

INDIAN COMMUNITY

# Enthusiasm remains high among Indians in Medan

Apriadi Gunawan  
THE JAKARTA POST/MEDAN

People of Indian origin gathered at the Buddhist temple Vihara Loka Shanti at Jl. Karya Pembangunan No. 50 in Polonia, Medan, on Jan. 21. They weren't there to conduct religious ceremonies but to form a foundation for Tamil Buddhists.

According to T. Ravi Kumar, a public figure of Indian descent present at this event, plans to create an association of Tamil Buddhists had been in the works for a long time. Up until now, however, nothing had come to fruition. This organization would mean a lot to these Tamil Buddhists, as they had never had a place to formally assemble prior to its existence.

"We wanted to establish this Tamil Buddhist Society so that we could have a bigger public presence, especially in the social realm," Ravi told *The Jakarta Post*.

One of the programs the association is working on is finding a location where they can build a crematorium for deceased Indian Tamil Buddhists. One place they have been eyeing is in the Belawan area of Medan.

"We want to build a crematorium in Belawan," Ravi said, adding that this would be the second such crematorium of its kind, the first being in Deli Tua in Deli Serdang regency.

Due to the large number of diverse Buddhists of Indian descent in Medan, it was felt that an additional crematorium was necessary. Ravi, however, did not have exact data on just how many such people there were in the area.

What is certain though is that there are a lot of people of Indian descent in Medan and that nearly all of them work in foreign companies, the police and the military. He added that relations between



JPI/Apriadi Gunawan

Priests pierce a participant's tongue and body in the Maha Puja Panguni Uthiram ritual in Sei Semayam, Deli Serdang regency recently. Panguni Uthiram is commemorates the glory of Lord Murugan.

Indians in Medan were harmonious, as could be seen with the formation of soccer groups and other such social communities.

The relationship between Indians in Medan and those back home in India was just as friendly, according to Ravi.

"I last went to India in 2014. I would like to go back," he said, noting that his wife's family was still in India, while he himself had no family.

Naran Sami, an older member of the Indian community in Medan, estimated that there were around 35,000 residents of Indian Tamil descent in North Sumatra scattered in the cities of Medan and Binjai in Deli Serdang regency, as well as in Pematang Siantar and Tebing Tinggi.

Naran said that Indians had first come to North Sumatra in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. At the time, the Dutch colonists were bringing in

plantation laborers from India to Indonesia, especially to North Sumatra and Aceh, both of which were known as plantation areas.

Naran, who was born in 1951, said that the Indians brought by the Dutch to North Sumatra were placed in a number of locations in Medan city. With the passage of time, the Indians decided to gather in Petisah village, which is today known as Keling village.

The arrival of these people of Indian descent in Keling village transformed it to become more like India; many of the roads were named after cities in India, such as Kalkuta, Bombay, Nagapatnam, Ceylon and Madras. However, ever since Indonesia achieved independence in 1945, these road names had disappeared.

Originally, there were about 10,000 Indian Tamil descendants living in Keling village. Now, there are only about 4,000 as many of

them have moved to the outskirts of Medan for economic reasons. Areas that used to be mostly filled with people of Indian descent are now filled with people of Chinese descent.

According to Naran, the village served as a magnet for people of Indian descent as it had its own Hindu temple, SHRI Mariamman, which was established in 1881 and built by a monk named Sri Maryaman.

The temple was still there, in good shape, on Jl. Zainul Arifin Medan. Hundreds of Hindus visited the temple every day to worship.

Nilekanden, a 23-year-old sanitation worker at the temple, said that the temple was open daily from 6 a.m. to noon. It reopened after a two-hour break at 2:15 p.m. and closed at 8 p.m.

"Every day there is always a full crowd of Hindus worshipping here. They don't just come from



JPI/Apriadi Gunawan

An Indian Tamil priest performs a Maha Puja Panguni Uthiram ritual in Sei Semayam, Deli Serdang regency, North Sumatra, recently. Panguni Uthiram is commemorates the glory of Lord Murugan, one of the gods in the Indian Tamil region.



