

A History of the Untouchables: The Buraku and the Dalit

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The Buraku of Japan and the Dalit of India remain the lowest caste of their respective countries. Experiencing more than just poverty and low status, the Buraku and the Dalit have been described as being lower than human, filthy, and contaminated. Members of these castes are considered to be the untouchables. Highly discriminated against, the untouchables remain outcasts, even in modern society. Both the history of the caste systems in Japan and India, and modern reformation movements must be discussed to fully grasp the current situation of the Dalits and the Buraku.

To understand the discrimination towards the Dalit of India, one must be knowledgeable of the caste system in India. A caste can be defined as a social class, made distinct from others by differences in rank, profession, or wealth. The caste system in India has been heavily influenced by the Hindu religion. In Hinduism, everyone is born into a caste (or jati). One cannot change his or her caste. Micheal D. Coogan writes,

Underlying the hierarchical social system is the fundamental Hindu idea that people are born into an existence that is the fruit of their past karma. One's social status in life is therefore traditionally considered predetermined and immutable, and the individual must adhere to the particular ritual practices and dietary rules of his or her jati. (159-160)

Scholars studying the history of India point out that the caste system might have evolved due to race. It is believed, that along with sacrificial religions, the Aryans might have integrated a caste system into the country, dominating the darker skinned natives (Majumder). Four castes predominate in India. The Brahman, the priests and holy leaders, are the highest class, which is followed by the Kshatriya, the princes and warriors. The Vaishya are the farmers, merchants, and artisans of society, and the Shudra are servants and workers (Schmidt et al 132-145). The lowest class is the Dalits, known as the untouchables. The Dalits are said to have no caste as they are not even viewed as being part of human society. As Emerson explains, in the Hindu religion, the three highest classes, the Brahmin, the Kshatriya, and the Vaisya, can be referred to as "twice born," and in the past these three castes were the only people allowed to study the sacred texts and scriptures (298). Those designated as untouchables, or Dalits, often concerned themselves with work that was considered "impure." Work that involved killing, the disposal of waste, or the handling of corpses was reserved for this caste. Even in modern India, Dalits are still seen as contaminated. An upper class person who is touched by a Dalit or who comes in contact with the shadow of a Dalit must go through elaborate cleansing rituals to undo the "damage" done. Dalits cannot wear shoes in the presence of those in higher castes and still encounter many barriers against practicing religion. Even to this day, untouchables are often chased out of many temples for fear of contamination.

In Japan, the Buraku emerged as the lowest caste because of their work. In feudal Japan, the elite members of society belonged to the daimyo, the feudal lords, and the highest rank one could achieve was to become Tenno Heika, or the emperor. Below the elite classes were the samurai (the warrior class), the nofu (farmers), the jukenaru (skilled artisans), and the shonin (merchants). Below these four castes were the hinin, the kakibe, and the kujome. The Burakumin (commonly called the Buraku), were known as the untouchables, the lowest social caste of Japanese society. Like the Dalits in India, the Buraku experienced discrimination based in large part on religion. The members of the Buraku caste were employed as butchers, leather workers, executioners, and tanners. Since the predominant religion at the time, Buddhism, preached the sanctity of life, those whose work involved the killing of animals were looked upon with contempt

and disgust. The Buraku, like the Dalits, were considered by upper class people to be impure and contaminated (Hendry 75). Such impurity was considered contagious by the more elite members of society. As a result, most of the Buraku lived in isolated areas, as seen in the literal translation of "Buraku," meaning "village people." The condition of a Buraku was considered hereditary; hence, the child of a Burakumin couple would have a predestined life as an outcast. Marrying a Buraku was out of the question for someone of higher status. Additionally, the Buraku were forbidden to enter most religious sites. Instead, the Buraku had their own temples and places of worship in order to keep them isolated from society. To further discriminate against the Buraku people, the lowest caste was required to remove all headwear as a sign of subservience. Throughout Japanese history, the Buraku lived harsh, impoverished lives due to their birth status and consequent caste.

