

## INDIAN COMMUNITY

# Indian community is well-respected and well-integrated into local society

India is celebrating its 68<sup>th</sup> Republic Day in India and across the globe on Thursday, including in Indonesia, which has a thriving Indian community. India is also celebrating 70 years of independence. In order to learn more about major local celebrations and the Indian community in Indonesia, Veeramalla Anjaiah, Vincent Lingga, Arief Suhardiman and Prasiddha Gustanto from The Jakarta Post interviewed Indian Ambassador to Indonesia and Timor Leste Nengcha Lhouvum on Monday in Jakarta. The following are excerpts of the interview.

**Question:** Independent India is 70 years old. What were the most important achievements of India during the last seven decades?

**Answer:** When India became independent in August 1947, 200 years of colonization had ravaged the economy and reduced most of its 400 million population to extreme poverty. The country had been split into two along religious lines. There were also divisions along linguistic, ethnic, caste and sectarian lines. It was a daunting prospect for a newly born country to face.

Despite all these challenges, India has remained a democracy through these 70 years, a functioning vibrant democracy. This is the most significant achievement.

Second, India, like Indonesia is an extremely diverse country with a multitude of cultures, religions, languages, ethnicities, castes, etc. It has remained a pluralist and tolerant society, a secular country in which freedom of religion and worship is enshrined in the Constitution.

Third, India is a scientific and technological power: in atomic energy, space technology, with a mission to Mars, in IT, pharmaceuticals, industrial R&D, manufacturing.

Fourth, India's education system has produced a deep pool of highly skilled manpower. The CEOs of Microsoft, Google, Pepsi are Indians apart from hundreds of scientists, doctors, investment bankers and managers in multinational companies.

Fifth, it is the fastest growing major economy that has recorded a growth rate of over 7 percent.

*India and Indonesia were helping each other a lot even before their independence. What makes these relations special?*

India and Indonesia have a very old relationship that dates back to at least the Sriwijaya kingdom if not earlier, when Palembang used to be a major Buddhist pilgrimage center. It was part of the Buddhist trail up to Nalanda and Bodhi Gaya.

These early contacts multiplied many times over in Bali, Borobudur and Java. In the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Sufi traders and Islamic missionaries from Gujarat carried Islam to Indonesia. Epics such as the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, and Sanskrit words and names, the timeless art of *ikat* and batik are simultaneously a part of our common heritage and everyday life in India and Indonesia today.

During our respective struggles for freedom from colonial rule, your founding fathers -Sukarno,

Mohammad Hatta and Sutan Sjahrir - worked in close collaboration with our national leaders - Jawaharlal Nehru and Biju Patnaik, among others. They shared ideas and strategies and drew inspiration from each other's struggle - in a way that the course of events in one movement often impacted profoundly on the other. Prime Minister Sutan Sjahrir's offer of sending shipments of rice to India when Indonesia itself was under Dutch embargo, and PM Nehru's reciprocal gesture of dispatching textiles and medicines to Indonesia, best captures our great solidarity in those difficult years.

Our founding leaders represented not just India and Indonesia, they took it upon themselves to raise the voice of oppressed peoples all over the world. The Asian Relations Conference in New Delhi in March 1947, months before India became free, was an early assertion of Asian identity. The Bandung Conference of 1955, bringing together 29 newly independent countries from Asia and Africa, laid the foundations of Afro-Asian solidarity. Together India and Indonesia helped to write the closing chapters of colonialism and started the Non-Aligned Movement.

President Sukarno became the first foreign head of state/government invited as chief guest at our very first Republic Day on Jan. 26, 1950.

*We have a very dynamic and vibrant Indian community in Indonesia. Could you tell us more about the Indian community? How big is the Indian community?*

There is an about 100,000 strong Indian diaspora in Indonesia. Indians came here in three stages. First, Dutch brought Indians for plantation work. The second wave of Indians came in first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century for trading and other economic activities. Both these categories of Indians are now Indonesian citizens. The third group, which came in the last two to three decades, comprises Indian expats who are mostly professionals working in Indian or multinational companies and are about 7,000 in number.

The Indian community in Indonesia is well-respected and well-integrated into the social and economic fabric of the country. It has distinguished itself for being hardworking, law-abiding and peace loving.

