HINDUS IN BALI
Category : March 1988
Published by Anonymous on Mar. 02, 1988

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Bali in Sanskrit connotes a magical place where a great profusion and range of beings dwell - Supreme Being, spiritually muscular gods, genies, music devas, nature devas, assorted powerful asuras and mischievous bhuta ghosts. It is, in short, where many worlds intersect, and that is exactly how Bali's Hindus view their bejewelled island.

It is the center of the universe, and if you haven't reincarnated into Bali, you're in orbit around the spiritual hub and basically missing out on all the fun of this cosmic meeting ground. In reality, the entirety of our universe intersects with the interior astral and superconscious universes. But some places are more awake to the intersection. Bali's daily, monthly, yearly and even centennial rhythms and culture are geared to this mystical knowing.

For instance, Bali Hindu homes are open-air rooms partitioned by lattice walls and spacious gardens filled with a wild profusion of flowers and cooing doves. Nature is woven into the home, not so much for sheer ascetic beauty but for the presence of helpful spirits that are the inner world being of the flora.

Bali, of course, is part of Indonesia, a Muslim-majority country that has a fascinating Hindu history, evidence of which is scattered across the landscape like debris from another planet. Indonesia is home to millions of Hindus, including an estimated 50 million Javanese Agamic Hindus (following a wonderfully rich folk Hindusim) whom the Muslims also claim in their faith census polls. The island of Java was the epicenter of Hinduism and Buddhism in Indonesia, but in the 15th century Islam swept over it like a tidal wave. Hindu refugees - aristocracy, priests, businessmen, craftsmen - migrated to Bali (just east of Java) where the native Balinese, already somewhat Hinduized, happily embraced Hinduism and welded their own ancestor worship and nature attunement onto the Hindu framework. It's like a fairy tale, but then Bali is a living fairy tale, a land seeming to be conjured by supernatural beings. Bali's present population is 1,800,000.

At the axis of Bali's teeming religious universe is Mount Agung, a 10,308-foot living volcano. It is the Kailash of Bali. Here Brahman, Vishnu and Siva dwell and the frequent wreaths of clouds and thick fog that girdle Agung are called the "Breath of Brahman." Down the wrinkled slopes of Agung is Bali's greatest, most precious temple, Besakih: one hundred spire-like temple towers that are grandly terraced into igneous rock, forming large platforms of worship for Lord Siva, the Supreme God of the Balinese. In 1963 Agung erupted, spewing forth magma and ash and solidifying the Balinese belief that great forces of malevolence and benevolence are battling near our world. Sixteen hundred Balinese were killed, yet thousands risked injury to worship at Besakih while ash blotted the sun and rained from the sky.

Where non-Balinese think it takes a long time to get from one annual Superbowl or World Cup Soccer Tournament to the next, Bali Hindus take things in hundred-year strides. Indeed, in Bali's and one of Earth's ultimate festivals, every century Siva's Besakih Temple is the focal point for the reenergizing and balancing of the planet's forces. The festival is called Eka Desa Rudra, and it was last performed in 1979 when 500,000 Balinese, one quarter of the population, flowed from Besakih in bright yellow/orange parades down the slopes of Agung to the Indian Ocean.

Hundreds of beautifully ornate temples are sprinkled throughout Bali, overlooking still, blue lake waters and green rice fields. There was a time when these were the pinnacle of Bali culture and civilization. But now, hotels - the temples of sun-worshipping and surfing tourists - jut out of the beachfront properties where the Bali Saivites still carry the urns of ashes from their dead. It has brought exterior change to the island and people. T-shirts printed with sassy Western slogans are replacing the lovely Bali dress, and Bali girls peddle massage to the European tourists. To the Balinese, this may not be surprising, for the ocean to them is an abode of troublesome asuras and all they see of the tourist is their love for the beach and ocean. Indeed, they really feel compassion for anyone who isn't attuned to their Gods and beings and spirits that occupy every life form on their island.

Ida Bagus Tilem is a Hindu woodcarver, a legendary artist who lives deep in the volcano heartland of Bali. With his Ray Ban sunglasses pushed up into his hair, he says "For me, for us life is a balance. The offerings we make help balance the good forces and the bad. We are part of nature just like the flowers and trees. We learn to be humble. Not to be proud. We may have a car now, but that's not important. For me, I like to sit beside the river and hear the sound of water, the sound of birds and get inspiration." In our time, when Hinduism encircles the planet, Bali remains

a radiant gem.

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