COMMENT

Lessons from Indonesia’s Hindu legacy

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The country’s official recognition and generally peaceful acceptance of Hinduism contrasts with India’s own problematic record of religious tolerance

Indians tend to see themselves as unique, in terms of both the achievements, and dilemmas, related to their bewildering social and cultural diversity. Partly this is because the Indian mental map of the world has tended to focus on the countries of the West, with the addition of our relatively homogenous neighbour, China, in its updated version.

But, if we “Look East,” as our foreign policy mandarins are supposed to be, this exceptionalism is diluted, particularly in the case of a country like Indonesia. India and Indonesia share more than a similarity of names. Both are colourful tapestries of multiple languages, geographies and religions welded together by the imagining of a state where unity coexists with diversity. India’s diversity is commonly linked to the “unique” characteristics of Hinduism: its ability to accommodate, reinterpret and absorb the other. But Muslim-majority Indonesia has similar claims to openness. In fact, for all of “Hinduism’s” vaunted tolerance, it is arguably better to be Hindu in Indonesia, than Muslim in India.

Indonesia is the world’s most populous Muslim country and its third largest democracy. Spread over 17,000 islands, if superimposed end-to-end on the map of Europe, the country would span the distance from Ireland to the Caspian Sea. The archipelago is home to some 700 languages, and features fauna from both sides of Wallace’s line. And although around 210 of its 242 million citizens, are classified as Muslims, Indonesia also accounts for substantial numbers of other religions.

Demographics
Hindus comprise two per cent of Indonesia’s population and form close to a 90 per cent majority on the island of Bali. The Hindu faith is however, far from limited to Bali. The 1960s and 1970s saw substantial conversions to Hinduism on the island of Java, by groups of people inspired by the imagined glories of the region’s past, which was dominated by Hindu-Buddhist kingdoms until the 16th century.

Meanwhile, many adherents of indigenous animist and tribal religions among the Dayak tribes in Borneo, the Toraja in southern Sulawesi, and the Karo in North Sumatra, also converted to Hinduism.

A final component of the country’s Hindu demographic is the 100,000-plus strong Indian diaspora, largely comprising Tamils and Sindhis, the majority of whom live in the capital, Jakarta, and the city of Medan in Sumatra.

Since the country’s independence in 1945, Indonesia’s Hindus have not been the targets of riots or pogroms. They are not disproportionately backward in terms of education, income or employment. Bali, home to some 3.4 million Hindus, is in fact one of the most economically developed parts of the country, with less than five per cent of the population below the poverty line (compared to a national average of 12 per cent).

Coexistence and intolerance
There are no visible restrictions on the practice of Hinduism, and Bali teems with temples devoted to various Hindu gods. Even in other parts of the country, for instance, the Muslim-majority neighbouring island of Lombok, Hinduism exists in a syncretic embrace with Islam. Lombok is home to the Pura Lingsar temple complex, where both Hindus, and those Muslims who adhere to the island’s unique “waktu telu” tradition of Islam, worship.
It is important to note that some of the effervescence demonstrated by Hinduism, notably the conversions from tribal religions, has been due to the intolerance of the Indonesian state which only recognises six religions: Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Protestantism, Catholicism and Confucianism. For adherents of religions not on this official list, discrimination by the state is rife, making it difficult to register children for school, obtain wedding certificates and secure employment. Asking to be redesignated as a Hindu is therefore often driven by the harassment faced by believers of indigenous religions, rather than their genuine embrace of Hindu tenets.

In fact, human rights activists claim that religious intolerance, as a whole, is on the rise in Indonesia. The brunt of this trend has been born by so-called apostates like Shia and Ahmaddiya Muslims who have found their places of worship summarily closed down, and in some cases been violently evicted from their homes. Christian groups have also complained of increased harassment.

Hindus have by and large had an easier time, but, Dr. Made Sadguna, a member of the Governing Council of the Bali-based World Hindu Parishad says that devotees sometimes face obstacles in gaining approval from local authorities to construct temples. And despite constitutional equality with Muslims, he adds, “it is widely understood that it would be impossible for a Hindu to become President of Indonesia.”

Reformulation

While not subject to violence, Hindus in Indonesia have had to modify the presentation of their faith in order to comply with the Indonesian Ministry of Religion's definition of religion as a monotheistic creed, based on a holy book. Hinduism, with its polytheistic character, was rejected at first when it applied for official recognition in 1950. It was subsequently recognised in 1959, after Balinese intellectuals reformulated their faith by presenting “Sangh Yang Widhi Wasa” or the “cosmic law” as the equivalent of “God,” and texts like the Bhagavad Gita as divine revelations conceived by holy seers, similar to the Koran. Hinduism's myriad gods were explained as corresponding to the angels in Islam.

Country comparison

Comparative analysis is always fraught with the danger that one might be likening apples to oranges. And it is therefore important to acknowledge the differential historical backgrounds of India and Indonesia. Hindu-Buddhist kingdoms ruled much of the territory encompassed by modern-day Indonesia, between the seventh and 16th centuries. Islam spread across the region, largely peacefully, under the influence of Muslim traders and clerics from India and China, as well as the Arab states. More syncretic strains of Islam, including sufi traditions, have historically had a strong foothold here.

By contrast, the advent of Islam into India was a bloodier affair. India moreover, did not convert whole scale to Islam and its population remained Hindu-majority, despite being ruled for centuries by Islamic emperors. Most significantly, Indonesia does not bear the scars of a cataclysmic religion-based trauma like the partition of India in 1947. There is therefore no historical memory of large-scale violence between religious communities.

There are some, including stalwarts of India's Hindu right, who claim Indonesia's broadly tolerant mindset to be the result of its Hindu past which makes Indonesian Muslims, coconut-like creatures, with a Muslim outer shell, but with a beating Hindu heart. This is an idea that would gravelly offend most Indonesians for whom a moderate, and sometimes syncretic, approach to faith, does not in any way detract from a strong Islamic belief. The idea that to be a “real” Muslim one must subscribe to a wahabist interpretation of what it means to be a Muslim, or else be described as a closet Hindu, is itself a fundamentalist one.

And so the fact remains that on most objective criteria, a Hindu in Indonesia is better off than a Muslim in India. And while this should not let Indonesia off the hook on its record of religious tolerance, it does highlight India's enormous problems with its own record.

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