They are a source of great sup-



Indonesia's first president Sukarno (second from left) and Madam Fatmawati (second from right) received by then prime minister of India Jawaharlal Nehru (right) and his sister Vijaylakshmi Pandit in New Delhi in January 1950.



Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi (right) and President Pranab Mukherjee (left) welcomes President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo (second right) and his wife Iriana during a ceremonial reception at the Indian presidential palace in New Delhi on Dec. 12, 2016. Jokowi was in India to strengthen the two countries' relations and business ties.



Indian Ambassador to Indonesia and Timor Leste Nengcha Lhouvum.

port to the Indian Embassy. The government of India recognizes and values their role in providing an important dimension to the bilateral relations between India and Indonesia.

There are 30 million Indians living abroad who are contributing to the success of the country of their stay. One will rarely find negative reports about Indians abroad. Indian Diaspora loves to stay in contact with India, follow its developments and faithfully follows Indian culture and tradition while harmoniously adjusting with the norms of the society they are living in.

*India is a maritime neighbor and strategic partner of Indonesia. Could you please shed some light on India's economic ties with Indonesia?*

Indonesia is the largest trading partner for India in the ASEAN region. India recognizes Indone-

sia as a long-term strategic and economic partner. Bilateral trade was US\$15.9 billion in 2015-2016, which has witnessed a fourfold increase since 2005-2006 (\$4.3 billion).

With \$13 billion imports last year, India is the fifth-largest export market for Indonesia with rising demands for coal and palm oil. India ranks ninth in terms of exports (\$2.9 billion) to Indonesia. The bilateral trade has increased exponentially in the last few years mainly due to the surge in commodity trade.

Both sides are constantly deliberating on diversifying the trade basket, reinvigorating the trade related bilateral mechanisms and identifying new sector investment. With the Indonesian government's new policies to allow market access for Indian bovine meat and pharmaceuticals as well as new investment proposals under the

'ease of doing business' initiatives of both governments, the trade and investment is expected to grow substantially in the years to come.

There are about 50 Indian investments/joint ventures in Indonesia and the cumulative investment is about \$15 billion, as per our assessment. India has contributed to the infrastructure development of Indonesia and has created about 250,000 direct jobs for Indonesians.

*Both President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo and Prime Minister Narendra Modi are determined to boost bilateral relations between the two countries. In your opinion, what should be done to take our countries' relations to a new level?*

The highly successful state visit of President Joko Widodo to India on Dec. 12-13, 2016 is an important milestone in the bilateral relations

between India and Indonesia. There is a convergence of interests at the highest political level to take the relationship to a new level. Both Prime Minister Modi and President Jokowi are known for their action-oriented approach to governance. They have agreed to meet at least once a year and follow up on the decisions taken by them in earlier meetings.

The progress of MOUs will now be monitored at the highest level. They also agreed that all pending ministerial level meetings should be held within a period of six months. We already had the meeting of fifth Joint Defense Cooperation Committee on Jan.17-18, 2017. We are expecting the meeting of the Energy Forum, the visit of India's minister of chemical and fertilizers and the Biennial Trade Ministers Forum in next two months.

The political push has to be coupled with an equal seriousness at the economic level by captains of industry from both sides.

## India: My birthplace, Indonesia's mother culture

**W**hat is more important to your identity? Your place of birth or your cultural heritage?

For me the answer is simple: both. I'm Indonesian - ethnic Sundanese from West Java and Muslim - but born in New Delhi. If asked about my identity, it's both my place of birth as well as my cultural heritage. I have no choice, as 'Indiati' is my middle name, so I carry my country of birth with me always! Well, at least on my passport. For daily use I dispense with it because my surname is already pretty long. But even then, I can't escape the Indian influence, because "surya" means sun and "kushima" means flower in Sanskrit.

Sanskrit? Yes, that sacred language of Hinduism and Mahayana Buddhism and the literary language used as a lingua franca in ancient and medieval South Asia as well as the origin of so many Indonesian loanwords. Some examples: *acara* (event, program) is *acāra* in Sanskrit; *bahagia* (happy, blissful) is *bhāgya*; *cinta* (love) is from *cintā*; *dana* (funds, donations) is from *dāna*. See how similar the words are? There are many, many more!



