

## INDIAN COMMUNITY



Courtesy of Bollywood Mania Club Indonesia

Bollywood Mania Club Indonesia (BMCI) hosts a gathering to view the movie Bang Bang at Mega Bekasi XXI on Oct. 5, 2014.

## Indonesians still crazy for Bollywood movies

**Prasiddha Gustanto**

THE JAKARTA POST

**I**ndia's Hindi language film industry, known informally as Bollywood, is the largest center of film production in the world.

It releases hundreds of films annually. According to the Box Office India website, the year 2016 alone saw a record 225 Hindi releases, up from 204 in 2015. These movies altogether generate billions of dollars in revenue each year and regularly break financial records.

The recently-released biopic movie *Dangal*, for instance, has managed to become India's all-time highest-grossing movie, with US\$50.59 million made at its domestic box office in the three weeks since it was released in late December 2016.

*Dangal*, a biographical sports drama starring Aamir Khan, is a big hit in Indonesia too. It has been houseful for more than a month and is still going strong.

The popularity of Bollywood reaches far beyond its Indian borders.

Bollywood's popularity among Indonesians is reflected in television channels like MNC TV and ANTV, which regularly feature Indian entertainment, with ANTV having its own daily screenings of Bollywood and Indian TV shows that run from noon to night.

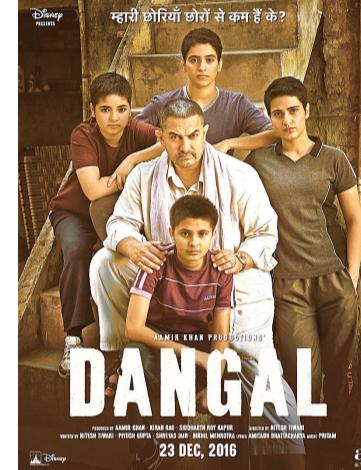
According to Uma Mahesh Gondi, chairman of the Indonesia Telugu Association, the affinity that the Indonesian public has for Indian cinema and television has to do with the resemblance in cultural values and behaviors between the two countries.

He cited things like family values, ideas like helping the needy and qualities like being able to quickly pardon friends and loved ones for mistakes as parts of Indian cinema and film that attract Indonesians.

"[These qualities] are all common aspects among people in both countries," Uma Mahesh said. "So, due to the above common factors, Indonesians like Indian films and television shows."

Poonam Sagar, co-founder of IndoIndians.com, a successful community information website for Indians in Indonesia, viewed the roots of Bollywood's success in Indonesia as being the accessibility of its narratives and the liveliness of its songs and dances.

"Bollywood movies are bigger than life and they are actually musicals with lots of song, dance and colorful costumes. Most of the



movies are based on love stories and I think this is very attractive to Indonesian audiences," Poonam said. "The movies are generally emotional tearjerkers where the audience feels connected to the characters."

Indonesians' love for Bollywood movies has led to events such as Bollywood Voice Indonesia, a singing competition in 2016 that saw hundreds of people from cities like Jakarta, Malang, Banjarmasin, Palembang and Medan competing for the chance to produce an album and win trips to India, Singapore and Malaysia.

Though thousands of Indonesians watch Bollywood movies in movie theaters regularly, they have a common complaint: movie tickets are very expensive, much costlier than Hollywood, Mandarin and Indonesian movies. Due to their addiction, they still watch these movies irrespective of their cost.

Its love for Bollywood has also led to many memorable pop-culture moments over the years. In 2011, a viral video of an Indonesian police officer in uniform lip-syncing and dancing to Bollywood songs made waves and turned the man, Norman Kamaru, into a celebrity.

In June of 2016, Faniear Nanda Doda, the head of Dembe Jaya sub-district in Gorontalo, banned his subordinates from watching Indian soap opera *Uttaran*, as it was disrupting their performance at work.

He announced the ban with a notice posted above the TV in the subdistrict office. A staff member took a picture of the notice, which, much like the police officer's singing, went viral online.

Indonesia, quite clearly, has had a deep romance with Bollywood films and Indian television for many decades now.

"We idolize Bollywood's hand-some artists. We love the stories, which are grounded in reality,

easy to watch, easy to digest, and aren't too complicated," said Asih Ardian, a member coordinator at the Bollywood Mania Club Indonesia (BMCI). "We also obviously love the dances and the songs."

The BMCI is one of the many Bollywood and Indian cinema fan clubs in Indonesia and happens to be one of the nation's largest such associations, with 36,000 members throughout Indonesia. While its headquarters is located in Bekasi, it also has branches in Cirebon and in East Java.

Other similar groups of varying sizes include the Bollymania Fans Club at Bens Radio 106.2 FM and Komunitas Fans Bollywood Indonesia on Facebook. There are also fan clubs dedicated to specific Bollywood stars, such as Aamir Khan.

Many of these organizations regularly hold relation-building and get-together events. The BMCI, for instance, holds movie gatherings at least three times a year, with a viewing of the movie *Kaabil* coming soon on Jan. 29 at CGVBlitz BCP Bekasi. The BMCI also makes regular appearances on TV, like as audience members for Bollywood-themed talk shows and performances.

