

Buryats

Profile

According to the 2002 national census, there are 445,175 Buryats in the Russian Federation. Along with the Kalmyks, the Buryats speak a Mongolic language. The Buryats are concentrated in the Buryat Republic (pop. 981,238: Buryats 27.8 per cent, Russians 67.8 per cent, others 4.4 per cent) as well as Irkutsk Oblast, northern Mongolia and north-west China.

The Buryat Lamaist church is part of a Buddhist sect which spread from Tibet to Mongolia in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Some Buryats have adopted Eastern Orthodoxy.

Historical context

Although Russians penetrated the Buryat homelands as early as the seventeenth century, contacts between the two peoples remained limited until large-scale Russian migration in the eighteenth century. A Buryat nationalist movement developed at the turn of the century in response to the growing Russian presence. In 1921, a Buryat-Mongol AO was established in the Far Eastern Republic; in May 1923 a Buryat-Mongol Autonomous Republic was created. In May 1923 they were merged to form the Buryat-Mongol ASSR.

In 1937, the Buryat-Mongol ASSR was divided into three units. Territory west of Lake Baikal (12 per cent of the territory) went to Irkutsk Oblast, establishing a Buryat enclave (the Ust-Orda or Ust-Ordynsk AOk); the eastern steppe (12 per cent) was incorporated into Chita Oblast, where another enclave (the Aga Buryat or Aginsk AOk) was created. This division of the Buryat lands caused resentment. In 1958, in an attempt to eliminate any link with Mongolia, the word Mongol was dropped from the region's title leaving the Buryat ASSR. Mongolian cultural influence, however, remained powerful and led, at the end of the 1980s, to a revival of Buddhism and Lamaism in the region. A movement for closer links with Mongolia emerged. Together these elements laid the foundations for the declaration of sovereignty for Buryatia. After the late 1980s, Buryatia became a centre for Buddhists in the RF with the Central Theological Department of Russian Buddhists located in Ulan-Ude.

A session of the Buryat Parliament in June 1992 declared that the 1937 division of the republic was unconstitutional. The main nationalist organization in the republic, the Buryat-Mongolian Peoples' Party has demanded reunification of all Buryat-Mongolian lands on both sides of the Russian-Mongolian border.

The Buddhist revival brought the region into close contact with Mongolia, Tibet and Kalmykia. In 1999 Tibetan medicine was introduced as a subject for the first time in the history of Russian higher education at the Buryatia State University.

Current issues

In April 2005 populations in Irkutsk province and the Ust-Orda AOk voted in favour of the unifications of the two entities into one administrative unit. In the Ust-Orda AOk 99 per cent of voters voted in favour of the unification, with a 99.5 per cent reported turnout. The unification was set to come into effect as of 1 January 2008. Moves for similar referendum to unite the Aga Buryat AOk and Chita oblast were initiated.

Reports suggested that views on the merger were not as unanimous as the above results indicate. Some Buryats in the Ust-Orda AOk fear the further dilution of their culture as a result of union with Irkutsk, after which Buryats would account for only 5 per cent of the population of the new entity. Some Buryats in Ust-Orda claimed they had been prevented from organizing rallies to protest against the merger, and from organizing the Tailagan Buddhist spring celebration. Human rights activists also claimed that leaflets protesting the merger had been seized by the authorities and the publishing house that had printed them shut down.

Language shift and assimilation is a concern to many Buryats. According to a survey conducted in 2002 and published in 2005, only 40 per cent of local primary schools in Buryatia offer tuition in Buryat. At higher levels all tuition is reportedly in Russian.