

On the Demise of Bhagwan Das, who Dedicated his Life to the Liberation of the Oppressed

On November 18, 2010, Mr. Bhagwan Das passed away in his residence in Delhi. He was 83 years old. Mr. Das, as a member of the oppressed caste, assumed many important responsibilities in his lifetime, including as the founder of the Ambedkar Mission Association.

Das was Advisor to the International Movement Against All Forms of Discrimination and Racism (IMADR), an international NGO based in Japan. He also joined us at the Buraku Liberation and Human Rights Research Institute (BLHRI) in Osaka when we held a series of workshops for researchers to exchange research on the issue of the caste system from an international perspective. Das delivered a presentation about the problem of discrimination against the oppressed caste in India.

The most remarkable achievement that Das has left in regard to our efforts towards the elimination of Buraku discrimination rested with what happened during the meeting of the World Conference of Religion and Peace (WCRP), which Das had been involved in since its founding conference in Kyoto. During the WCRP conference held in August 1979 in Princeton University, New Jersey, together with a pastor from Canada, Das outspokenly pointed out the problem of discrimination against Buraku people and suggested that the WCRP address the issue. His proposal met the strong objection of Rev. Soyu Machida as the leader of the Japanese delegation. The statement in regard to Buraku discrimination that had originally been included in the agenda was deleted. Shortly thereafter, this incident gained much attention, and the religious circle in Japan as a whole was accused of maintaining a discriminatory climate. This resulted in the foundation of the “Solidarity Congress of Religious Organizations in Japan to Address the Buraku Problem” in 1981. Without the proposal raised by Das and the Canadian pastor, it is not an exaggeration to say that Japanese religious organizations would never have seriously faced the problem of Buraku discrimination.

This incident was followed by another in August 1984, when the fourth congress of WCRP held in Kenya, Nairobi, invited a delegation from the Buraku Liberation League (BLL) to participate. Before the audience, Mr. Saichiro Uesugi, then Secretary General of the BLL, called for attention to the Buraku discrimination issue in Japan. I clearly remember that Das, as a participant in the conference, saying, “It is very good that after recognizing their discriminatory climate, Japanese religious leaders have started to tackle the problem, whereas it is quite difficult to imagine that the same would happen in India.” The previous year, Das presented the problem of discrimination against the oppressed caste groups in India before the UN Sub-Commission on Human Rights in Geneva. This brought about a big reaction on the part of the Indian government, and caused Indian religious leaders who had joined the conference in Nairobi to attempt to expel Das from the WCRP.

The other memory I have is related to the World Conference Against Racism, or Durban Conference, held in Durban, South Africa, in September 2001. As one of the speakers, Das was invited to the symposium organized by IMADR that called for the attention of the international

community to take action against Dalit discrimination in India and Buraku discrimination in Japan.

Since the Durban Conference, through the initiatives of IMADR and other NGOs, the international community has increasingly poured its efforts into the elimination of discrimination against Dalit and Buraku people. In August 2002, the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD), adopted General Comment No. 29 in regard to the term “descent,” and June 2007, the UN Sub-Commission on Human Rights concluded the “draft principles and guidelines for the effective elimination of discrimination based on work and descent.”

Das was slim and tall, had grey hair and wore glasses. He was always calm and mild, and whatever questions we asked him in regard to discrimination against the oppressed caste in India, he answered in a courteous manner.

I would like to salute Bhagwan Das for what he has done, and swear that I will abide by his wish and continue to work for the elimination of all forms of discrimination, including those against the oppressed caste in India and the Buraku people in Japan.

by Kenzo Tomonaga
Under-Secretary-General, IMADR