Caste in Japan

William H Newell

Buddhism is supposed to have been a reaction against Hinduism and its system of social stratification. Yet it is interesting that in Tibet, Korea, Japan and, possibly, China there has existed, and still exists to some extent, a well developed caste system with its characteristic features of endogamy, pollution and hierarchy.

In Japan historians have attempted to show that some of the lower caste groups originated from emigrant Koreans as early as in the thirteenth century. But it is clear that the majority of the lower castes are in fact Japanese, originating in the past from various occupational groups like fishermen, leather-workers, armourers, prison wardens, temple dancers, gypsies and cemetery attendants.

The number of lower caste people in Japan is increasing in the rural areas, both absolutely and proportionately to the total population. Even so, the lower castes probably do not constitute more than 2 per cent of the total Japanese population.

Since the War, the lower castes have tended to be divided into two sections, one seeking upward mobility through the increased economic opportunities and a smaller section concerned with remaining as it was and defending its traditional position.

With continually rising standards of living, the economic differences between the lower castes and the rest of the population are getting blurred. In contrast, however, the political importance of the lower castes is increasing.

A national organisation for the emancipation of the lower castes has been in existence since the War. This organisation is also powerful as a vote-catcher at the elections and both the Liberal Democrats and Socialists rival each other in wooing it.

India is such a large country covering such a large portion of the world’s surface and with such a large population that the method by which it organises its people into different religious, territorial and economic groups has always been a fascinating field for linguists, anthropologists and culture historians. In the course of this study the emphasis has always been on the uniqueness or special features of Indian society to such an extent that similar social or historical features elsewhere in the world have often been overlooked or not sufficiently emphasised. This applies especially to the field of caste studies. In fact, the international magazine Current Sociology devoted one issue to its study of caste and in the introduction it was assumed that since most of the studies of caste have been made in India, it was hardly necessary to include examples from other parts of the world. About the only comparative study of caste which has ever been made is the one published by the late A M Hocart “Les Castes” but even there the only examples taken are from the Indian and Sinhalese side of Asia.

Traditionally, Buddhism was supposed to have been a reaction against Hinduism and its system of stratification. Yet it seems rather interesting that in Tibet, Korea, Japan and possibly China (if one counts the discrimination against the Tanka people as caste discrimination) there has existed and still exists to some extent a well developed caste system with its usual features of endogamy, pollution and hierarchy. All these are countries which can be said to be Buddhist in the sense that much of their culture is based on Buddhist forms. This seems unlikely to be an accident.

No Physical Differences

It might be argued that the caste distinctions in these countries were a remnant of earlier races or religions which became, so to speak, fossilized, were it not for the Japanese situation. So in this short article I propose to deal with the Japanese situation with a few remarks why the situation in Japan is of important theoretical interest to Indian students of sociology and politics.

The first important point is that in Japan there is no national physical distinction between people of different castes. Japanese physical anthropologists have been attempting for at least a hundred years to show that the bottom Japanese caste has distinctive physical characteristics which mark them off from ordinary Japanese (termed heimin). It can be said conclusively that within the limits of modern scientific knowledge there is absolutely no physical difference between members of Japanese castes.

The second important point is that in Japan every family within the boundaries of the Empire has the names of its members inscribed in a Koseki (a family register) and this register is kept by the various local offices within Japan. In fact if one were to define a Japanese, the best way to do so would be to state that a Japanese is a person who is registered as a citizen of some local unit within Japanese territorial boundaries. The Japanese nation from one point of view is a union of Japanese families registered by the local authorities. This definition from a sociological point of view has a number of important consequences, but from the point of view of this article it means that it is possible to trace every single family in the patrilineal line often for several hundred years. Thus historical research in Japan is of an extremely high quality.

