The History of the Burakumin

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Burakumin (部落民) refers to a minority group in Japan. The word literally means "village or hamlet people", and they have been traditionally doing jobs such as slaughterer or tanner. Slaughter of animals is considered to be an impure act in both Buddhist and Shinto beliefs, therefore the burakumin have been viewed as being impure. Throughout their history they have been discriminated and treated as lower class people in Japan. It is important to note that the burakumin are not an ethnic minority, and that their discrimination is solely based on their outcast status.

This essay is focusing on the modern history of the buraku, but a few words should be said about the ancient history. There are historical records about social outcasts in Japanese society already in 12th century, and during that time all of these people were categorized as slaves. In the medieval period of Japan (1185-1600) the outcast groups were being categorized in several ways depending on their occupation, the place where they lived, or their appearance. For example 'eta' (穢多, literally "impure group") were people who worked as slaughters and tanners, jobs that were thought to be impure whereas 'hinin' (非人, literally "non-human") were in general considered to be impure.

In Tokugawa era (1600-1868) laws regarding the outcast groups were given. These laws stated that the outcast group members can only get married amongst each other, they can only live in designated ghettos, they had to do certain jobs and they cannot interact freely with common people. They were also proscribed to wear certain clothes, e.g. they had to wear straw ropes or cords as belts since they were prohibited from wearing sashes and belts. At some point the buraku were not even considered to be humans and thus left out of the national consensus. In the beginning of Meiji era (1868-1912) the emancipation act dropped the word eta from the official records. However, the commoners got angry about this because they did not want burakumin be on the same level as they were in the society. They did not want to have any contact with the burakumin, so the discrimination got again worse than before.

The burakumin started to demand their rights as equal members in Japanese society in the 19th century. In 1922 the official buraku liberation movement called Suiheisha (水平社) was created in Kyoto. This group had strong ties with leftist and communist groups. If a person who belonged to buraku
community faced discrimination, the *Suiheisha* would organize marches to the place where the offense had happened. When they appeared they would demand a public apology by the offender. Usually this apology was done by printing leaflets and put them in public places or pay for an ad in a newspaper. There were even cases in which the *Suiheisha* members fought with right-wing nationalists, since these nationalists wanted the *burakumin* to remain as outcasts.

During the Second World War changes in politics were impossible, but after the war a new liberation party, the National Committee for Burakumin Liberation, was formed, and this party continued its work through 50s and 60s. Especially in the 1960s Japan's economic growth was stable and this prosperity also stabilized the society. The *buraku* saw their opportunity and fiercely called for their rights. In 1969 some actual changes in the legislation were made. The new law called the Special Measures Law for the Assimilation Projects raised the financial aid given by the government to make renovations in the *burakumin* communities and to help the poorer families. Many people of the *burakumin* group found better jobs and moved out of the ghettos. But even these new laws could not dispose entirely the negative stigma on the *burakumin* and as the economy declined in the 1990s, *burakumin* were again falling to the lowest level of society. As for the Special Measures Law in Japan, it has not been renewed since March 2002. But on a prefectural and local level, policies that benefit *buraku* people, still exist.

Despite the fact that many laws and edicts state that the *buraku* are equal members of the society, the reality in many aspects remains unchanged. Various sources give different estimations of how many of them live in Japan nowadays, but there are at least more than two million *buraku*. Even though the discrimination is not easily detectable, it exists, and the *burakumin* have difficulties getting good education and employment. Even if the *buraku* children are catching up with other Japanese children education-wise, they may not be as successful. Compared to the Japanese, not many of the *burakumin* go to college. Those who get better education and jobs usually move out of the *buraku* areas. In an attempt to assimilate with the Japanese, they end up keeping quiet about their background. The *buraku* issue has also become something that the Japanese don't really talk about. There are young Japanese people who don't know about the *burakumin* and their past discrimination. Even the *buraku* people have been affected by this as well. Many of them don’t even know that they are *buraku*, and face this fact when they are about to get married or find a job. Japanese people often check their future spouse’s lineage, and there have been cases where the engagement has been cancelled because the other person is *buraku*. 
When it comes to terms of employment, injustice still exists. One example are the burakumin who work at nuclear plants. They are not hired full-time, yet might work also as much as a regular employee on various plants. However, they don’t have the benefits that the full-time employees have. They also might end up doing more dangerous tasks than other nuclear plant workers.

In 2001 a highly ranked politician Hiromu Nonaka could have become the new prime minister of Japan. He had even supporters amongst the Liberal Democratic Party. However, because of his buraku background he decided not to aim for this position since it might hurt the burakumin and his family. There were also party members, including future prime minister Taro Aso, who were strictly against a prime minister of buraku origin.

However, discrimination and unfair treatment are not the only issues faced by the burakumin. Other issues in the buraku community include low income in families, unemployment, alcoholism and crime. In the past, compared to their commoner counterparts, young burakumin were more likely involved in some criminal activity. In fact, a lot of burakumin are still involved in organized crime syndicates called Yakuza. Along with ethnic Koreans, the burakumin make up more than three-quarters of the biggest Yakuza group, the Yamaguchi Gumi.

The buraku is not the only outcast group in Asia. In many Asian countries butchering is thought to be impure, which is probably because of the strong influence of Buddhism. For example in Korea there is a very similar group to the buraku called paekchong. Like buraku these people were also doing jobs considered to be impure and thus treated badly. Another example is the Tibetan minority group called rgyagpa, who are also working as slaughters and despised by the majority population.

**Literature**


