



Social Transformations in India, Myanmar, and Thailand: Volume I

Social, Political and
Ecological Perspectives

Edited by
Chosein Yamahata · Donald M. Seekins ·
Makiko Takeda

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Editors

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To those who are working on transformations of all kinds to make societies freer, communities more prosperous and individuals more empowered: may your pursuit of just rights and good opportunities towards building an equal, stable and peaceful environment, particularly in India, Myanmar and Thailand, prevail and may it never cease.

Foreword By Paul W. Chambers

In early 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic suddenly and unexpectedly swept the global stage, demonstrating the speed in which society can face swift and unforeseen turmoil. In fact, the whirlwinds of change are rapidly transforming the world in which we live. The dynamics of globalisation have increasingly integrated populations, contributing to greater arenas of interaction and producing interlinked and successive transformations. Change is thus transnational in nature and rapid in effect, presenting both challenges and opportunities on a global scale because in some countries there has been more resistance to it while in others there has been greater acceptance. Issues where attempts at change have made their mark include frictions among ethnicities and religions, healthcare problems, climate change, disaster management, energy responsibility and preserving peace. While transformations often occur at the macro-level in terms of politics, economics and society, the micro-level—centring upon communities, groups and individuals—is often ignored.

The volume at hand endeavours to spotlight the latter—localities. It generally asks three questions: What factors initially motivated these social transformations? What continues to drive change forward? What has social transformation, if any, produced? The book focuses upon three different countries in the most populous continent—Asia. India, Myanmar and Thailand are three nations in Asia which are undergoing rapid societal change. Though they are not the only countries where change is afoot, they represent fascinating cases from Asia. In each of the three countries, marginalised people are confronted with enormous obstacles to political, economic and social advancement. These hindrances represent continuing impediments in equality, justice, security, empowerment, human rights, public health, the environment, development and freedom despite residing under a formal democratic system, apparent moves towards democratisation, and/or a seemingly robust economy. Though one would think that the state apparatus in all three countries would be addressing these issues, at the community level, state remedies have, in many cases, proven insufficient. As a result, there have been grassroots efforts and community initiatives, sometimes led by women and/or minorities—empowerment from below. These local endeavours have worked to build social and human capital in order to achieve positive social transformations at the community level, often

despite the inabilities or apathy of state officials who have tended to be less aware of or unsympathetic to local problems anyway.

Nevertheless, there are sharp distinctions among the cases of India, Myanmar and Thailand.

In terms of political space, India is the most democratic while authoritarianism is much more prevalent in Myanmar and Thailand. In addition, in terms of demographics, India is a much more diverse and populous country, with more sizeable numbers of separate ethnic and religious communities than Myanmar and Thailand. Finally, India possesses more structural inequalities than Myanmar or Thailand. As for Myanmar, it is the poorest of the three countries. Since 1962, Myanmar has been dominated by a hegemonic military though today military domination is concealed under a halfway democracy. In addition, the country possesses more ethnic groups than Thailand or India. Lastly, Myanmar infamously has the world's most and longest internal conflicts, repression of minority ethnicities and more human rights violations than the other two cases. Regarding Thailand, though it has long been seen as a stable tourist destination overseen by an internationalised liberal economy, the country also holds the record for the most military coups ever carried out. Indeed, though a frail military-dominated democracy was established in 2019, the authoritarian institutions of monarchy and military have continued to rule supreme across the country with any attempts at lasting democratisation lost in transition. Though Thailand's economy might be relatively buoyant at the macro-level, the country continues to suffer an extraordinarily high level of relative poverty.

The challenges which marginalised peoples continue to face in India, Myanmar and Thailand amount to a wholesale insecurity crisis. That is, some or all the seven dimensions of human security have proven to be deficient for many local people in these three countries. In 1994, the United Nations offered an initial definition of human security as "safety from chronic threats such as hunger, disease, and repression as well as protection from sudden and harmful disruptions in the patterns of daily life—whether in homes, jobs or communities." Human security shifted from being state-centric to people-centric, emphasising "freedom from fear," "freedom from want," and "freedom to live in dignity." Human security was comprised into seven dimensions: economic security, food security, health security, environmental security, personal security, community security and political security. All seven were considered essential for grassroots-driven efforts to alleviate local problems though achieving them would require effective social change. People-centred human security problems are finding some solutions in India, Myanmar and Thailand.

