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Japan's Invisible Minority: Better Off Than in Past, but Still Outcasts

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KYOTO, Japan— A 23-year-old woman had just given birth to her first baby when she learned something devastating about her husband. He was secretly a burakumin, a descendant of outcasts.

So the woman refused to touch her own baby. She returned to her parents' house and abandoned her husband and child forever.

That was a generation ago, in Nagano Prefecture in central Japan, and the incident underscores a legacy of discrimination in Japan that has parallels in the United States.

Even today, there is no better way for young Japanese to give their parents heart palpitations than by suggesting a marriage to a burakumin, and most burakumin still live in segregated neighborhoods riven by crime, alcoholism and unemployment.

Yet Japan is also remarkable for the progress it has made.

Today almost two-thirds of burakumin (pronounced boo-RAH-koo-min) say in opinion polls that they have never encountered discrimination. About 73 percent now marry non-burakumin, and most dismiss the possibility that the Japanese police might treat burakumin unfairly.

The E-word -- Eta, or "much filth," the traditional word for burakumin -- has been banished from discourse, so that virtually no Japanese ever uses it.

"I haven't ever encountered discrimination myself," said Masuharu Okuda, a prosperous 53-year-old who was standing outside his dry-cleaning shop in a burakumin neighborhood in Kyoto.

Mr. Okuda proudly pointed to his daughter-in-law, a woman in her 20's who was busy ironing shirts in the shop. "My son married a girl from outside the neighborhood, and she moved in here with us," he said. "There've been no problems."

Yet Japan has not overcome its divide. For if the three million burakumin, amounting to a bit more than 2 percent of the population, are now rarely burdened by overt discrimination, they face the same problems as some minority groups in America: disproportionate poverty, high crime rates, low education levels, many single mothers, dependency on welfare benefits and resentment from a public that believes they are getting special help.

The issues are those that Americans associate with race; in Japan the burakumin are not a different race at all.

They are an occupational minority group rather than a racial one. Indistinguishable in appearance from other Japanese, they were discriminated against simply because they were the descendants of people whose jobs were considered ritually unclean, like butchering animals, tanning skins, making leather goods, digging graves and handling corpses.

A related group of outcasts, also ancestors of some of today's burakumin, were hinin, or nonpersons. They were given tasks like torturing suspects, crucifying Christians and sawing off the heads of criminals for public display.

Outcasts were legally barred from marrying outside their group or from living outside their slums. These slums were called buraku, or hamlets, and that remains the term for a burakumin neighborhood.

In Japan, the outcasts were formally emancipated in 1871, but for decades after that they were effectively barred from ordinary jobs or any life outside the slums. Some Japanese shopkeepers so loathed the burakumin that they would wash their coins upon being paid.

Such behavior has vanished, but contempt still survives in some households. A university-educated housewife in Tokyo was scandalized when asked if she would allow her daughter to marry a burakumin.

"Never, never, never!" she said. "Even if she wanted, I could not allow it. They're dirty. And they're not really Japanese."

Yet attitudes are changing in most families. A housewife in Mie Prefecture noted that the best friend of her teen-age son is a burakumin, and she said this had been a problem until the death of her mother-in-law a couple of years ago.

"My mother-in-law was a very good woman, but she had a terrible prejudice," she said. "So I could never tell her where my son's friend lived, even though he visited us all the time. She

would have been furious. She would have said things like, 'He can't be allowed in the house! He can't touch the plates we use!' "

Now the boy eats with the family often, and the mother says she does not know if her son even realizes that his friend is a burakumin.

Invisibility A Minority Hard to Identify

Some Japanese say the reason that their country has made progress with the burakumin is not broad-mindedness, but rather the inability to figure out who is a burakumin.

Members of another minority group, ethnic Koreans, are more easy to distinguish. Perhaps as a result, Koreans still face enormous discrimination in Japan.

Burakumin are not easily identifiable by their jobs, for only a few of them now work in traditional fields like leather-making. The other big clue to who is a burakumin -- an address in a buraku -- is also less useful now, because burakumin have been pouring out of their neighborhoods while other Japanese have been moving in.

Kenichiro Tatsumi, the head of the Buraku Liberation League in Kobe, said the buraku in which he lives did not have any non-burakumin residents until 1980. "Now half the people who live there are outsiders," he said.

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The burakumin are also invisible because there is a virtual taboo on discussing the issue. Newspapers and television stations virtually never mention the word buraku, partly because buraku organizations have sometimes denounced publishers for insensitivity when they have written about buraku issues.

"There've been arguments in which burakumin said some very tough things, and so people became afraid of us," Mr. Tatsumi said.

