

Balinese and Hindus

Some 1.8 per cent of Indonesia's population practise Hinduism (Indonesia Census, 2000), the vast majority of them on the island of Bali (where more than 90 per cent of the population are followers of Hinduism), but with others but also in Sumatra, Java, Lombok and Kalimantan.

The Balinese – who number over 3.1 million people according to the 2000 Indonesia Census – are often depicted as a graceful and aesthetic people. Such descriptions are partly based on historical legend, but this characterization is also rooted in the rapid development of Bali in recent decades through the influx of foreign tourists. The tourist market for traditional Balinese carvings, dance performances and paintings has, in modern times, helped both create this image and reinforce Balinese identity. Their language is part of the Malayo-Polynesian branch of the Austronesian family. Like Javanese and other Hindu societies, Balinese society is stratified. There is a small hereditary Brahman class, as well as small groups of Vaisya and Kshatriya classes. However, the Balinese rank system involves no occupational specializations, nor does it prohibit marriage between ranks. The vast majority of Balinese, including many prominent politicians and business people, belong to the Sudra or commoner rank.

Other Indonesian Hindus also constitute distinct ethnic groups. The Tenggerese, for example, speak an archaic form of Javanese. Just over 600,000 (500,000 in 1989 according to Ethnologue website), they live in isolated villages in the Tengger Mountains near Mount Bromo in East-Central Java.

Historical context

Many of the populations that now constitute the peoples of Indonesia came under the cultural influence of the Indian subcontinent possibly even from before the first millennium: by the sixth century, a number of Hindu kingdoms were already flourishing in Sumatra and Java. Prambanan, for example, is a World Heritage Site with the largest Hindu temple compound in Indonesia, and was built in the ninth century. Majapahit was the last great Hindu empire and at its peak exercised some authority over much of what is today Indonesia in the fourteenth century. Islam was already gathering strength in the north of the archipelago by then, and it was to gradually become the dominant religion after the fifteenth century. The remnants of the Majapahit were to abandon Java and shift to Bali in the sixteenth century. Hindus have survived as a minority in Java, Sumatra and other parts of Indonesia since then, including of course Bali.

The end of the Second World War saw one last attempt by the Balinese to break away from Dutch control – and from their forced incorporation into a Muslim Indonesia – in 1946 at the Battle of Marga when a number of Balinese rebels, using Japanese weapons, were defeated and wiped out by the Dutch.

The situation of the Balinese, and of most other Hindus, has for the most part been relatively stable since then, except for the period after the events of 1965, when Suharto came to political power and a

campaign against suspected communist sympathizers led to massive killings: although the numbers have never been verified, some 100,000 Balinese are thought to have been killed.

Current issues

Because of the density of the population in Bali and the lack of available free land, the island was not targeted by the Indonesian *transmigrasi* programme. Indeed many Balinese have become transmigrants themselves, with tens of thousands moving to the outer islands in the 1970s and 1980s. There has been a sizeable influx of migrants into Bali from Java, but unlike other parts of Indonesia the Balinese have retained control over their land, over job opportunities and over political office, so they have avoided the discrimination other minorities have suffered. Outsiders have not threatened their language and culture so far. In fact revenue from the tourist industry has helped Balinese protect and enhance their culture.

Bombings in Bali in 2002 and 2005 by Muslim extremists damaged the tourist industry and raised the spectre of possible tension between the Balinese and Muslim incomers. There were a few calls for the removal of Javanese migrants – the culprits behind the bombings were mainly from Java – but the plea for calm by most Balinese leaders has by and large been accepted, and, there still are substantial numbers of Javanese newcomers flowing into Bali.

Smaller pockets of Hindus in Indonesia in places such as North Lampung, Southeast Sulawesi, Kalimantan, and some areas in East Java have difficulties in the exercise of some rights which exist under Indonesian law. They also have been subjected to periodic hostility from religious extremists. In September 2013, hardliners used a sermon to launch a scathing attack on Hindus for hosting the Miss World Pageant in Bali. A spokesperson for the Indonesian Mujahideen Council branded the event ‘lascivious’ and a ‘war against Islam’, adding that ‘those who fight on the path of Allah are promised heaven’. The remarks were viewed as hate speech by critics and stirred debate about the need for effective laws to tackle incitement to violence.

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