

Buraku Discrimination and I

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I was born during World War II, in 1943, in a rural region of Fukuoka Prefecture that consisted of 40 villages. In the village, there were about ten people who obtained land by the emancipation of farming land during the postwar days, but they were only able to have a small bit of land for agricultural purposes. The life of the people in the village who had been repatriated from the former colony had especially become poor. My home consisted of about 12 tans of cropland that my grandfather who was comparatively affluent, farmed. The liberation movement had not been organized well enough in my village during that time.

I realized in the fifth grade that I was an outcast and discriminated against through various scenes in my daily life. I found that the name written on our mailing address was different from the one we usually used. I wondered why, so I asked my father, he replied, “You don’t need to know.” I felt so sorry for him that he had to cover his Buraku identity unwillingly to escape Buraku discrimination from what he had said to me. Even today, people residing around a Buraku community

resist over the pressure in renaming their town to the name of the nearby Buraku community.

Moreover, discrimination in marriage was practiced from village to village. Marriage outside the village was not possible. Discrimination in marriage is a serious problem even now. My relative's younger son's marriage was canceled due to Buraku discrimination in 2001. Many of the bride's relatives opposed their marriage so vehemently because he was from a Buraku community.

Other forms of discrimination were seen as well. My grandfather was an adopted son from outside the village in another prefecture and my grandfather's younger sister sometimes came to play. One day the younger sister's husband asked my father, "Is Yotsu still here?" I was just a school child and I did not understand the word "Yotsu" but I understood the chilling tension in the air left by my granduncle's question. I asked, "What does 'Yotsu' mean?" but my father just said, "It is unrelated to us". As for the word "Yotsu", the meaning is originally used as a numeral word, four, but my granduncle used it as a discriminatory word meaning Buraku people who had been made to dispose of dead cows and horses. So the word "Yotsu" is used as an expression for people who handle the disposal of four-legged animals.

Though they were humiliated, my father and the other adults could not avoid such discriminatory questions. That behavior was etched in my mind, and I had learnt this was a serious problem that I should not mention, so I thought.

I experienced prejudice from classmates in junior high school. One classmate had said, "All people named Kumisaka seem to have ancestors who came from the Korean peninsula, don't they?" Korean-Japanese also suffer discrimination in Japanese society. A fellow classmate was taught by his father that it was because our ancestors came from Korea that we were discriminated against. I did not have any suspicion that my ancestors came from Korea, so I went home and asked my father about it. He denied strongly "that we were of Korean descent". It was

clear that my father was aware of distinguishing between himself and Koreans. At that time, father and I also were made to believe that Koreans and us, Japanese, were not the same. The attitude was the same as those Japanese who discriminated against us.

We did not realize the crafty trap of discrimination that prevents people discriminated-against from forming solidarity. Society and the government, whether intentionally or unintentionally, create a split among the discriminated-against groups in order to perpetuate the existing structure of the society and to keep dominance over the discriminated-against. In turn, the discriminated-against, do not realize this crafty trap, and they discriminate-against one another. It is sad.

Another experience that had a big impact on my mind occurred in the twelfth grade of high school. I had a girlfriend at that time and her friend, who was living outside of Buraku community near my community, asked her, “Are you sure your relationship with him is on the understanding that he is from Buraku?” When I heard of this I shivered in disbelief. I had believed that Japan had changed into a society of democracy under the Constitution and I had no doubt that freedom and equality among human beings had spread throughout Japanese society, so I was very surprised and angered when I heard this.

The increase in discrimination had made me feel the need to go to a place without discrimination against outcast people. When I entered university in Tokyo, far from my hometown, I had a slight expectation that in a big, modern city that there would not be any discrimination against outcast people. However, my hopes of such a place were quashed when I had to register as coming from a Buraku community. Such registers were submitted to large enterprises for employment purposes at that time. Although these registers were not clearly labeled as such, we were clearly labeled on these registers from family names and because of this it was impossible to escape discrimination.

The register has been protested against since the “Suiheisha” (the National Levelers Association; the predecessor of Buraku Liberation

League (BLL) was founded by Buraku people in 1922 to realize a society without discrimination.) was formed but the description to still understand an old position at the feudal period remains in this register. Surprisingly, the register was freely viewed. It was in 1968 that BLL won the struggle to prohibit viewing of the register completely.

These events that I have mentioned above are my own personal experiences. Even though they happened in the past it is still possible, even today, for Buraku people to experience such acts. For instance, 10 years ago, my oldest daughter who was a junior high school student told me that she wanted to change the family name. In my hometown the family name of Kumisaka can be easily recognized as a Buraku family name. I had requested the same thing to my father 40 years ago to escape from the discrimination against Buraku people. I think she had experienced some uncomfortable and awkward situations due to our family name.

It was discovered in 2001 that a real estate agency, which has branch offices in a number of prefectures, had asked Ogori City Hall the whereabouts of Buraku communities. The real estate agency tends to avoid dealing with real estate properties in Buraku communities, or to sell them cheaper once they know that those properties are in Buraku communities.

A lot of similar incidents are reported. Real estate in Buraku communities is taxed as much as that of communities outside of Buraku communities, though the former is relatively undervalued compared to the latter. It can be said that the real estate industry condones or promotes the existence of the Buraku discrimination.

In addition, it was discovered in 1998 that private detective agencies in Osaka had contracts with around 3000 private companies. They had conducted investigations into the background of job applicants to find out if they were from Buraku areas. They investigated into a wide range of background information including the individual's family background, their thoughts and beliefs, their region, ethnic origin and

many other things. This large-scale discriminatory background investigation became a big social issue. However, this incident has proven that the system that pushes Buraku to the bottom of society still continues to operate.

Today a large amount of discriminatory information circulates through the Internet before our eyes. A book of Buraku communities called "Buraku Lists" was circulated on the net. The "Buraku Lists" was first made public in 1975. More than 200 companies in Japan bought it to investigate if job applicants were from Buraku areas. Cases were reported that individuals would buy the book for the purpose of marriage investigations. It was said that the information would remain in the hands of private detective agencies but such information spread instantaneously to many through the Internet, and it is copied easily now. With the popularity of electronic communication devices, discriminatory messages such as attacks on Buraku people, community, and association in the form of humiliating remarks and derogatory terms has spread. The Internet, with the progression of information technology, should be used to increase the expansion of important anti-discriminatory messages instead.

I reported on my experience and today's situation of Buraku discrimination; however, to our regret, there is no legal system to prohibit this discrimination in Japan. The Law on Special Measures for Dowa Projects of putting an end to Buraku discrimination expired at the end of March 2002. The government has not indicated its intention to renew the law after its expiration. The government denied the need to conduct a survey to assess the actual conditions of Buraku communities. The government is also indifferent regarding the ratification of ILO, convention and the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination article on the prohibition of discrimination has been delayed. Furthermore, the Commission on Human Rights installation along the guidelines of the government is being planned. One aspect is what role the government should play in

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the security of various human rights. The bill including the establishment of a Human Rights Commission is under deliberation in the Diet now, and in addition, Buraku Liberation League is requesting establishment of an effective Human Rights Commission that secures the participation of the persons discriminated against and which is independent from the government and in conformity with the UN Paris principles.

(English text prepared by Natsuko Okuda)