

Foundation of the National Levelers Association and Levelers Declaration

On March 3, 1922, influenced by the Taisho* Democracy movement and calls for self-determination that had accompanied the Russian Revolution and the establishment of the League of Nations, the National Levelers Association (Zenkoku Suiheisha) was founded. The Levelers Declaration, adopted by the Founding Congress of the National Levelers Association, holds an esteemed position as Japan's first "human rights declaration." It states, "human beings are not to be pitied, but respected," and calls for "light in all human beings."

The Buraku Liberation League, as the organization's successor, will celebrate the 90th anniversary of the National Levelers Association on March 3, 2012. To celebrate the 80th anniversary almost ten years ago, the Buraku Liberation and Human Rights Research Institute (BLHRRI) based in Osaka published a leaflet containing the full text of the Declaration in eight different languages, including contemporary Japanese, Chinese, English, French, German, Korean, Russian, Spanish and Ainu. The work took more than a year to complete, to carefully translate the text while preserving the spirit of the Declaration. The Declaration is inspiring for all who work for the elimination of discrimination and for the realization of human rights in the world today.

The Declaration begins with the statement, "*Tokushu Burakumin throughout the Country Unite!*" Tokushu means "special," referring to the fact that the Buraku community was different from others. The Japanese government deliberately used this word in a discriminatory manner. The Declaration continues:

Long-suffering brothers! Over the past half-century, the movements on our behalf by so many people and in such varied ways have yielded no appreciable results. This failure is the punishment we have incurred for permitting ourselves as well as others to debase our own human dignity. Previous movements, though seemingly motivated by compassion, actually corrupted many of our brothers. Thus, it is imperative that we now organize a new collective movement to emancipate ourselves by promoting respect for human dignity."

Brothers! Our ancestors pursued and practiced freedom and equality. They were the victims of base, contemptible class policies and they were the manly martyrs of industry.

As a reward for skinning animals, they were stripped of their own living flesh; in return for tearing out the hearts of animals, their own warm human hearts were ripped apart. They were even spat upon with ridicule. Yet, all through these cursed nightmares, their human pride ran deep in their blood. Now, the time has come when we human beings, pulsing with this blood, are soon to regain our divine dignity. The time has come for the victims to throw off their stigma. The time has come for the blessing of the martyrs' crown of thorns.

*The time has come when we can be proud of being Eta**.*

We must never again shame our ancestors and profane humanity through servile words and cowardly deeds. We, who know just how cold human society can be, who know what it is to be pitied, do fervently seek and adore the warmth and light of human life from deep within our hearts.

Thus is the Suiheisha born.

Let there be warmth in human society, let there be light in all human beings.

March 3, 1922

The Suiheisha

* Taisho is a name of the Japanese era from 1912 to 1926.

** Eta means “very filthy.” This derogatory term was given Buraku people during the Edo feudal era to place them outside the caste system. After the Meiji Restoration, the government issued an “Emancipation Edict” abolishing the outcaste status and the name “Eta.” The government gave them the name “new commoners” instead, and started to use the term “Tokushu Buraku” to refer to Buraku communities.

(Megumi Komori, Under-Secretary-General, IMADR)