

A Brief History of Buraku Discrimination in Japan

By Tim Boyle

Buraku Liberation Center, United Church of Christ in Japan

Osaka, Japan

As with any aspect of human culture developing over a long period of time, Buraku discrimination is not something that can be comprehensively described in a short essay. It is a subject that is difficult to explain in terms easily understood by people outside the culture. Nevertheless, I will attempt to give an overview of how this insidious form of discrimination developed in Japanese culture and why it has been so difficult to eradicate. I will be basing most of my observations on a textbook (“Korede Wakatta! Buraku no Rekishi” – “Now I Understand It! Buraku History”) written by Uesugi Satoshi, a lecturer at Kansai University in Ōsaka, Japan, while adding a few points I have gleaned from other sources and from my own observations. While the detailed factors that conspired together to create the monster of buraku discrimination in each area differ considerably, the basic principles are common to all, and since this is to be a general overview, I will focus on the broad strokes and delve into local details only as they illuminate these broad strokes.

Sense of Defilement: The Underlying Rationale

A key concept in understanding any such form of religiously-sanctioned class discrimination is that of “defilement.” What is it that makes something or someone “defiled” and “unclean?” The basic concept is that something is “defiled” when it is out of its “proper” place in society. This is, of course, related to the basic worldview that was common to almost all ancient societies – namely that the natural order of nature and its relation to human society are controlled by events in the realm of the gods and by the whims of the gods. Thus, placating these gods through magical incantations and ceremonies, together with “purifying” whatever is thought to be defiled, was of paramount importance in maintaining a stable society.

As this animistic worldview was the basis for understanding everything within society, before applying its implications to the issue of buraku discrimination, let’s first get a clearer understanding of its operation in ancient Japanese society. As a window to this way of understanding the world, let’s look at two common Japanese words that give us insight into this ancient mindset. “Tenki” (天気), weather, is made up of two characters, “ten” (天), “heavens,” and “ki” (気), “feelings.” Thus, the concept is that the weather is the result of the “feelings” of the “gods.” If the deity or deities involved were angry about something, violent or otherwise unfavorable weather would result, and this had to be dealt with by the religious authorities. Shintō priests are referred to as “kannushi” (神主), literally, the “lord (主) of the gods (神)” – namely, the one who can placate (control) the gods through prescribed rituals and magical incantations. Thus, removing whatever was perceived to be offensive to the

gods was given utmost importance in ancient society, and this was the underlying rationale for ostracism and its resultant discrimination.

So, let's consider what it was in ancient Japanese society that was thought of as "kegare" (defiled). Actually, it was pretty much the same as in essentially all other ancient societies, including that of ancient Israel, as is portrayed in Leviticus and certain other sections of the Old Testament. Things having to do with death and blood were considered "defiled." Even such a joyous event as the birth of a child fits into this category, since it involved blood, and thus that too had to be "purified." Interestingly, the Japanese word for a wound, "kega" (怪我), is related to "kegare," but it is written in an entirely different way from what it is in Chinese, from which most such Japanese words are borrowed. (In Chinese, it is written, 受傷, "to receive an injury or mar." The Chinese character for "kegare" is 穢, but as it is now has such pejorative connotations, its use is usually avoided, and the word is simply written in the phonetic "kana" ケガレ.) The implication of this is that this concept predates the introduction of the Chinese writing system into Japan, and so has probably existed from when humans first began populating these islands. (The characters used were simply chosen to match the pronunciation of the already existing word, with little relevance to their actual meaning, which in this case is "strange self.") As this concept is critical in understanding buraku discrimination, I will return to it later, but first, let's set the historical stage.

The Vicious Cycle Sets In

While the roots of discrimination date from early human history, the particular form we see in buraku discrimination had its beginnings in Kyōto from around the 10th century AD. Kyōto was the center of power and culture in those days, and as society developed, the gap between those with wealth and power and those without widened. Those who could not pay the high taxes that supported the noble class were ostracized and forced to live in undesirable areas, such as in river flood plains. It was the fear of such ostracism, then, that encouraged the rest to endure the high taxes. Much like day laborers in modern Japan, those who were marginalized ended up doing the "3-D" jobs (dirty, difficult and dangerous) that society needed done but which nobody wanted to do.

