

In a Different Light

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Recently, the Japanese Government has decided to impose further economic sanctions on South Africa in protest against apartheid. Japan has a definite role to play in the global move to abolish this system. But do you know about the discriminations that exist in Japan?

There are said to be 3 million people, living in 6000 segregated villages, like the hometowns, across Japan. They do not have to carry an identification card, but instead they're often forced to hide their identity, even though they're the same Japanese people like you and me. They are the so called "discriminated-village people," the "Buraku people."

We tend to take little notice of this problem, and think of it as something in a different world. So, I was very surprised to know the following facts. Most of the villages are located in areas unsuitable for cultivation, with ill drainage and little sunshine. The infant mortality rate is 5 times as high as the national average. The rate of livelihood protection recipients is 5 to 8 times as high, and many people cannot afford to receive higher education. The population density in the villages is 4 times as high as the average. Just imagine having four times as many people living in our rabbit-huts! Furthermore, even those who have moved out of the villages are facing discriminatory conditions in marriage and employment, and some have even lead to suicide cases.

The Buraku people were placed in the lowest class in the social class system during the Edo period as an object of contempt and hatred. People called them Eta, Hinin and Senmin, implying that they were impure. They were bound to certain occupations and places to live. They were emancipated on the legal basis in 1871, and their situations have slowly improved through a century of emancipation movements. But discrimination and poverty still remain.

In most cases, this problem has been treated as a historical one, and some say that we should "let sleeping dogs lie." But let us look at it in a different light.

Japan now enjoys an unprecedented economic prosperity. We have great political influence in the world, and are one of the leaders in the high-technology field. But I think it's time for us to play another important role in the international society, as a leader in the ethical field. We should lead the global opinions on issues like racial or religious conflicts. A friend of mine in the United States said he was "disillusioned" when I told him about this discrimination problem, because he had thought the Japanese people were a people of politeness, love and deference. Our present prosperity will just be pearls cast before a swine, so long as we continue to discriminate against the people of our own race, and neglect their pains and poverty. Let us be a model of humanity, instead of vanity.

Then what measures can be taken to abolish this discrimination, and also show the world that it can be done?

First, the Government should provide sufficient financial aid for environmental reforms like repairing houses and constructing sewage systems, and also continue to offer scholarships for higher education.

Secondly, historical education should be done with adequate explanation that there can be no justification for such an irrational discrimination today.

But the most important thing is that we young people do not have discriminatory attitudes. The sense of contempt seems to exist especially among the older generations, so let us not allow such a notion to be passed down to us or our children. Sometimes marriage is prevented by the elders even when the couple doesn't care about the partner's birth. Let us not allow this to happen to us or our children.

The Japanese Government is supporting the southern African countries in a research to increase the effect of economic sanctions against Pretoria. We should be aware of our duty in the international society, and just as we make efforts to abolish apartheid, let us strive to emancipate the Buraku people from discrimination and poverty. Remember that the freedom and happiness of the Buraku people can lead to the freedom and happiness of millions of other people suffering from various discriminations in the world today.

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