Julia Suryakusuma

And language is not the only reason that India is our mother culture. We got *Ramayana*, Hinduism and Buddhism from India and Islam through Gujarati traders. Even the name "Indonesia" we owe to India (see "India-Indonesia: Allies on a journey of mutual rediscovery", *The Jakarta Post*, Aug. 16, 2016).

I returned to India for the first time in 1987, 33 years after I was born, to attend a feminist conference and workshop in Mumbai. Over the years I have met several inspiring Indian feminists, for example Devaki Jain, the founder of the Institute of Social Studies Trust, and Vandana Shiva, the renowned eco-feminist.

On that first visit back to India, I made a side trip to my birth city of New Delhi and stayed at the Indonesian Embassy where my parents

worked in the mid 1950s, so it really was a *napak tilas* (following the footsteps) trip. I left India at the age of 20 months, so can only "remember" the place from photos my parents took during that time.

One of these photos was of my beautiful mother, then 22, clad in a *kebaya*, standing between Indian Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and Mohammad Hatta, Indonesia's first vice-president, when he went to visit India in October 1955 after the landmark Asia-Africa Conference in Bandung in April that same year.

Since my first trip to India, I have made many more, for professional reasons and for spiritual ones. In fact, I could say I owe a big part of my spiritual life to the Brahma Kumaris, a spiritual organization based in India, founded in 1930 (see "When dead friends make you love life, and the living ones, more", *The Jakarta Post*, Nov. 5, 2016).

Every year they conduct a Peace of Mind meditation retreat at the headquarters of the Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University (<http://www.brahmakumaris.org>) in Mount Abu, Rajasthan. Since 1991, I have attended five times. The BKWSU, as they

call themselves, is not a woman's organization, but it's headed mainly by women. Particularly awe-inspiring is Dadi Janki, the active spiritual head of the Brahma Kumaris. A centenarian (born in 1916), she's physically diminutive, but spiritually, a giant!

In 2003, I was fortunate enough to be invited to India as a guest of the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR, <http://www.iccr.gov.in>). Basically, it's a program where the guest gets to do and meet whoever he or she wants.

I met, among others, the talented Shabana Azmi, a world renowned Bollywood actress, social activist and member of the Rajya Sabha (upper house of parliament). I also met Shyam Benegal, a prominent film director and creator of a new genre of Indian cinema popularly known as 'middle cinema'. My late husband, Ami Priyono (1939-2001), was inspired by Benegal and many of his films could also be placed in the category of 'middle cinema'.

A number of Ami's films were produced by Raam Punjabi and Manoj Punjabi, who are considered the most important movie producers and media tycoons in Indonesia, so Indian cinema

played an important role in Ami's professional life.

What else do I love about India? Food and films of course. After I watched *My Name is Khan* (2010) - at least three times - I realized that Shah Rukh Khan is not just droolingly dishy, but a darn good actor who can carry off a difficult role in what I consider to be an important film for our times, about how 9/11 brought out people's worst racist and sectarian prejudices.

Other films I really liked were *PK* and *Three Idiots*, both by Rajkumar Hirani who has a wonderful knack for social satire. *PK* is a critique of religion and *Idiots* of the Indian education system. It's true that Bollywood churns out formulaic song-and-dance and action movies that Indonesians love. While fewer in number, there are also many brilliantly directed and acted films, gems that convey important universal values and which should be considered part of world cinema.

And of course India's democracy is something that Indonesia can surely learn from. It's as chaotic as Indonesia's, perhaps even more so, but there are some aspects of Indian democracy that we should

aspire toward. I learnt about this from my fellow panelist, Shashi Tharoor, at the Ubud Writers Festival in 2007. He was the former United Nations under secretary-general to Kofi Annan (2002-07). He is also a prolific novelist, columnist, journalist, politician, and inspiring global speaker.

In 2007 he gave a speech where he extolled the merits of India's astonishing pluralism. Hindu majority India has had three Muslim presidents and countless high-ranking Muslim officials. And what about the extraordinary events of May 2004 when a Catholic and ethnic Italian political leader (Sonia Gandhi), gave way to a Sikh (Manmohan Singh), to be sworn in by a Muslim (President A.P.J. Abdul Kalam) to rule India, a country whose population is 82 percent Hindu.

True, I may be spiritually connected to India, possibly from some past life connection. But even in this life, there are innumerable ways I find India inspiring. So in this way, yes, India is also my cultural heritage.

*The writer is the author of Julia's Jihad*

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