Beyond local empowerment and human security, this volume's areas of focus are (1) fairness, equality and freedom, (2) communicative participation and (3) livelihoods amidst social cohesion. The book persuasively argues that it is necessary to promote political participation at the community level to address problems in the periphery. The chapters within each of these three parts are quite diverse, from examining such subjects as plurilingualism and press freedom, environmental communication and educational as well as public health reform, and urban planning initiatives as well as efforts towards multicultural justice.

Finally, this book interestingly advocates the Academic Diplomacy Project, a method of scholarship in which collaboration between academics and non-academics contributes to problem-solving at local levels which assists in piecemeal efforts towards social transformation. Such diplomacy shifts the focus from state-level diplomacy to an enhanced dialogue among academia, civil society, the media, NGOs and local people.

Though there are many contemporary studies on transitional areas of the world, this work is remarkable most importantly because it prioritises communities and the local level—the peripheries of nations. Most other such books have highlighted the national level or the centres of societies. The book is also significant because the editors succeed in weaving together a plethora of human insecurity issues facing India, Myanmar and Thailand. Finally, the authors demonstrate that indeed there are often local solutions to local problems. Where solutions have not been achieved, the authors show that resolving the challenges are necessary now. The book is thus extremely useful in terms of illustrating a wide variety of issues hindering, witnessing and contributing to social transformation across time, space and context affecting both centres and peripheries situated in India, Myanmar and Thailand. Readers should come away from this book with a greater appreciation and understanding of marginalisation and how some communities in Asia have sought to confront it.

Phitsanulok, Thailand
August 2020

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Foreword By Shovan K. Saha

The editors of this book compile academic enquiry that can have a meaningful impact upon comprehending the challenges facing societal change and how to overcome these obstacles by calling to employ academic diplomacy built on four pillars: (1) “causative focus” on the root causes of socio-economic challenges; (2) “curative focus” on how to ameliorate root causes through bottom-up approaches that empower local communities; (3) “transformative focus” that aims to reconfigure societies and provide the foundation for lasting, sustainable change; and (4) “promotive focus” on wider structural changes. The Academic Diplomacy Project, the term coined by the editors, is proposed as a tool to empower society in general and each individual member of the community in particular through the dissemination of knowledge and information so as to bring in a community-driven collective struggle to preempt any sort of exploitation and exclusion and psychological violence thereby facilitating positive social transformation.

When members of a society collectively hope for hope of a change leading to improvement of any kind in their lives by adopting hitherto untried means and attitudes, it leads to social transformation. In a structurally divided society, the possibility of section or strata wise differential transformation contributes to sustenance of the society as such. Therefore, transformation of such a society in a holistic fashion may not occur according to known or expected pattern and pace. The intensity of desire for change in the existing situation and the ability to dominate collective opinion of the society therefore determine the character of transformation. Under the democratic process, based on its analysis around the world, four options are observed by Smootha and Hanf (1992): partition, ethnic democracy, consociational democracy and liberal democracy for resolving “deep internal ethnic conflicts.” In the Asian context, such an exercise needs to consider further complexities. In India the society is structurally divided in two ways, according to religious faith, mainly Hindus and Muslims constituting 80.4 percent and 13.4 percent of the population respectively (GoI 2011). And Hindus are divided according to four major occupations Brahman (priest), Kshatriya (warriors and kings), Vaisya (traders) and Shudra (service personnel). In terms of social hierarchy, Brahmins are on top followed by the other three in the order as above. Each of the four main castes got further subdivided into many subcastes associated with specific occupations. The sum result is a highly complex structurally

divided society where reaching a consensus or resolving a conflict are particularly challenging. The Japanese caste system following the Confucian logic and philosophy, have had Samurai (warriors) at the top, followed by farmers, artisans and merchants.

Transformation of a society, including structurally divided societies may occur according to their natural evolution or may be induced through persuasion as well as domination. Both have their own advantages and disadvantages. The all-pervading high sense of discipline of the Japanese society is easily credited to Japan's traditional social structure where the Samurai is on the top who are authorised to be ruthless and enforce behavioural changes on the society at large. In contrast, under prevailing circumstances the priests in India are permitted to bend inherited procedures to some extent to carry forward the fundamental rituals or events.

