

Lessons from the *Buraku* Liberation Movement

***Buraku* Discrimination**

Burakumin (people living in disdained communities) are the biggest minority group in Japan. There are approximately 1.2 million *Burakumin*, who live in about 4,000 communities nationwide. *Burakumin* are a Japanese historical minority group. *Buraku* discrimination is a longstanding form of discrimination within Japanese society (as indigenous Japanese). The *Burakumin* claimed to have descended from various kinds of humble peoples in Japan's feudal era. In 1871, the new modern state abolished the feudal status system, and at the same time, reorganized the former humble peoples into a new category of *Shin-Heimin* (new commoner), later called *Burakumin*, who have faced severe discrimination throughout the modern era. The *Ippanmin* (dominant people as non-*Burakumin*) have never forgotten *Burakumin* roots, and discrimination against *Burakumin* has not disappeared. Many forms of discrimination exist, including anonymous graffiti and flyers with derisive language, excluding *Burakumin* from a range of activities: daily association, employment, marital relationships, and so on. *Burakumin* are Japanese and as a result are an invisible minority group. Many *Burakumin* try to live as *Ippanmin* concealing the identity of *Burakumin*. Revealing who is *Burakumin* among Japanese people includes asking *Ippanmin* if any neighbor is *Burakumin*, investigating a *Burakumin* identity using a detective agency, illegally obtaining a transcript of a *Burakumin* family register, searching for the location of *Buraku* communities on the Internet, and so on. In this way, In this way *Burakumin* are made visible and social discrimination occurs. Moreover, structural discrimination against *Burakumin* also exists. Many *Burakumin* live in a generational and inter-generational cycle of poverty: they are deprived of decent jobs due to employment discrimination; they work for low wages, and live in poverty because of low incomes. As a result, many children of *Burakumin* are unable to attend better schools. They also begin to work at low-waged jobs under poor working conditions and live in persistent poverty.

***Buraku* Liberation Movement**

The *Burakumin* have struggled against such discrimination and with the goal of self-

liberation in a longstanding liberation movement. The history of this movement is the history of ideological controversies over how to understand discrimination against *Burakumin*, how to struggle against discrimination and how to struggle against national and local governments which have neglected to resolve the problem of discrimination against *Burakumin*. This essay summarizes the history of the *Buraku* Liberation Movement and its controversies in three stages, and confirms the theoretical lessons important for today's *Buraku* Liberation Movement.

The First Stage: Discrimination Denounced Struggle

In the modern era, through the category of *Shin-Heimin* or *Burakumin* discrimination persisted. From late 1910's to the 1920's, Japan was in economic crisis, and many urban poor rioted across the country to protest the increase in the price of rice. The ideas of the Russian Revolution of 1917 were transmitted to Japan as laborer and farmer movements increased. Inspired by this militant social atmosphere, *Burakumin* openly expressed their anger at systematic discrimination. In 1922, *Burakumin* launched an association named the All Japan Levelers Association. It was the first nationwide movement group through which *Burakumin* challenged a discriminatory society. Through the All Japan Levelers Association, *Burakumin* expressed their anger against those who discriminated against them and denounced both individuals and the administrative organizations which neglected to eliminate discrimination. While the *Burakumin* denunciation of discrimination caught the attention of prejudiced *Ippanmin*, these struggles against discrimination were suppressed by the police, and many activists were arrested.

Shortly after the All Japan Levelers Association was launched, a controversy occurred over the purpose and policies of the *Buraku* Liberation Movement between anarchists criticizing socialist's orientation toward socialist state power and socialists from the Japanese Communist Party (Bolshevik). On one hand, the anarchists claimed that the *Buraku* Liberation Movement was a unique struggle to address discrimination against *Burakumin*, whose central purpose was to impeach the individuals discriminating against *Burakumin* and consequently correct their inhuman treatment of *Burakumin*. They further claimed that it was different from the workers' class struggle although *Burakumin* might be united with workers, because the *Burakumin* status emerged not from class but from feudal social status and that the discrimination against *Burakumin* might not be resolved, even by socialism, without the workers dispelling their own prejudice against *Burakumin*. Consequently, they were skeptical of socialism.