One such job was the disposing of dead bodies — a particularly "defiling" task. (And in the context of that ancient worldview, there was thus a second level of "3-D" — defiling, demeaning and despised!) In 1015 A.D., a plague struck Kyōto, forcing its society into a crisis mode. Without the removal of dead bodies, there could be no return to normalcy, and so those who were already viewed as "kegare" were pressed into service as "kiyome" (purifiers). Needless to say, this was a vicious cycle, as these "kiyome" were then viewed as being even more defiled because of their association with this defiling task. The undesirable land that was designated for them was thus not taxed and was

viewed as simply “outside the system.” This gradually led to a codification of a caste-like system that was the direct antecedent of buraku discrimination.

These marginalized “kiyome” were further categorized into two separate groups that later became known by the very derogatory terms of “hinin” (非人), literally “non-human,” and “eta” (穢多), literally, “defilement abundant.” (Again, because of the discriminatory implications of this word, the use of the kanji characters is usually avoided, and it is simply written in katakana as “エタ”.) This distinction, however, was something that developed over a long time period, and as various occupations became more specialized, various groupings within these larger categories also began to appear.

The first basic distinction to be made was that between the disposal of the carcasses of dead animals and the bodies of dead humans, since the latter involved rituals of mourning and dignified burials. “Kiyome” who specialized in the handling of dead humans were the group from which the “hinin” category developed, while those that dealt with dead animals became the “eta.” This latter category was considered the more defiling, and so the “eta” category was more associated with “kegare.” The “eta” thus had a monopoly on animal skins and the production of leather goods. In fact, as their own separate society developed, some became rather wealthy in their own right. This, however, was not a path to acceptance in the general society, as even a wealthy “eta” was still an “eta.”

The category of “hinin,” however, included those who were ostracized for reasons other than being associated with “defiling” occupations. It was often a form of punishment, and those who became “hinin” for such a reason could return to their original status in regular society if certain conditions were met within a maximum of 10 years. Needless to say, that was not a common pattern, and so once demoted, they were basically stuck there, and their children had no way out at all — unless they were successful at leaving one area and infiltrating into another with a bogus identity. We know that a certain amount of this did take place, as there are references in contemporary records to a few such people being caught. But as the system became increasingly strict and more centrally controlled, such escapes became more difficult. This was basically the situation from the Edo period onward, as the various medieval fiefdoms that had existed up until that time were unified under the “shogun” warlords.

The long period of warfare that eventually led to the unification of Japan under the Tokugawa Shogunate had the result of making the production of leather products (body armor containing leather, etc.) of critical importance. This “defiling” task, however, was monopolized by the “eta,” and so while they were despised and ostracized, their services were viewed as being of critical importance. Thus, they were tolerated by regular society — provided they kept their proper distance.

Japanese Feudal Society

In his book, Uesugi points out that a typical misconception of medieval societal structure actually comes from the misapplication of the terminology used to describe feudal Chinese society to that of Japan. Put into the diagram form that has typically been used, feudal society was often described as a pyramid with the samurai warrior class on top, with the layers of “farmer,” “artisan” and “merchant” below them. These, then, all rested on the base made up of the “eta/hinin” outcastes. Uesugi points out that just as the term “outcaste” implies, these people were actually entirely outside the “caste” system. He pictures it as two separate pyramids, with the main pyramid being topped by the emperor and other nobility, with the warrior class representing the top level below that “capstone.” Below that, then, were only two basic categories, each put on more or less the same level — that of the “townspeople” (which included artisans and merchants) and the “farmers.” The “eta” and “hinin,” then, formed their own separate hierarchical “pyramid” society totally outside of regular society, with the “eta” above the “hinin” and ruled by an “etagashira” (chief “eta”). This was in spite of the fact that originally the “eta” were considered the more defiled of the two groups. Below each of these pyramids, then, existed a variety of slave-like categories of servants. Even some of the wealthier “eta” owned their own “slaves.”