An attempt has been made by various historians to show that some of the lower Japanese caste groups originated from emigrant Koreans as early as in the thirteenth century. But it is also clear that the majo-
The choice of Canara Springs by fleet operators and car owners is borne out by experience. The quality of a spring rests on its performance reflected in the comfort in travel. That is why owners of every type of motor vehicle rely on Canara for the built-in strength and consistent quality, eloquently proved by the cradle-like comfort provided by the Canara Springs in actual performance. Fitted with Canara Springs you enjoy the drive on any kind of road.

Canara Springs

The Canara Workshops Limited

Factories at: Mangalore & Nagpur
Discrimination in Tokugawa Period

As far as can be gathered, during the Tokugawa feudal period there were two main distinctions within the bottom caste termed hinin and eta. Hinin means “Not a full person”, and although the etymology of the word eta is obscure, it is usually regarded as meaning “dirty”. The eta were apparently a sort of aristocracy among the lower caste and remained permanently eta. Hinin were often made servants of eta but apparently under certain circumstances could regain the status of a heimin, ordinary Japanese. The upper and lower castes were rigorously endogamous and in Tokugawa it appears that hinin and eta in some areas were also endogamous among themselves. However today this distinction no longer exists and a general term, burakumin (members of a special district) is used to apply to the whole of this lower group.

Up to about 1615, the end of the Chusei era, the ancestors of the burakumin were not discriminated against particularly; it was only during the narrow-minded Tokugawa period that the disability of being burakumin became specially felt. During the Tokugawa, the people of Japan were organised into various feudal classes with sumptuary laws of various sorts against classes which tried to move up (or down). The ruling Bakufu government was increasingly faced with certain internal difficulties towards the end of the period and it is thought that the deliberate emphasis on discriminatory measures against the eta tended to assist the government in much the same way as the use of Jews as scapegoats in Europe also during the later feudal period.

Be that as it may, with the Meiji restoration in 1868 all residents of Japan were supposed to be given equal treatment by the government as subjects of the Emperor and all families had the right to acquire surnames, a right previously reserved only to certain classes. At the time of their legal emancipation in 1871, 300,000 of the burakumin living in special districts were enumerated. Since this total included only people in the special areas, the numbers were certainly much larger in the whole of Japan. Since 1871 it has been illegal to count them, register them or to discriminate against them; but it is certain that today the number is much larger. In 1915 it was about 800,000; today the best reports indicate at least 1.5 million. Burakumin are found principally in the Kinki district of Japan (Hirosima, Yamaguchi and Okayama) and also in Fukuoka, Shikoku and the area around Nara, the ancient Japanese capital. According to Professor Jiro Suzuki (Orient West, July 1961, volume 6, No 7, p 9), of 4,925 known special residential districts more than half contain fewer than 20 households, while in those containing a population of more than 500, found only in large cities, there are less than 0.3 per cent of the total estimated number. But this is only guesswork in the absence of a census.

Incorporation into Urban Life

It is my personal conviction based on a snap survey in two Japanese provinces (ken) that the numbers of burakumin are increasing in rural areas both absolutely and proportionately but certain other experts in the field deny this and claim that a gradual process of incorporation is taking place into the wider Japanese society.

There is no doubt that this Japanese lower caste is mobile in the same sense as one can talk of an Indian subcaste being mobile as a group. The number of burakumin are being reduced by death and by incorporation into urban life. Owing to poverty and bad living conditions for the most part, it seems likely that the age of death is lower than for the Japanese in general. Moreover in certain urban areas where the Japanese are not so to speak, very caste-conscious, the fringe settlements are disappearing into ordinary slums and certain traditional occupations such as shoe repairing and manufacture tend to be dominated by ordinary Japanese. Tokyo is one such city where the burakumin are probably being absorbed. There are probably not more than a few thousand known burakumin in Tokyo, a city of ten million population.

On the other hand burakumin are increasing by birth and recruitment from other minority elements in Japanese society and as a result of absorption of ordinary Japanese who prefer to be burakumin. No person as far as I am aware has ever tried to work out an all-Japan burakumin index of fertility and I would not even like to make a wild guess.