Comparisons between the Buraku and the Dalits are numerous. Both castes were discriminated against due to their professions as their work went against the principles of the predominant religion of society. The Buraku and the Dalits were considered filthy and contaminated by higher castes. Both castes lived in isolation, forced to live apart from society. Because the Dalits and the Buraku were considered contagious, associating with them would reflect poorly on the religious virtue of any upper class person. Neither the Dalits nor the Buraku were completely free to pursue religion, but the Buraku did have temples designated for their use. The Dalits were forbidden access to any religious temple, as well as studying scriptures and texts. Nevertheless, the major and most crucial difference between the Dalits and the Buraku appears in modern times.

While both caste systems are still largely discriminated against today, modern reformations, such as civil rights protests, have helped improve and raise awareness of the conditions of the lowest castes. Today, the Buraku is an invisible caste in that there is no visible difference between a member of the Buraku and someone of another caste. While the Buraku do not visibly appear any different from those of a higher class, Buraku people are still heavily discriminated against. Many Buraku continue to live in impoverished communities in Japan. During the 1990s, the Buraku Liberation League aided in pressuring the government to pass the *Special Measures Law for Assimilation Project*, which called for government assistance in Buraku communities. One major setback for the Buraku lies in education. A survey done by local governments in 2000 states,

Due to the fact that the drop-out rate for Buraku high school student is two to three times that of the national average, the enrollment percentage for Buraku students drops to 10 points behind the national average at the time of graduation. (Buraku Liberation League)

Despite organizations that campaign for the rights of the Buraku, discrimination still exists. Members of the Buraku have a harder time finding jobs and have lower incomes than those in higher castes. Permanent job positions are rare for the Buraku, and most members of the caste end up working in the leather trade. Marriage between families of different castes is still looked down upon, and a person marrying into a Buraku family may be disowned by his or her own family out of shame. While living conditions for the Buraku can easily be improved by the passing of new legislation, ending a deeply ingrained tradition of discrimination and hatred is a significantly harder task (*Japan*). Perhaps it is the Japanese people's love of tradition and obedience that impels them to keep traditions like the caste system in practice.

The most notable civil rights movement pertaining to the Dalits came during the time of Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi advocated social change and the end of discrimination of the Dalit class.

As opposed to the many negative and offensive terms used for the Dalit, Gandhi referred to the lowest caste as the *harajin*, or the "children of God" (Schmidt et al 139). Today, untouchability has been officially abolished in India, though Dalits are still commonly treated as inferiors (Human Rights Watch). At present, there are approximately 260 million Dalits in India, making up 25% of the population (National Campaign). This caste still suffers from harsh discrimination. Certain Dalits, however, have managed to obtain important positions in India. For example, K. R. Narayanan became the tenth president of India, despite the fact that he was a Dalit. Another Dalit, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, was a notable lawyer and an influential leader. Crusading for the rights of his people in 1947, Ambedkar is best known for being the prime architect of the Constitution of Independent India, which came into force in 1950 (National Campaign). Modern activists for the Dalit caste have become very involved with improving the education system. Most members of the Dalit caste cannot afford private education, and public school systems are often under-equipped and under-staffed. Discrimination against the Dalits is less apparent in suburban areas of India, where the population is more dense, and people from many different castes mingle together. In rural areas, however, extremely harsh conditions may arise for members of the Dalit (Human Rights Watch). Discrimination, it appears, varies depending on the area of India one inhabits.

The Buraku and the Dalits have been forced to live under bleak and harsh conditions simply because they were born to a family of low caste. While civil rights movements continue to persist in both Japan and India, discrimination remains deeply ingrained in both cultures. Even in India, where the idea of untouchability has been abolished since 1950, the gap between the Dalits and the rest of society is present. Hence, hatred of the Buraku and the Dalits may never cease unless citizens of Japan and India are taught to rework their way of thinking. The tradition of discriminating among castes is so heavily ingrained in both societies that laws and legislation can only improve living conditions for lowest castes to a small extent. Even if the government provides funding to improve their living conditions, the untouchable castes will continue to have trouble finding permanent jobs and achieving higher levels of education. One must wonder if the caste system in India and Japan exists today because of the human desire to segregate and establish superiority. The untouchable castes, those individuals who have been traditionally described as being lower than human, will continue to be outcasts until the citizens of Japan and India rework their ways of thinking and take additional positive steps to end discrimination.

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