Most Japanese clam up in horror when the topic is broached, and so most young Japanese know far more about discrimination against blacks in America than about discrimination against burakumin in Japan.

Some junior high school students in the town of Omiya, where there are many buraku, looked puzzled when the topic of burakumin came up.

"Who are they?" a teen-age girl asked. "I've never heard of them."

Even many burakumin students themselves find out only in their mid-teens that they are burakumin.

"Most parents don't tell their kids," said Masahiro Takino, a city administrator in Kobe. "They say, 'Don't wake a sleeping baby.' "

Mr. Takino, who is in his 40's, first learned that he was a burakumin in the third grade, when he went to visit a friend's house. The friend's mother told her son, loud enough for Mr. Takino to hear, never to play with a boy from a buraku.

Japanese corporations used to search the backgrounds of potential employees to make sure there was no trace of burakumin heritage. Parents hired private detectives to investigate the pedigrees of their children's boyfriends or girlfriends.

Such searches are becoming rare now. Strangers are now banned from looking at other people's family registration certificates, where past home addresses are recorded. Private detective agencies are barred in some areas from checking on family backgrounds.

Poverty Social Problems Are Persistent

In the 1960's, the buraku were immediately recognizable as slums: dilapidated hovels leaned over tiny alleys, open sewers carried waste water into the rivers, and old people blinded by contagious disease sat hopelessly in the open doorways.

Now that has all changed. A torrent of Government investment has improved the buraku so they are no longer slums.

Yet average income for buraku families is still only about 60 percent of the national average, and social problems are proving to be far more persistent than discrimination.

Buraku leaders acknowledge that alcoholism is a disproportionate problem in their communities. Poverty and alcohol, in turn, weaken the family in the buraku.

Single parents are almost twice as common in the buraku as in the nation as a whole. Five percent of burakumin are on welfare, seven times the rate in the overall population.

A 35-year-old study in Japan found that buraku children had lower I.Q.'s than non-buraku children in the same public schools. Scholars who examined the data say the differences

reflect general apathy and lack of self-esteem, a result of discrimination and contempt from society as a whole.

In the field of education, burakumin have made stunning progress. But they also remain stunningly far behind.

Truancy rates in elementary school in 1960 were 12 times as high for buraku children as for others. Now they are twice as high.

Burakumin have almost caught up with their peers in the proportion who graduate from high school, a tremendous achievement. But only about 24 percent of burakumin go to college, compared with 40 percent of other Japanese.

Crime High Membership Among Gangsters

Social workers say crime is a disproportionate problem among young burakumin, but the issue is so sensitive that no Japanese scholars have conducted research on it. One rare statistical study, conducted by Americans in the 1960's, found that burakumin youths were three times as likely as non-buraku youths to be arrested for crimes.

One explanation is that young burakumin sometimes feel that they are outside the umbrella of middle-class society. Denied the benefits by society, they also spurn the responsibilities.

Another explanation, aside from high rates of poverty and unemployment, has to do with one of Japan's open secrets: burakumin and ethnic Koreans dominate the organized crime gangs known as the yakuza. More than three-quarters of the members of the Yamaguchi Gumi, Japan's biggest underworld organization, are said to be burakumin or ethnic Koreans.

In the buraku of Kobe, the nicest houses -- gaudy American-style homes with wide porches and Mercedes-Benzes in the driveway -- belong to yakuza bosses. As a result, the "success stories" whom children in the buraku see as they grow up are often mobsters.

To be sure, there have been many brilliant buraku youngsters who have grown up to be doctors, lawyers, athletes and politicians. But they melt away into the overall society, keeping their background quiet, and so they do not serve as role models.

One of Japan's best-known politicians is secretly a burakumin, according to several buraku social workers. This politician, who has held major Cabinet posts, was horrified when a

reporter called his office to ask for an interview on the subject. By all accounts, the buraku connection could still hurt him at the polls, and so he refused to go public.

Partly because burakumin are so invisible, and because mobility is breaking down the barriers that used to keep them apart, many Japanese believe that burakumin will become assimilated over the coming decades.

Yet for now, the progress is only partial.

The daughter-in-law of Mr. Okuda, the dry cleaner, was initially happy to talk about how she had married a burakumin and moved into the buraku. She even posed for a photo in the dry cleaning shop, a symbol of integration in the new Japan.

Then she decided she did not want people to know after all that she had moved into a buraku.

"So," she said, "don't use my name or my picture in the paper."

Photo: The minority burakumin of Japan still suffer from problems of poverty and crime. They are physically indistinguishable from other Japanese, as in this mostly burakumin class at an elementary school in Kyoto. (Fumiyo Asahi for The New York Times)

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