Koreans, a Separate Group

But I was very interested in visiting a certain village about 50 miles from Kyoto in order to observe a small community of Koreans living separately from the village who had been brought to Japan during the war as labour and who were not able or willing to return to Korea. The children spoke Japanese as their principal language and in the school they were segregated from the Japanese. The Koreans were not regarded as belonging to the main tommari (neighbourhood system) of the village and were not represented in the village council by households but had one delegate representing the whole sub taste. They were not allowed to be buried in the village soil after cremation but their ashes were stored in the local Buddhist temple on the pretext that they would eventually be returned to the family vaults in Korea. The were also a totally separate communal and endogenous group treated by the other villagers as a sort of inferior burakumin group.

I have also visited one burakumin settlement in which one of the villagers after describing certain disabilities from which they suffered stated that even though they were not regarded as having the full rights of Japanese, nevertheless they regarded themselves as better than , Koreans who were a totally separate group. These groups are potential lower caste recruits.
The other method of recruitment to the burakumin caste is from the Japanese themselves. Although this is not very common in the countryside, in most big cities in the Osaka and Kinki area one will find that in the burakumin settlements there are always substantial numbers of Japanese who are not burakumin by birth but who like living in the area. This question has not been investigated very deeply as yet although a study is being undertaken by George de Vos and Waga-tsuma of the University of California from a social psychological viewpoint. But it seems to me that with industrialisation and increasing upward mobility, the moral conformity to class values one stage higher than one's parents' is tending to give a sort of competitive attitude to an individual (men especially) which it is difficult for a person to resist. Being at the bottom of the caste/class scale enables one to be freer and to relax and to do only those things which one wishes to do and the caste solidarity of the burakumin at the bottom has a positive quality about it lacking in just slum dwellers.

Enviable Lot of Lower Castes
Speaking as a foreigner, when I enter a Japanese house I am constantly conscious of Japanese etiquette: coughing gently when I approach a house in case the occupant is asleep and using special verbal forms unless I know the person to whom I am speaking very well indeed. But in an average burakumin community the people say what they think bluntly, tell you to go away if they do not want you, and children seem to be pouring through all the houses in a continuous rough and tumble much more like a Polynesian household than a traditional Japanese house. I cannot help feeling that much of the Japanese criticism of and hostility to the burakumin in their midst is a sort of jealousy against people who so clearly do not care for the same things as an ordinary Japanese with the corresponding feeling that it serves them right to be at the bottom of the economic scale. In an article some years ago in the American Anthropologist Kathleen Gough compared the position and freedom of women among a low caste labouring community and in a Brahmin household, with an un-written conclusion which seemed to come naturally out of the article that it was much better to be a working woman free to work side by side with your man and free to change him if one wanted to than to be a well kept, well brought up Brahmin woman continually kept as a sort of property. To be hungry sometimes was worth it. The number of such ordinary Japanese who wish to become burakumin must be quite considerable in my opinion. It is my belief that these second group of factors are at present more powerful than the first so that the burakumin population is probably increasing.

Two Groups
Since the end of the war a tendency has been visible for the various local burakumin communities to divide into two sections, one seeking upward mobility as a result of increased opportunities and a smaller section concerned with remaining as it was and defending its traditional position. This usually took the form at the beginning of special improvement associations in which the richer members tried to persuade the poorer to clean.
up their houses, stop having drunk-
en parties, etc. The argument was
that one reason why burakumin
were despised by ordinary Japanese
was that they were spendthrifts and
dirty in their habits and the sooner
they started to behave properly the
better for them.

At the beginning this usually re-
sulted in various quarrels between
the two sections with an attempt by
the upwardly mobile section to try
to deny their origins. But with the
continually rising Japanese standard
of living this separation into two
factions seems to have become weaker. Even those at the bottom
can easily find manual or other work
so that all are beginning to be
inspired with the same competitive
spirit as ordinary Japanese.

With this gradually increasing
wealth, we have a gradual weaken-
ing of the interests of the buraku-
min in their caste association and
an increasing political importance
of the association itself.