As the ruling class continued to manipulate this highly contrived system for their own benefit, the controls put into place to manage the system became increasingly oppressive. What later developed into the present-day “koseki” registration system was formalized in the early Edo period as a means to maintain social control. It likewise served as an effective means of stamping out the “Kirishitan,” the numerous converts to Christianity that some 50 years of missionary activity by Xavier and his comrades had generated. All persons had to register at the local Buddhist temple and so officially became “Buddhists” — irrespective of actual belief. The net result was that Japanese became at least superficially adherents of both Buddhism as well as the native animistic religion of Shintō. (The relationship between the two is complicated, with the final result being that Buddhism focuses on funerals and memorial services, whereas Shintō takes care of weddings, blessings and most everything else in the way of religious ritual.)

The “Kirishitan” Connection

The relationship between the “Kirishitan” (a term used to refer to medieval Japanese Christians) and the “eta” and “hinin” outcastes is a very interesting one. When the Jesuit missionaries arrived in Japan — beginning with Francis Xavier in 1549 — their strategy was, for the most part, to focus on the upper echelons of society in a top-down approach. The one exception to this was in the Nagasaki area, where concerted efforts were also made to reach the “eta.” For the most part, however, few “eta” became “Kirishitan” during this era. Almost all of them were followers of the Jōdō Shinshū (“Pure Land”) sect of Buddhism, as it was the one Buddhist sect that allowed “inclusiveness” — a

relative term, of course, as it was only within the very strict constraints placed on it by the system. As would be expected, given those constraints, “eta” temples, cemeteries, etc, were totally separate from other temples even of the same sect.

When it came to the “hinin,” however, it was a very different story, as a high percentage of them became “Kirishitan.” This was not, however, because the missionaries focused evangelistic efforts on them; it was more of an indirect result of the persecution that arose when the “Bakufu” (Shogunate) rulers decided to close Japan off from the outside world. The perception of these warlords was that the Christianity being propagated by the European missionaries was a prelude to foreign domination and colonization by one of the European powers (which if allowed to continue might very well have been the case). From their perspective, stamping out all remains of Christianity was of utmost importance.

During the first few decades of the 1600’s, an estimated 200 to 300 thousand “Kirishitan” were martyred, many of them being beheaded for refusing to renounce their faith by stepping on the “fumie” (踏絵, “stepping picture” — a carved representation of Christ or of Mary and the baby Jesus people were forced to step on to show they were not followers of this foreign — and therefore “defiling” — religion). As to who was pressed into service to do the actual dirty work, it was, naturally, the “eta,” since being an executioner was defiling work indeed.

The general consensus is that there were at least 750,000 Christians at the height of its influence, and some researchers believe it was considerably higher than that. As to what happened to the rest, they basically fall into two groups: those who buckled under the pressure and stepped on the “fumie,” and those who successfully went underground. Known as “Kakure Kirishitan” (Hidden Christians), numerous communities maintained at least basic elements of their faith for over 250 years, until the prohibition was finally lifted (under foreign pressure).

The former Christians (those who stepped on the “fumie”) were still held in suspicion, however, and so it was not as though they were allowed back into regular society with a clean slate. They were still ostracized, and so the net result was that at least a large percentage of them became “hinin.” One contemporary record listed 2000 “hinin” in one section of Ōsaka, and recorded that of those, 920 were “Kirishitan.” Other records indicated similar figures, and thus, far more of the “hinin” became Christians than their counterpart “eta.”

Another reason for the large numbers, in addition to persecuted Christians becoming “hinin,” was that one reason many people had been made “hinin” in the first place was because of “defiling” skin diseases and the like. While actual “leprosy” (now known as “Hansen’s Disease”) certainly existed, many other skin disorders were simply lumped together with it. Since these conditions were considered to be curses placed on such people by the gods, even the

families of victims were left with no choice but to ostracize them and expel them to the outcaste “hinin” community.