By contrast, the socialists claimed that it was important for the *Buraku* Liberation Movement to not only impeach the individuals discriminating against *Burakumin*, but also

to revolutionize society producing the discrimination against *Burakumin*. Further, that discrimination against *Burakumin* might be perfectly resolved only in a socialist society and therefore that the *Buraku* Liberation Movement would have to be dissolved into workers' class struggle, because the socialist revolution had to be the supreme purpose of all peoples' struggles. In this way they prioritized the workers' class struggle rather than the *Buraku* Liberation Movement. The All Japan Levelers Association was thus in danger of division; however, as soon as Japan entered World War II, the *Buraku* Liberation Movement was suppressed by the military government and eventually destroyed.

The Second Stage: Government Struggle

Japan lost the war, the fascist regime collapsed, and the era of democratization began. In 1955, *Burakumin* organized the *Buraku* Liberation League and resumed their struggle against discrimination. The central idea at that time was that rather than being rooted in the feudal status system, the *Ippanmin* prejudice against *Burakumin* might be more likely to occur because *Ippanmin* disdain the poor living environments within *Buraku* communities. However, the poor living environments were the result of discrimination against *Buraku*, and eliminating discrimination against *Burakumin* was the government's responsibility. On this basis, the *Buraku* Liberation League pressured the government and demanded the improvement of the poor living conditions of *Buraku* communities. In 1965, the national government acknowledged that it was responsible for resolving discrimination against *Burakumin* and improving their living situation. By 1969, the government implemented special measures to that end, and was the first nationwide government's policy to address this minority group's suffering from discrimination in Japan.

At that time, however, a controversy also occurred within the *Buraku* Liberation League over the government's special measures. Those who actively monitored these special measures claimed that improvement of the living conditions in *Buraku* communities was vital for resolving the discrimination against them. Pursuing the government to uphold their responsibility thus meant co-opting the struggle against a government which had effectively enabled discrimination against *Burakumin*. In contrast, some in the Japanese Communist Party claimed that the government's special measures were just like a poison pill to undermine *Burakumin* anger at the government, thereby consolidating with the government and moderating the *Buraku* Liberation Movement. Instead, the *Buraku* Liberation Movement should join the workers' class struggle rather than supporting the government's special measures.

In the background of this controversy were the pre-war debates among anarchists and socialists. Anarchists claimed that the *Buraku* Liberation Movement was a unique

struggle whose only purpose was eliminating discrimination against *Burakumin*. Conversely, socialists claimed that the *Buraku* Liberation Movement was part of the workers' class struggle. In 1970, the *Buraku* Liberation League split into two parties, with those from the Japanese Communist Party forming a separate organization. These two organizations, the *Buraku* Liberation League and the National Federation of *Buraku* Liberation Movement, have since coexisted. The latter gradually regarded the *Buraku* Liberation Movement as breaking up the workers' class struggle, often denying the *Buraku* Liberation Movement, obstructing it, as the two organizations exhibit a fierce hostile relationship.

The Third Stage: Diffusion of the *Buraku* Liberation Movement

In 2002, the government ended the programs for *Burakumin*, thinking that the purpose of special measures to improve the poor living environments of *Buraku* communities had been nearly achieved. Since then the *Buraku* Liberation Movement, which had placed the struggle against government as its central policy, has grown smaller and has retreated. Moreover, the 35-year course of special measures gave rise to a hierarchical differentiation among those *Burakumin* who took advantage of the measures and those who did not. In the neoliberal economic environment, the *Burakumin* occupations were diversified, *Buraku* communities were transformed. As a result, *Burakumin* identity was diffused. Those conditions have become a major obstacle to *Burakumin* unification.