Worse Off After Emancipation

After the legal emancipation of
the burakumin in 1871, it was not
clear exactly what was going to
happen. But the general feeling
appears to have been that the gov-
ernment had solved the caste sys-
tem which was incompatible with a
modern industrialised country and
that the whole problem should
solve itself. In a particular village
in Nagano ken which one of my
students studied, the burakumin
lived outside the village, they could
not use the services of the Buddhist
priest and used to bury their dead
without anvirites., they had only a
very small area of land and the site
on which their houses were
built, and their main duty was to
bury dead animals and beggars
(who were common during the pea-
sant riots at the beginning of Meiji).

In exchange they were entitled to
certain specified quantities of grain
from the harvest of each household.
Before the 1871 act they were mem-
bers of the village and felt inferior. But as the coun-
try became more controlled the
villagers tended to neglect even the
few responsibilities they had to the
burakumin and the valuable forest
land, the product of which should
be shared proportionately by all
the villagers, was in fact only shar-
ed by the heimin. The burakumin
were admitted to the temples, but
their position was in some respects
worse after emancipation.

The situation varied in different
parts of Japan but broadly speaking
in those areas which could be deve-
loped by capital, ordinary Japanese
had to enter and to exploit the
tied labourers, often burakumin,
who could not move out of the
area as a result of social discrimi-
nation still practised by the major-
ity of the Japanese. Thus it was
cheaper to employ burakumin than
the ordinary Japanese rural farmers
who were swarming into the cities
from the countryside. In shoemak-
ing, for example, the position of the
burakumin previously guaran-
teed by the Tokugawa laws was
lost under Meiji, and the burakumin
from lack of capital and opportu-
nity did not find it easy to enter the
fields of ordinary heimin.

Between 1871 and 1900 an un-
truly exist in which indivi-
dual landlords and others tried to
help the low caste people for rea-
sons of national politics and a num-
ber of novels were written dealing
with the Japanese caste problem.
But in 1902 a national burakumin
emancipation movement was laun-
ched by the burakumin themselves
in Okavama-ken which soon spread
to the Kinki and Chugoku districts.
In 1905 the movement dissolved
itself in view of the patriotic feel-
ings created as a result of the
Russo-Japanese War but in 1912
the movement was resurrected. In
1918 public attention was drawn
cforcibly to the movement with the
so-called "rice riots" of 1918 which
were believed to have been partially
instigated by the burakumin
movement.

Census by the Police!

In 1922 the first national conven-
tion of the Suehei Sha (Water
Level Movement, i.e. water finds
its own level whatever the uneven-
ness in the bottom of the pond) was
held in Kyoto and meetings were
held annually until 1929 when the
movement collapsed as a result of
(a) the increasingly national
tendencies of the Japanese govern-
ment (b) internal differences be-
tween a radical, allegedly Commu-
nist, wing and a more moderate
element; and (c) systematic at-
ttempts by the Japanese police to
plant police spies inside the leader-
ship so that the leaders would "not
trust one another. Several members
of the executive committee were
on the police payroll. During this
period the movement tended to be
more and more political and it is
significant that about the only real
attempt that has ever been made
to make a census of the burakumin
since the last century was by the
Japanese police in 1922; the police
made a secret and unpublished re-
cord of the distribution of buraka-
min in the traditional "special
distRICTS".

Since the last war an organisa-
tion called the Zenkoku Buraku
Kaiho Domei (National Associa-
tion for the Emancipation of burakumin)
has been formed to conduct poli-
tical activities aimed at attacking
caste discrimination and obtaining
benefits for burakumin communi-
ties. This organisation is also
powerful as a vote collector at elec-
tions. Its secretaries sometimes
receive their salaries through a
grant from prefectural government
funds, and Liberal Democrats and
Socialists rival one another in
wooing its support, especially where
the two parties have a roughly
equal representation in a prefectu-
ral assembly. This organisation
bears a marked resemblance to cer-
tain caste movements in India, and,
it arises, I believe, from the same
cause: the attempt to obtain poli-
tical advantage from an increasingly
centralised political system on the
grounds of special privilege. Through-
out the accounts of nearly every
local government in Japan are
found funds marked as educational
or scholarship or typhoon damage
assistance which are in fact earmark-
ed for distribution to burakumin
in areas where they are likely to
be politically influential. For
example, in one area in the coun-
tryside with which I am familiar
one can snort a burakumin house-
hold by the fact that each house
has a special desk given to it by
the education department for the
children to work at their lessons.