JPI/Apriadi Gunawan

A priest guides the ritual of Maha Puja Panguni Uthiram in which participants' tongue and body are pierced with a long iron rod. The ritual was performed in Sei Semayang, Deli Serdang regency, North Sumatra recently. Panguni Uthiram is commemorated to mark the glory of Lord Murugan.

Keling village but also from places like Binjai, Deli Serdang and Pematang Siantar," Nilekanden said.

Aside from the temple, another symbol of the Indian presence in the area can be seen in a school named Khalsa, which is located right next to the temple and was built by Sikhs from North India before Indonesia became independent. The school is one of the few in Medan to use English as its primary language.

Naran Sami said that not all Indians who lived in Keling village

were Hindus. There were also Muslims, Buddhists and Christians, all of whom lived together peacefully alongside the Chinese and Malay people there.

"The emotional bonds of the Tamil people are very strong, despite differences in religious faith. The harmony between the Indians and Chinese and Malay peoples in this village didn't just occur out of thin air. It is the result of a long process of patience and tolerance that has been built over time between these different ethnic groups," Naran said.

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The Indian Diaspora of approximately 300,000 in Indonesia like anywhere in the world, is a reflection of India - segregated in discrete groups based on language, ethnicity, faith or interest, with little flow of information across various groups.

As newcomers to Jakarta in the 1990s, Poonam and Rajat Sagar had very little information on living in Indonesia available to them. Even on food and groceries, housing, medical systems, travel destinations or arrangements, education options, and the rest. For the most basic things, ask around, search in books or figure it out on their own. Indonesia was the land of many unknowns for a newcomer. Few locals were comfortable with English and most written information and media was in Bahasa Indonesia. So it was a long process of discovery before they finally found their feet in Indonesia. Over time they made friends, both Indian and Indonesian, and fell in love with this wonderful country with its warm, smiling and hospitable people. A little Bahasa went a long way in making life comfortable with domestic help, shopping and travelling around Indonesia.

In the year 2000, while the world was in the middle of the dot com bubble, Poonam Sagar, along with some friends in Jakarta, stepped up to start an information portal for the Indian community in Indonesia. With the support from Infotech, an IT company established by Rajat Sagar, *Indoindians.com* was officially launched in 2001 and celebrates its 16<sup>th</sup> birthday this month. With ongoing funding and support, it has since become the social and community venture of PT Infotech Solutions.

**Indoindians endeavor is to be the information bridge between India and Indonesia. To connect, support and engage the Indian Diaspora in Indonesia as well as people of Indonesia with an interest in India - the Indoindians community.**

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The Indoindians Children's Painting Competition winners pose for a picture with (from fourth left to right) Poonam Sagar, Manish and Rakesh Jain.



Poonam Sagar (left) and Rajat Sagar

social media channels with over 25,000 followers the website has useful information covering What, Where, Who and How of Living in Indonesia. Its features include weekly newsletter, offline and online events, job forum, classifieds, etc. Flowers, cakes and gift packages can be sent through Indoindians Giftshop to over 300 cities across India and Indonesia. A virtual ambassador with a powerful blend of Indonesian and Indian culture, which epitomizes the best of both worlds for all walks of life' states Nagesh Chawla, MD Ritz Carlton Mega Kuningan and JW Marriott.

Indoindians facilitates Indian trade shows in Jakarta, community events, including workshops, talks, and children's competitions. The website is closely associated with the Embassy of India, Indian Women's Association and other community organizations in Indonesia. "Indoindians is doing a great job in bringing the Indian community together with its informative updates on regular basis on social media. Indoindians closely collaborates with India Club," says Rakesh Jain, President India Club.

Events and updates pertaining to all associations are published on Indoindians website, newsletter and social media channels. The Indoindians facebook page is a vibrant community space with engagement and interaction on various current topics and common interests. Shyam Tapparai, a long time resident in Indonesia says "A very useful site to visit and stay updated on news and events. I highly recommend Indoindians to any newcomer or long time resident in Indonesia"

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(From left to right) Dr Kiran Bedi, Poonam Sagar and H.S Dhillon

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307 Palma One, Jl HR Rasuna Said Kav X 2/4

Kuningan, Jakarta 12950, Indonesia

Tel: +62-21-5228775

[webmaster@indoindians.com](mailto:webmaster@indoindians.com)

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