Prior to the onset of the persecution, Christians had built over 20 sanitariums for the care of these unfortunate victims. With the improved hygiene and nutrition they received, many were cured, even seemingly miraculously, and so this obviously had a great evangelistic impact, with many becoming ardent followers of the faith. During the persecutions, then, these followers were instrumental in providing sanctuary for many Kirishitan or “former” Kirishitan who likewise entered the ranks of the outcastes.

This sanctuary, however, was relatively short-lived, as the rulers were intent on completely eliminating Christianity from their midst, and so even these outcaste Christians had to go. While many no doubt at least pretended to become Buddhists, records also show that many were exiled and forced to leave Japan. One record states that one group of over 100 “Kirishitan lepers” was exiled to Luzon (Philippines) so that “swords would not be defiled with blood.” Japanese grammar does not necessitate a pronoun before “swords” to indicate who is being referred to (which is part of the vagueness inherent in the language), but the implication is that it was the swords of the executioners being referred to. But since the executioners would presumably be defiled “eta,” one wonders just how that defilement was actually viewed. Apparently, the authorities believed the expedient thing to do was to simply send these people into exile rather than risk extra defilement on their land by having them killed.

It also appears that there was considerable reluctance on the part of executioners to follow through with their orders, as there are also recorded examples of “eta” executioners preferring to give up their own lives rather than execute these “seijin” (holy persons). Likewise, there were entire “eta” villages that simply refused to participate in the persecution at all, and so the general picture that emerges is one of a gradual plugging of the numerous “holes in the dikes” constructed by the shogun rulers to both eliminate the Christian presence while simultaneously solidifying the strict caste system in order to insure their control over the people.

Tightening the Controls

While ruthlessly efficient in moving towards these two goals, absolute control was never completely within their grasp. The human spirit will not allow totalitarianism to persist indefinitely. By the middle of the Edo Period (18th Century), the sense of defilement that was the basis for discrimination was beginning to loosen up, and so in order to counter this, the rulers decreed new laws making it mandatory to discriminate. Thus, not only was it illegal for “eta-hinin” to resist in any way the indignities forced upon them, but it now became illegal for anyone else to not treat them as the law demanded, under the threat of being made outcastes themselves. Records reveal numerous cases in which townspeople and farmers were punished by relegation to the “eta” status, and, of course, if they were unlucky enough to contract a dreaded skin disease, or were

for some other reason ostracized, they would be made “hinin.” Numerous “eta-hunting” campaigns are recorded during this period to find those who had tried to beat the system by pretending to be townspeople or farmers. While many were caught, it is apparent that many were not, and so even prior to U.S. gunboats entering Tōkyō Bay to demand that Japan end its self-imposed isolation, there were considerable signs that the system was beginning to fall apart.

As to what kinds of “indignities” were being forced upon the “eta,” in addition to segregation into isolated communities on undesirable lands and being relegated to “defiling” occupations, they were also forced to wear identifying clothing. Since there was no obvious physical difference between them and other Japanese, it was easy for them to blend in (temporarily) if they dressed like everyone else. Thus, anticipatory shades of Nazi Germany and the “stars of David” the Jews were forced to wear at all times pinned to their clothes, “eta” likewise had to wear leather patches, etc. on their clothing to make them easily identifiable.

Local regulations varied considerably, however, and so another tactic sometimes employed by the local rulers was to require specific clothing that in effect were “uniforms” to make them easily identifiable. For instance, the strategy adopted by the local feudal leaders in what would present-day Okayama to strengthen their hand during the turmoil that followed the arrival of Commodore Perry in 1853 was to institute various measures to weaken any resistance to their rule. They particularly wanted to keep the farmers’ dissatisfaction to increased taxation in check by instilling in them an increased sense of superiority over the burakumin. Thus, burakumin were ordered to wear only plain “shibuzome” or similar “aizome” clothing (tan or indigo dyed cloth) and to never carry an umbrella or wear wooden “geta” sandals. They also were required to take off their footwear and bow down before any farmer they met, thus making the farmers’ lot seem less odious by comparison. This later led to the famous “Shibuzome Uprising” that was successful in bringing about a repeal of these added regulations, and which became an inspiration for the present “Buraku Liberation Movement.”