Wooing the Lower Cases

These gifts are not given on the
grounds of poverty alone but also
of caste position. Although as a
community throughout Japan the
burakumin are today poor and
underprivileged, in certain areas
they are not the poorest section of
the community; but whereas the
poor people have not been able to organise themselves politically, *burakumin* have through their caste consciousness been able to create a sense of solidarity. Up to now the Kaiho Domei has been definitely left wing in outlook and has always succeeded in returning certain representatives to the Upper House (which is chosen by voting in a national electorate). Within the last few years however with the increasing standard of living in Japan, it has become increasingly difficult for the Kaiho Domei to organise its members. Although the annual fees are extremely small, often as low as Y 90 per family (where a day labourer can easily receive Y500 per day), nevertheless there has been a fall in active membership. Moreover the year before last the conservative Liberal Democratic Party gave a special "research grant" towards this problem of *burakumin* which will take the form of assisting *burakumin* in politically uncertain rural areas.

**Different from Indian Castes**

Although up to this point in the article I have compared the Japanese *burakumin* with Indian lower castes, there are a number of important differences. These differences are:

(a) In Japan there are only two castes, *heimin* and *burakumin* with the latter not more than 2 per cent of the total Japanese population. Some India experts claim that deprived castas in India could be regarded as high as 60 per cent of the Indian population.

(b) There, are no *degrees* of ritual impurity in the Japanese society. One is either *burakumin* or one is not, whereas even the lowest caste in India always regards itself as superior to some other.

(c) Before the war there used to be a system in Japan known as the *oyabun-kobun* system of relationship between families. This is sometimes translated as fictitious parent-child relationship. Although in certain respects it was similar to the *jajmani* system in India, there are also certain fundamental differences which prevent an exact parallel being drawn. But in modern Japan this *oyabun-kobun* relationship in the countryside is rapidly disappearing but caste has not disappeared as a result.

(d) Caste is found more or less all over India but in Japan there are strong regional differences with caste being strongest in the older settlements of Japanese civilisation in the west and in the more ancient cities. Thus the form of caste in Japan is regionally much more various. For example in Tokyo there is no feeling against anyone who wishes to become a shoemaker and there is no close correlation between leather work and being a *burakumin*. But in some areas such as around the edges of Lake Suwa one can almost be sure that any bootmaker one sees is a *burakumin*. There is no Japanese national philosophy of caste. But in India a Brahmin is a Brahmin whether he is found in the south or the north.

OF all the people in Asia, the Japanese have displayed the strongest will and capacity to limit births to the number parents feel they can adequately support and educate. While we are proud of this achievement, abortion and to some extent sterilisation have been important means towards this end. With the latter we are far less concerned than with the former because, while both are surgical procedures, sterilisation is a one-time affair. In our sterilisation survey we learned that the increase in sterilisations, from under 6,000 in 1949 to over 44,000 by designated doctors in 1956, resulted not from an increase in serious diseases but from an increasing disposition to regard sterilisation as a contraceptive device.

With abortions rising in the country from a level of about 100,000 a year in 1949 to over a million a year by 1953, excluding unreported operations, we had reason to be seriously concerned with the possible effect of this method on the health of the mothers. The research we made on this subject in 1952 disclosed two important findings. One was the association with abortion of a high incidence of various diseases, ranging from light anaemic symptoms to serious bacterial infections. We found that about 47 per cent of all those undergoing operations were suffering from some form of one or other of these diseases. The second finding was the high probability of another pregnancy following induced abortion: 43 per cent were pregnant again within six months of the abortion and 73 per cent within a year. We are happy to say there were no deaths among the women in our survey, which covered only married women.