In this context, a controversy over movement policy occurred within the *Buraku* Liberation League. Its central headquarters agreed with the government's termination of special measures and claimed that the *Buraku* Liberation Movement had entered a new phase. Given this, the movement would need to create new policy initiatives based on the existing context, which included the transformation of *Buraku* communities and the diffusion of *Burakumin* identity. Improving the poor living environments of *Buraku* communities could be implemented through general measures to improve all Japanese citizens. Behind these moves was the idea that discrimination against *Burakumin* occurred because of *Ippanmin* prejudice against *Burakumin* rather than any government failure to eliminate discrimination against *Burakumin*.

The *Buraku* Liberation League therefore claimed that it was important for the *Buraku* Liberation Movement to struggle in cooperation with the other minorities whose survival was threatened by discrimination and the violation of their human rights. However, the struggle against *Buraku* discrimination was buried in efforts to address various other human rights issues and thus almost disappeared from the government's human rights policy.

Yet, several branch organizations of the *Buraku* Liberation League insisted that it would be difficult to eliminate discrimination against *Burakumin* through general measures, because discrimination against *Burakumin* had unique origins when compared to various forms of discrimination in Japan. Special measures would still therefore be needed to eliminate discrimination against *Burakumin*. The *Buraku* Liberation League would have to continue to pressure the government about their responsibility in this context. Indeed, the need to pressure the government about their responsibility might be increasing, because the *Burakumin* living conditions were increasingly deteriorating due to the government's neoliberal economic policies.

Lessons from *Buraku* Liberation Movement

The *Buraku* Liberation Movement has changed from its pre-war and post-war phases to its present form. Three theoretical debates can be derived from its history. The first is about understanding the reason for discrimination against *Burakumin*, which some people believe is a remnant of their feudal social status. If this is true, it would be enough for the *Buraku* Liberation Movement to change the perceptions of prejudicial *Ippanmin*. Other people believe that discrimination against *Burakumin* was created by the modern state. If this is true, the *Buraku* Liberation Movement would have to criticize state power and change the modern cultural and social structures that constantly urges *Ippanmin* to hold prejudices against *Burakumin*.

The second theoretical issue is about the relationship between the *Buraku* Liberation Movement and state power. Some people argue that the prejudice of *Ippanmin* plays a more important role in producing discrimination against *Burakumin* than the government's negligence. Others believe that both discrimination against *Burakumin* and poor *Burakumin* living conditions are the result of the government failure to eliminate discrimination against *Burakumin*. In the latter case, the *Buraku* Liberation Movement must pursue the governmental to fulfill its responsibilities. The third theoretical issue concerns the relationship between the *Buraku* Liberation Movement and socialism. Some people believe that the *Buraku* Liberation Movement is essentially a unique self-sustaining movement aimed at eliminating discrimination against *Burakumin* and that discrimination against *Burakumin* can be fully eliminated in a modern society. They therefore believe that the *Buraku* Liberation Movement must be independent from and can never be absorbed into the workers' class struggle. Others, however, believe that discrimination against *Burakumin* cannot be eliminated in a modern capitalist society. They believe that the *Buraku* Liberation Movement should unite with the workers' class struggle aimed at realizing a socialist state and society.

These controversies pose important lessons for today's *Buraku* Liberation Movement. In my opinion, the essence of the theoretical problems lies in the following: discrimination against *Burakumin* was created by the modern state of Japan. In other words, the modern state needed discrimination against *Burakumin* due to new national political integration. Thus, a conclusion can be drawn from these points: *Buraku* liberation cannot be achieved under the modern state. To liberate *Burakumin* from discrimination, the *Buraku* Liberation Movement has to struggle against the modern state. Here the problem of socialism inevitably emerges. However, it does not mean that the *Buraku* Liberation Movement may be dissolved in the workers' struggle for socialism. It must join the people's movements to change society while maintaining its uniqueness.

In this way, the *Buraku* Liberation Movement has raised basic questions about discrimination, the modern state, liberation of minority and socialism. It will provide important lessons when considering other minority's movements both in Japan and around the world. While there are many theories of social movements (collective choice theory, resource mobilization theory, new social movement theory, political opportunity theory, framing theory, and so on). I am not sure to what extent they are effectively address essential theoretical problems such as the relationship between social movements and the modern state/society and socialism.