At this time, no nation-state had laid claim to the northern territories referred to as “Ezo” (mostly present-day Hokkaidō). It was inhabited by the indigenous Ainu people, who were considered by Japanese to be “barbarians,” and so to prevent the island from being claimed by Russia or any other foreign power, there was considerable discussion in the late Edo period of sending settlers to develop the land and solidify Japan’s claim to it and neighboring islands. Interestingly, one of leading theories of the time regarding the origins of the “eta” was that they were descendants of the Ainu. Other theories had them descending from other “barbarians,” but the common theme was that they were racially different from the Japanese (which, of course, was not the case at all). So, there were proposals to ceremonially “cleanse” willing “eta” and have them

“return to their roots” as a vanguard for the Japanese state to lay claim to the northern islands where the Ainu lived.

Outside Pressure and the Beginning of the End

Before such plans could be instituted, however, Commodore Perry and his gunboats arrived in Tōkyō Bay in 1853, and this was the catalyst that began a 15-year period of great instability, as various factions competed for supremacy. One such faction was the Chōshū domain in western Japan that had long sought to bring down the Tokugawa rulers. They were, in fact, instrumental in overthrowing the shogunate government, but how they handled the “eta” issue is informative in considering why it is that the system was ended without the discrimination ending.

Numerous documents of the period reveal that the feudal rulers in general held extreme ethnocentric and xenophobic views. Basically, all foreigners were viewed as being inferior “barbarians,” and so in 1863, the Chōshū authorities decided to offer young, healthy “eta” men a chance to earn their way out of their inferior status by serving in a special military wing to “fight off the barbarians.” In 1866, however, when the Tokugawa Shogunate forces attacked the Chōshū forces, it was this regiment of “eta” soldiers that performed brilliantly to defeat the shogunate forces, and this fact was clear to all involved. They were welcomed as heroes, and thus even though they were being “used,” they turned tables and used this opportunity to win grudging respect.

Fast forward some 80 years to another group of people (at least some of who were descendents of these “burakumin”) who were also enduring deprivation of their basic human rights, and one can see the obvious similarities to the 100th Battalion/442nd Infantry Regiment, made up of mostly of Japanese-Americans out of the internment camps of World War II America. Their exemplary service in the war effort in Europe was instrumental in eventually winning the respect and acceptance of the larger American society. Unfortunately for those caught up in the turmoil at the end of feudal Japan and the dawning of the modern Japanese state, however, the end results were far different. It is my belief that the difference in basic worldview between the two societies is the primary reason. The treatment of the Japanese-Americans by the US government was an aberration of the Judeo-Christian ethic and the basic human rights that naturally flow out of that worldview (where all humans are “created in the image of God”), whereas the continued discrimination faced by the burakumin even after their “emancipation” was consistent with this still prevailing worldview that focused on “kegare” and how such perceived “defilement” could be avoided or at least “cleansed.” (This included a strong sense of maintaining “purity” so that whatever was considered as being “different” was pushed away instead of being accepted.)

The forces that brought down the Tokugawa Shogunate were intent on restoring rule to the emperor (after some 265 years), and once the Tokugawa defeat became obvious, the struggle quickly ended. The net result was that the

opportunity for the “eta” to win points by their brave service was quickly lost. Likewise, since the emperor system itself was predicated on the continuance of a hierarchical class system, there was a renewed effort to again strengthen the apartheid-like segregation that had been loosening up. For instance, when the emperor was to proceed from the palace in Kyōto to Ōsaka, an order went out to make sure no “hinin beggars” or “eta” would be within sight. “Eta” villages that were within sight of the route had to be hidden from view and their inhabitants were ordered to stay in their villages.