Although our studies were made from a medical and not from a socio-economic or socio-psychological viewpoint, our information has led to the realization that abortion is neither a convenient nor an inexpensive method of controlling births because the operation usually has to be performed repeatedly.

Abortion continues to be a major problem in Japan. Too little is known about the medical consequences of repeated abortions. Some doctors are of the opinion that ectopic pregnancy, irregularity in menstruation, and miscarriage are more frequently encountered in women who have experienced induced abortion. I have found recently that repeated abortion is a cause of sterility. A follow-up study on a wider scale is now being planned.

— From paper submitted to the Asian Population Conference by Yoshio Koya of the Family Planning Federation of Japan, Tokyo.
IFCO-THERMIC FURNACES

Slotted Opening
Oil Fired Furnace

DOUBLE FRONTED TYPE

Maximum operating temperature in the working chamber upto 1350 deg. C.

Normal working temperatures 1100 deg. C. to 1200 deg. C.

SUITABLE FOR HEATING ENDS OR MIDDLE OF BARS OR FLATS FOR FORGING AND BENDING

Recuperative Oil Fired
Forge or Stamp Furnace

This Furnace is used for heating billets for forging or stamping; and other high temperature treatments.

Maximum operating temperature 1350 deg. C. Normal operating temperature 1300 deg. C.

Early Delivery—No Import Licence required.

WE ALSO MAKE OTHER MODELS

For details, please write to us.

INDIAN FURNACE CO. PRIVATE LIMITED

(Dept. E.W.)
Lotus Cinema Building, 12A, Dr. Annie Besant Road, Worli, Bombay - 18.
Phone : 74687
Gram : "ELECFURN"
Bata Ambassadors
are scientifically
designed for the foot in
motion: to hug the
heel firmly; cradle
the instep; provide room for the
forefoot so your toes can flex freely.
Immediately you should feel the difference.
Bata Ambassadors help surround
your feet with firm, flexible comfort.
"Look Not Behind Thee"

Taking God's advice "Escape for thy life, look not behind thee," Lot with his wife and daughters fled from the city of Sodom. But his wife looked back.— Biblical story.
**Tete-a-Tete**

“Really? I wonder why. Oh, Mrs. Chand was that sweet. Maybe because they have already heard of Mr. Ram like all others and admire him. And you know, she was wearing a cute ear-ring—four diamonds only on a turquoise foil.”

“But I am sure they are a proud lot. Teddy is no longer an Asst. Secretary but an olltg. Dep. Sec. and still they couldn’t talk to us.”

“Maybe they didn’t know Kusum. Somehow we are lucky. And do you know, Mrs. Chand has promised to call on us some time this week.”

“But I am really annoyed. It is that Sheila’s doing. She deliberately introduced Teddy to Mr. Chand as Asst. Sec. Wicked of her.”

“But I thought you talk are great chums. I saw Sheila all the time with Mr. Kumar at the Reception.”

---

**Howlers**

**I**

Everyone saw, Dr. Lohia, with heavy dossier.
Saying Ta ! Ta !

Going to ’Merica, tough as tapioca, almost like Karaka,
Saying "Eureka!"

He will speak freely, mouth very mealy, very, very eellj
Almost like a lily,
Speaking on all fours, without any remorse, he will not of course,

Let down the Third Force!

**II**

Like Empedocles at Etna, from Satna and Datna,
They met at Patna,
What Kripalani said, the living and the dead, heard in be-
Only Ranga fled.
You must be hearty, very veryarty, even tarty
To form a party.
When Kripalani spoke, every wheel had a spoke, son

There was smoke!

**III**

Everyone is free to lend his knee and carefully
Plant a tree!
Is is a cult, not cant, you can even chant, to give a slan
To every plant.