In the contemporary post-industrial era, transformation of societies including structurally divided ones are induced according to universal rule books: The National Constitutions, that consider ethnic or other kinds of discrimination illegal, thereby expecting members to protect their unique identity within themselves, families and homes and contribute to nation-building in the global world. Instances of members presently in an occupation with no link whatsoever with his inherited one, may be seen in Bali, Japan, India and elsewhere. Colonisation of some parts of Asia by the Europeans might have introduced the idea thereby promoting transformation of structurally divided societies.

However, the increasing number of violent conflicts across the globe is proof enough to believe failure of international, regional and most of the domestic agencies and leaderships in this regard.

In light of the above understanding, this book discusses the complex challenges of the subject with special reference to local issues, inclusiveness of difficulties, initiatives or innovations as well as possibilities from India, Myanmar and Thailand towards any possible positive change. Accordingly, different contributors through a varying means of engaged academic research focus on the challenges facing meaningful social and political transformation towards pluralistic societies in South and Southeast Asia. As a salient feature, the book portrays the struggles, roles, capacities and initiatives of the agents, the obstacles they face and how these challenges are addressed through academic enquiry essentially inspired by ground realities.

The aim of the book as stated in its opening chapter, is to bridge the gap between academia on the one hand and policymakers, practitioners and community builders-cum-advocates on the other by bringing contributions together written by a diverse set of authors both not only from academics but also community builders and local specialists based in Myanmar, Thailand, India and beyond. The book is an attempt to reflect the vital importance of having a meaningful collaboration among the academia, media, organisations and other non-state actors in order to document, disseminate, dissect and direct the sources and forces of transformation across three countries.

A total of 23 contributions are organised under three parts: "Fairness, Equality and Freedom," "Communication, Participation and Challenges" and "Livelihoods, Social Cohesion and Planning" covering topics of justice, peace, culture, minority

issues, press freedom, climate change, women's political participation and rights, social and human capital, borderlands, vulnerability reduction, ecological approach and social livelihood, ethno-religious conflict and human rights. Therefore, the book addresses an inspiring set of very topical issues as well as regional themes that should be of great interest to different readers keen to learn about how structural inequalities coexist with a vibrant democracy like India, how Myanmar's struggling democratic transition in dealing with the military which holds the sway in the wake of political liberalisation, peacebuilding and national reconciliation, and by understanding how three distinct sets of contending supporters of monarchy, military and democracy in Thailand are trying to achieve a steady-state in governance. In sum, the editors attempt to underscore the relevance of active participatory democracy to thwart all forms of socio-economic and ethno-cultural exploitation and persecution besides political exclusion across the three societies.

August 2020

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We extend our thankfulness to Professor Masami Umekawa, the former Director of the Centre for International Studies at AGU for his institutional support, and the staff of the Centre for International Program, who kindly provided logistics whenever needed.

Last, but not least, we express our deepest appreciation for all the contributors to the third book of the Academic Diplomacy Project (ADP) in extending its concept, applying its functions and generating impacts to reach any possible corners of different localities.

October 2020

Chosein Yamahata
Donald M. Seekins
Makiko Takeda

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Part I
Fairness, Equality and Freedom

Chapter 1

Forces of Change: Transformation from the Lens of Academic Diplomacy



Chosein Yamahata

An Unequal World

Developing countries across different regions are being confronted by common challenges such as economic disparity, social injustice, environmental degradation, and natural disasters while some of these countries have severe ‘trap-like’ situations of poverty, drought, violent conflict, hunger, health crisis, and state fragility. According to the UNDP, the countries are categorised into four levels: very high human development, high human development, medium human development, and low human development. The annual human development reports offer comparative outlooks on four dimensions of poverty: income, human capacity, freedom, and equality.

Since poverty is a constant and pressing danger that threatens the economic lives, social livelihoods, political stability and development relations of a country, the global governance, humanitarian assistance, and international cooperation matter more than ever (Knight 2017, p. 139). What is equally important domestically for each country under such circumstances is a state’s ability in developing, managing, and sustaining its scarce resources—natural, economic, and human—to meet the needs of individuals and communities in a sustainable manner.

