

## Abstract

This research aims to study the origin and the social status of Burakumin and the factors that have caused the continued existence of discrimination problems and biased treatment against Burakumin in Japanese society up to the present day. The study emphasizes the origin of Burakumin arising from the social classification system and from the influence of religious beliefs which caused the emergence of a low class, or Senmin, which was related to Eta Hinin, the direct ancestors of present-day Burakumin. The study takes into account social, economic, and political changes since before 1603 of the Tokugawa era.

The study found that Burakumin originated in the eighth century. Social discrimination by both high and low social classes helped this process. In addition, the influence of the notion of impurity found in Shintoism combined with the precepts of refraining from killing found in Buddhism, affected the social conglomeration or the segregation of low class people who were Burakumin's ancestors.

In the past, the Burakumin's occupation reflected some of their necessary duties in society. Certain occupations which were considered unclean, disgusting, and avoided by most people became the occupations of the Burakumin. Ritual impurity, the killing of animals, and the cutting of leather were considered offensive but were an essential part of society's needs. The Burakumin assumed these duties. Although these people had a social role, they had to be segregated and formally classified as outcasts with the lowest social class in the Tokugawa era. State power was another factor which encouraged the discrimination and biased treatment accorded to the Burakumin.

The status of a 'lowest class' was legally removed in 1868 and the provisions of a new constitution afforded equal rights and status to all and prohibited biased treatment due to the discrimination after World War II. However, social discrimination and biased treatment against Burakumin did not disappear. This led to the emergence of the notion of a new social role, of rights, and of a liberation movement of the Buraku. The Buraku organization which had much in common with some political parties' concepts and policies was established. The emergence of various groups of the Buraku movement encouraged the government to study the problems in order to find solutions. The government promoted the "area assimilation development strategy" which aimed to improve living conditions in Buraku communities under the government control known as "Dowa Area". This improved the social status of Burakumin and helped to reduce the gap between them and the other groups in Japanese society. In addition, using the Dowa education policy and using human rights' education programs, the government

tried to create an understanding among society in general of the Buraku issues and of the problems which they faced.

The improvement of both the physical environment of Buraku communities and the living conditions of the Burakumin led to a reduction of the Buraku problems. This does not mean that discrimination and biased treatment have ended. There are still problems concerning the investigation of personal backgrounds, strong opposition to mixed marriages, frequent insults against the Burakumin which appear in messages inside Japanese society. The Buraku communities which are outside government control still suffer from the discrimination and are inferior more than those in other areas.

The solution of the Buraku problem is not just a matter of economic strategies. The government still needs to create a standard or law which defends human rights of such a person effectively. It also needs an education system which will lead to a lessening of discrimination consciousness against the Burakumin and to a greater acceptance of difference. Last, it requires the government, the Buraku organization, the Burakumin, and Japanese people at large to assimilate and develop a sense of community awareness, and to eliminate the discrimination and biased treatment against the Burakumin and other inferior groups in Japan in the future.