Ending the Official Discriminatory System

With the fall of the Tokugawa Shogunate and the opening up of Japan to the outside world again, the fledgling Meiji government was faced with numerous challenges in transforming Japan from a feudal state to one more in line with what they saw in the West (which they viewed as being superior from the standpoint of military power and technology, though not in other ways). Not only was there the issue of what to do with the former samurai warriors, but also the more difficult issue of what to do with the “eta/hinin.” Some pushed for a type of “affirmative action” plan to give training and then release them gradually into regular society according to their performance. The general consensus was that this shifting of individuals from outcaste status to commoner status should be done gradually, but with the rewriting of a whole host of laws that were interrelated, the authorities basically had to settle for a sudden end to the system.

The term used to describe this abandonment of the feudal social system is “kaihōrei” (解放令), which is translated into English as “Emancipation Edict” (or “Emancipation Proclamation”). Uesugi points out in his book, however, that the term “kaihō” (freedom) never appears even once in the entire document. The original document didn’t actually have a title as such, but the term used to refer to it was “Senmin Haishirei” (賤民廃止令), “Order to Abolish (System of) Ignoble Peoples.” In other words, it was simply a repealing of the class system as such and was not based in any concept of human rights and justice. Doing away with the feudal system, promoting industrialization and establishing things such as private ownership of property and a universal tax system meant that the old system of enforced class identity (including rules of where people could live) could no longer be maintained. Thus, ending the caste system was simply a matter of expediency. The term “kaihōrei” was first applied to the ending of the feudal caste system during the Taishō Era (1912-1926) as a part of “revisionist history.” The spin being put on it at that time was that the kind of discrimination going on in the Edo period was in reality against the will of the emperor, and so it was out of the great magnanimity of the emperor that these outcastes had been emancipated. Given these facts, one wonders why the term “kaihōrei” is still used to refer to this even today.

Similar to the continued discrimination faced by freed slaves in the US and elsewhere, the “shinheimin” (“new commoners”) as they called themselves,

continued to face the same severe discrimination, and in fact, found themselves in some sense in even worse straits than before, as what few prerogatives they had under the old system were also taken away. Previously, their lands had not been taxed in deference to their existence “outside the system.” That was, of course, a burden they would have gladly borne if they had simply been accepted as equals in the general society. But centuries of being thought of as less than human and undeserving of equal treatment were so deeply ingrained in the public psyche that it was not something that could simply disappear overnight.

Obviously, the more than 130 years that have transpired since then are far more than “overnight,” and so we need to consider why it is that remnants of this discriminatory system still remain. Before proceeding to that subject, however, one other historical note of importance is what happened to the “hinin” as a result of the ending of the caste system. Unlike the “eta,” the “hinin,” for the most part, were quarantined in what were considered public lands, and so in one sense, their treatment was even more unfair. The “new commoners” at least ended up with the newly produced deeds to the plots of land they had lived on, but the land on which the “hinin” had been forced to live was for the most part not deeded to them, since it was viewed as “public.” In the long run, however, this may have worked to their advantage – at least that of their descendants, anyway – since their existence as a separate group, along with the discrimination that went along with it, has for the most part simply faded away.

There are exceptions to this, of course, as can be seen in the treatment of those with Hansen’s disease. Prior to the development of effective treatment of this communicable disease, the need to prevent its spread by taking steps to quarantine victims in colonies is understandable – even though the deplorable violations of human rights still deserve condemnation. However, with the development of effective medications from the 1940’s, any need to quarantine such people disappeared. Nevertheless, it was not until 1996 that Japan finally repealed this system of forced isolation in “leprosaria.” Again, it would seem, basic worldview beliefs are behind this. While perhaps not exactly the same as the “kegarekan” (feeling of defilement) that was the basis for such discrimination in ancient times, the related concept of excluding and marginalizing those who are different has remained strong in Japanese society.