Todaro and Smith (2017) provide an explanation about a great deal of diversity of development problems existing throughout the developing world, and calls for different specific policy responses and subsequent development strategies. Accordingly, the common development phenomenon of the developing world consists of 10 major areas, known as the ‘diversity within commonality’—(1) lower level of living and productivity, (2) lower levels of human capital, (3) higher levels of inequality and absolute poverty, (4) higher population growth rates, (5) greater social fractionalisation, (6) larger rural populations but rapid rural-to-urban migration, (7) lower levels

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of industrialisation and manufactured exports, (8) adverse geography, (9) underdeveloped markets, and (10) lingering colonial impacts and unequal international relations. Regarding the differences, Todaro identifies eight major areas between the developed and the developing worlds, specifically (1) physical and human resource endowments, (2) per capita incomes and levels of GDP in relation to the rest of the world, (3) climate, (4) population size, distribution, and growth, (5) historical role of international migration, (6) international trade benefits, (7) basic scientific and technological research and development capabilities, and (8) efficacy of domestic institutions (pp. 57–74).

However, the position of the developing countries is significantly different from their developed counterparts in their earlier stages of economic development. The world's nations are far from equal in their capacity to change living conditions inside as well as outside their own borders. The economically, technologically, and militarily most powerful countries—the US, Japan, Canada, Australia, EU countries, Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan, Russia, and China—have the ability to make a difference in the societies of less developed countries through foreign aid, trade, private investment, and international relations. Their political will, collective goals, policy approaches, and the implementation of such approaches matter in enabling a much needed positive change to take shape in their own countries as well as beyond their borders. As such, it is crucial for each developing country to know, based on its resource constraints, which direction it should be heading to. What are the choices available and what kinds of new options should be created? How can all plans and priorities be achieved through diverse trade-offs? Who are the prime beneficiaries in the process as well as in the end? While the ready-made answers are not yet available for all developing countries, a sure path to invest towards a better future is developing and multiplying human resources as it is the commonality among all differences of the developing world. For realising such a goal, it is crucial for every government and its system to nurture and expand human capital, among three capitals, towards social change and harmony, human well-being, and national development through every measure and policy.

The policies and actual programmes on ground must be focused on increasing access, promoting equal rights, widening opportunities, building capacities, diversifying entitlements, guaranteeing basic freedoms, and raising dignity to empower and facilitate every member of society towards fulfilling their maximum entitlement. Development in its broadest terms defines it as 'improving the society' which comprises people (individuals) under varying identities, beliefs, colours, races, ethnicities, and backgrounds in the formation of groups or communities. Therefore, development in the society implies enabling people to achieve their aspirations through a continuous process of change making them take control of their own decisions and destinies to maximise their full potential—that is building each invaluable capacity strengthened by confidence, knowledge, healthiness, skills, assets and most importantly, freedoms. Such able human resources are the human capital of a country in which building it requires democratic process, political willingness, facilitation measures, and international cooperation (Clark 1991, p. 26).

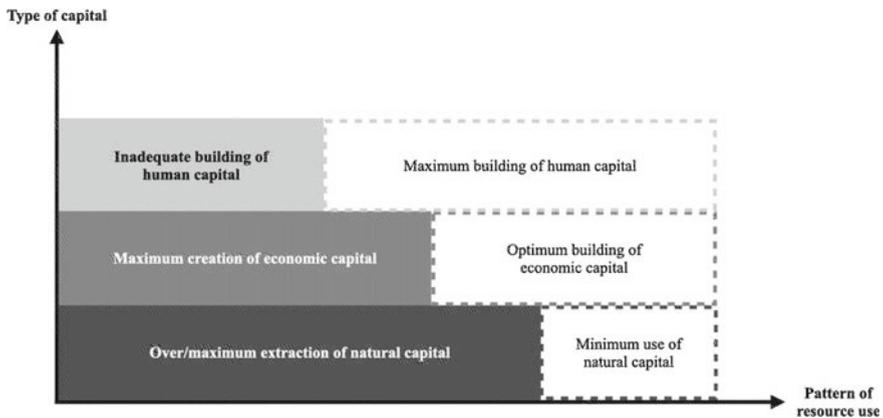


Fig. 1.1 Pattern of sustainable resource use for the future

It calls for a transformation of resource use as a common principle to be integrated in development policy and planning at each decision-making layer and mechanism of governments. The degree of success in formulating major policies to deliver its intended target of multiplying human capital among populations can be assured by the political will as well as setting common priorities on the widening of the provision of human rights (accessibility and basic/equal rights), the application of human development framework (capacity formation, entitlement, and opportunity), and the promotion of the guaranteeing measures for human security (guarantee, dignity, and civic freedoms) as the composite enabling mechanism.

