while low-income elderly families are left behind in old, small and cheap public housing units. Consequently those who still stay in these half-empty settlements are mostly elderly, mostly living alone and mostly poor. Many times, even in a close-knit community like Asaka, they have noticed newspapers piling up for several days on someone's doorstep, and

then discovered that the elderly person inside had died alone.

Yamamoto and other buraku leaders are understandably alarmed to see the communities running down and all these community-managed services, on municipal property, being uprooted. They jointly formed a research group and have undertaken self-surveys and analysis, assisted by an ACHR friend Jeon Hong-Gyu from Osaka City University. The group came up with a plan of actions for, among others, the establishment of a “people-based town development agency” as a new framework of collective actions.



The agency will attempt to re-gain self-management capacity of housing maintenance and settlement development and to demonstrate a new model of community revitalization. It will purchase/rent/maintain land and housing strategic in the area, safeguard community-managed welfare establishments and services, build/occupy and manage social space for community interaction, facilitate community business enterprises, and negotiate with the government and private sector for people-friendly land and housing programmes. It will also promote exchanges with other *buraku* and non-*buraku* communities and Asian poor groups on people-managed community maintenance. Funds have been raised locally from BLL local branches, neighbourhood associations, community-based welfare establishments and others and added to ACCA's initial contributions.

Focus of operational activities may depend on specific characteristics of the individual settlements. For example, Asaka already acquired a house for the disabled in the area which was about to be sold by the local government to a private developer, mobilizing people's contributions and community assets, and then placed it under the community ownership and control. It caters to people in and outside the area. Asaka community now rents and occupies a vacant unit of public housing, after negotiating with the City for its non-residential use, and converted it to a community space for the aged and youth to gather, enjoy local traditional foods and play, organize house maintenance consultations, etc. Similarly, some public facilities already closed down and sold by the government, such as public bath, clinic and community centre, will be negotiated for community use.

The first community space, named “*cosmos*” was opened in September 2013. Mr. Seiji Yamato, a correspondent from *the BLL News*, reported in January 2014 on “cafe *cosmos*” as follows:

A number of community centers and a various types of facilities for youth and for the aged in *buraku* settlements in Osaka have been closed down or “amalgamated” by the city government over last three years under the municipal financial reform. Public baths, small shops and other community-level facilities are also out of operation these days. Large vacant plots are here and there within communities and a very few number of people are seen along the streets. Asaka community is not an exception.

But a new initiative was born in Asaka to create a “community place to stay” in the midst of the settlement. The community obtained the city's approval for rent and re-use (community business) of a vacant public housing unit. BLL Asaka branch, welfare establishments in the area, a local human rights support association, and community development groups, assisted by Bangkok-based ACHR, financially contributed to the physical renovation. Last September, a community cafe “*cosmos*” was opened and has been managed by the community. It is now almost always full house with some 20-30 people, particularly elderly residents, who visit and gather every day.

Asaka community did a survey with support from Osaka City University for last three years. It was found that nearly half of the residents were aged 65 or older, most of whom were either single or old couple households,

living on small pension only. It is partly due to the concentration of low-rent public housing. Mr. Yoshihiko Yamamoto, Asaka community leader, says “This area is going back to slum situation day by day, if nothing done now. People tend to stay at home alone for the whole day. The first step is to have them come out to gather”.

The community cafe is open from 10 am to 5 pm every day except weekends. Two women community members, Akiko and Etsuko, volunteered to organize and arrange the cafe. “We want to help and do whatever we can, if for revitalizing our community!”. A morning set (toast, coffee and a boiled egg) is priced 250 yen and available until 2 pm. Noodles, assorted boiled vegetables, Japanese pan-cakes (*okonomiyaki*) are among the most popular items. During lunch time, the cafe is full of visitors. The two smiling women managers surely create family atmosphere and let visitors feel at home. Four months passing, Akiko says, “Older people used to isolate themselves, but gradually they became regular customers here”.

But the real intention of Yamamoto and the leadership goes beyond. When the government program for *buraku* improvement was massively going on, *rinpokan*, a settlement-based community center, was a place of integrating government support services and *buraku* liberation movement. Now that the central government ceased to finance special *buraku* programs and local authorities close down community facilities, *rinpokan* functions are rapidly disappearing in *buraku* communities. Yamamoto says, “We plan to occupy other vacant units, expand *cosmos* functions and add a “life support consultation” center. We cannot neglect lonely old citizens in our community. We want to revive a *rinpokan* of our own”. He is also mobilizing local welfare establishment for community-oriented business and the *cosmos* is expected to become a center of community revitalization.



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