Returning to the situation of the Meiji Era, the former outcaste groups found life very difficult. They now, however, had the freedom (in principle at least) to try to escape the poverty and discrimination they faced. Many of them jumped at the opportunity to leave Japan to work in other countries. Most of these early migrant workers were planning on saving up money they earned abroad and eventually returning to Japan, but many ended up staying, and some planned to emigrate from the beginning to escape the oppression they had endured for so long. From the late 1800’s and into the 1930’s, many thousands of Japanese immigrants settled in countries such as the United States, Brazil and Peru. No

records exist that indicate what percentage of these people came from former “eta” and “hinin” backgrounds, but certainly a large percentage did.

On the home front, after the Meiji Restoration, the Meiji government proceeded with the plans to lay claim to the northern islands by encouraging settlement. However, since the caste system had been done away with, the original idea of “cleansing the eta” and sending them up as the forerunners was no longer part of the plan. In fact, the Meiji government decided to discourage large numbers of former “eta” from settling in Hokkaidō, wanting to keep that figure below 10%. So, while official discrimination was supposed to be ended, in reality it continued in numerous unofficial (or in this case, quasi-official) ways.

The Struggle Continues

Much remains to be discussed about the history of buraku discrimination since the ending of the official caste system at the beginning of the Meiji Era. Why hasn’t such overt discrimination based solely on one’s ancient family heritage simply disappeared with the passage of several generations? In ancient times, buraku areas were located away from the main population areas, but as cities and towns expanded, these buraku were often surrounded by newer developments. Prior to government efforts to upgrade the infrastructure of former buraku areas in the 1960’s and 1970’s, these areas were very poor and underdeveloped, and that easily contrasted with the much superior infrastructure in the neighboring non-buraku areas. Likewise, because most people of buraku background were poor and did not have equal education opportunities, their advancement was further retarded.

The national and local governments have made attempts to rectify the situation through redevelopment projects, affirmative action programs in employment, and anti-discriminatory education in schools, but since many of the officials administering these programs themselves had deep-seated prejudices against burakumin, the results have been less than satisfying. Not unlike the plight of many blacks in the American context, these programs have even inspired numerous complaints of “reverse discrimination,” merely adding to the common misperception of these people being “different.” Being of buraku descent is still perceived in a very negative light by many Japanese. They may give lip-service to being against discrimination, but when, for instance, it comes to their child wanting to get married to a person of buraku descent, there is a knee-jerk reaction against that. Suddenly, fear of what one’s relatives might think overrides superficial pledges to equality, and great pressure is put on the young person to break off the engagement.

The way this scenario usually plays out is that the family of the non-buraku young person will do a “background check” on the prospective partner, and if buraku roots are detected, they then put great pressure on the couple to break the relationship off. The “koseki” family registration system that was inherited from the feudal age is a major factor in allowing such “background checks” to

be made. This is because one's family heritage is recorded in detail in one's "koseki," and this includes any buraku connections. The address of where one's family roots are registered is one thing that determines that, and while unauthorized persons are not supposed to have access to that information, numerous instances of such "leaks" continue to occur. Clandestine lists of buraku areas with detailed address information can easily be accessed by computer, and so anyone who wants to do a background check on someone can find a way to determine if there are such buraku connections. Such activities are against the law, of course, but the mere existence of this information in official records guarantees that such abuse will continue to occur. Simply restricting easy access will not prevent such abuse.

Likewise, many private companies still want to avoid hiring people of buraku descent just "to play it safe," since they're afraid of potentially negative reactions from customers not wanting to associate with one of "those people." Thus, they also make use of such "background checks" to weed out "undesirables," of which buraku descent is high on the list, irrespective of that person's abilities.

Thus, while gradually getting less common, these forms of discrimination still persist, and thus the work of the Buraku Liberation Center and other organizations working to end such discrimination will continue to be necessary for the foreseeable future.