Against this light, each developing country shall put urgency and priority on the maximising of feasible choices to build its human capital, out of its principal assets—natural resources (renewal and non-renewable resources), economic resources, and human resources, in narrowing the equality gap towards empowering and improving a society (Fig. 1.1).

Challenges in India, Myanmar and Thailand

The issues that hinder social transformations toward democracy and development in the Global South are considered in this book through a set of questions. What are the implications, which might affect some parts of this globalising world’s more urbanising nations, and for the lives of the majority of people and communities? How can we avert or prevent major difficult situations affecting many lives? Has history already taught us not to make situations of ‘humanity in crisis’ in the world’s developing regions? What are the both common and salient features in the selected case countries? What are the major root causes that influence agents of change? How do environmental factors play roles in any societal impacts in positive terms? How are

the roles of the knowledge sector and citizens’ sector interacting in the community as a platform to strengthen towards those positive changes? With such curiosity in the background, the chapters in this book focus on the forces of change necessary towards addressing the wider issues and interests of Asian developing countries, namely India, Myanmar, and Thailand.

Figure 1.2 illustrates a comparative outlook of India, Myanmar, and Thailand from the dimension of peace and stability by using the most recently available aggregate data on institutional strength, effect of rule of law, socio-political integration in the society, as well as the absence of violence in each case. All countries show a common phenomenon depicting a similarity for the presence of violence with political instability. Meanwhile, each country has varying degrees in terms of political and social integration, the effective role of the rule of law, and the strong democratic institutions. Myanmar can be understood through the interpretations from these indicators as a society with more divisions, with the least level of the rule of law while also facing challenges in building democratic institutions. On the other hand, the degree

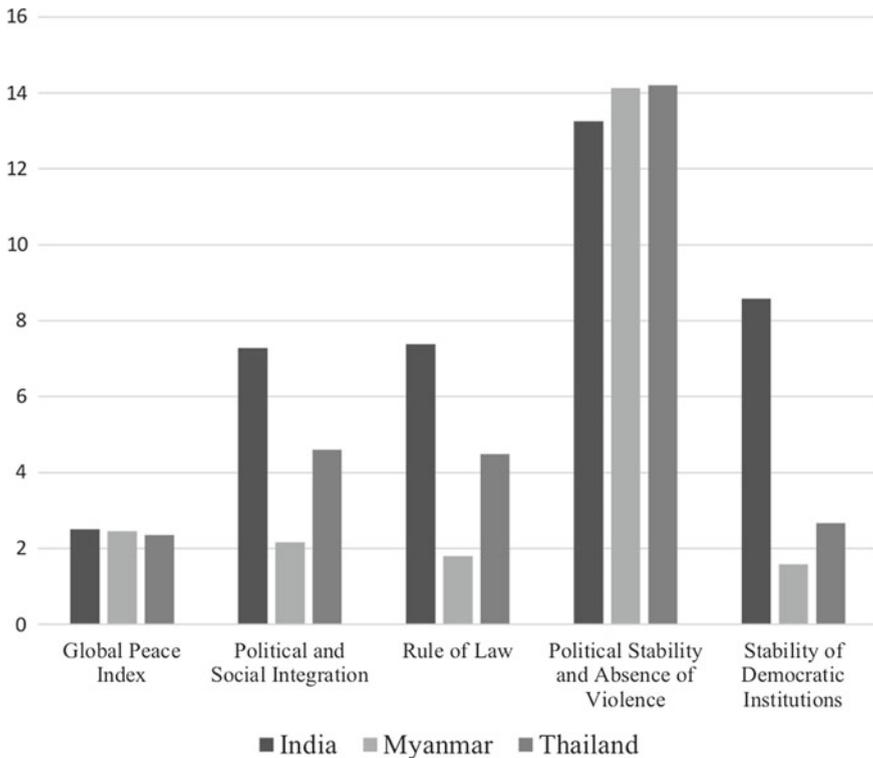


Fig. 1.2 Overview of political and social integration, stability, and strength of institutions in India, Myanmar, and Thailand (Source World Governance Indicators [2008–2018], <https://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/>; Bertelsmann Transformation Index [2008–2018]; Institute for Economics and Peace Global Peace Index [2008–2018])