"We are sought for as an audience that understands Bollywood. We will be in the audience wearing Indian clothing," Asih said.

The country's love affair with Bollywood has not gone unnoticed in India. In December 2016, Giaa Manek, who plays in the long-running popular TV drama *Gopi*, visited several cities in Indonesia to meet and greet with her local fans, in response to popular demand.

"Everyday I receive so many DMs [direct messages] asking me when I will be coming to Indonesia," Manek wrote on her Instagram page on Dec. 13. Other Indian artists who have visited Indonesia include the stars of shows *Jodha Akbar* and *Mahabharata*.

Bollywood is clearly here to stay in Indonesia. Its long-established historical roots in Indonesia's popular culture allow it to remain firmly established. What about those who want to get into Bollywood but don't know where to begin? Asih Ardian has three recommendations:

"Start off with *Dangal*. It has an IMDB rating of 9.2. Then watch the comedy-drama *3 Idiots*. Also, watch *Tare Zameen Par*, which stars Aamir Khan on educating children with learning disabilities," Asih said.

## Mahabharata, Javanese stories

**Riyadi Suparno**

THE JAKARTA POST/JAKARTA

**A**lthough originating in India, I thought the Mahabharata was a Javanese epic. I learned it from the Javanese shadow puppet theater, with which I grew up. And the way the puppet masters told the stories of Mahabharata indicated that they all happened in Java.

Most of the puppet masters, the *dalang*, would describe the league of gods in Mahabharata residing in Mahameru, the top of Mount Semeru in East Java, the tallest mountain on Java. And the five main characters of Mahabharata, the Pandawa (Pandava), are Javanese princes. So, when they fought wars, the puppet master would call the enemies as people from *sabrang* (outside Java).

I was brought up in a village at the northern foot of Mount Lawu, located on the border of East and Central Java. Some places around Mount Lawu have names associated with Javanese Mahabharata stories, such as Candradimuka crater, Jalatunda spring and Pringgondani hermitage. Also, nearby, there is a village called Wirata (Virata), a kingdom in the Mahabharata stories.

In Java, Mahabharata, an epic narrative of the Kuruseta (Kurukschetra) war between the Pandawa princes against their cousins the Kurawa (Kaurava), tells more stories about Pandawa rather than the war itself.

What I learned from puppet masters was that after the Kuruseta war, Pandawa would bring about justice in Hastina kingdom and Pandawa's descendants, especially from Arjuna, would become kings of Java, then the subject of storytelling in Javanese traditional plays, the ketoprak.

So, in my understanding, there was a continuation of stories from Mahabharata in the puppet shows with stories around kings of Java in the Ketoprak plays.

Only later, when grown up, did I realize that Mahabharata was originally from India. I then noticed



JP/R. Berto Wedhatama

differences between the Javanese version and the original one. For example, Drupadi (Draupadi) in the original version is married to the five Pandawa brothers, while in the Javanese version, Drupadi is only wed to Yudistira (Yudhishtira), the oldest of the Pandawa.

Such differences may stem from Islamic belief that bans polyandry. Some of the early branch stories (*lakon carangan*) in the Javanese Mahabharata were written by one of the nine saints of Java, Kalijaga, himself a puppet master, in the 15th century.

The nine saints of Java are believed to have played a pivotal role in the Islamization of Java, which was previously predominantly Hindu and Buddhist. At least four of the nine saints – Kalijaga, his son Muria, his teacher Bonang and Derajat – were known to have used the traditional Javanese musical instrument the gamelan, the puppet and Mahabharata and Ramayana stories to spread Islamic teachings among Javanese.

Branch stories such as *Dewa Ruci* and *Jinrat Kalimasada*, both written by Kalijaga, contain Islamic messages. *Dewa Ruci* teaches about Islamic sufism, while *Kalimasada* stands for *Kalimat Sahadat*, which is the Muslim formula affirming faith in the religion.

Another important difference is the introduction of Punakawan, the clown servants of the main characters in the storyline. They are father Semar and his three sons Gareng, Petruk and Bagong.

There are even branch stories with one of the Punakawan as the main character, such as *Semar Bangun Kayangan* (Semar builds Kayangan, the kingdom of gods) and *Petruk dadi Ratu* (Petruk becomes king).

These branch stories and all the Javanese versions of Mahabharata were compiled by maestro Ronggowarsito from Surakarta Kingdom in the 19th century in his book *Pustaka Raja Purwa*, now the source book for all puppet masters.

These days, puppet masters are still playing the Islamic influenced branch stories of Mahabharata. Some puppet masters even add some additional Islamic flavors into their puppet shows. For example, some masters introduce Islamic songs into the show.

Because of its uniqueness, in 2013 UNESCO proclaimed this puppet theater as an intangible cultural heritage of humanity.

Originally flourishing in Java and Bali, this puppet theater has also spread to other parts of Indonesia, including Lombok, Sumatra and Kalimantan.

This cultural heritage, originally from India and embraced by early Muslim preachers, is now being questioned by a few radical Islamic groups, which claim that the puppet shows using Mahabharata and Ramayana stories are not Islamic, and therefore, should be rejected.

So far, these groups are not popular and do not have many followers. However, if moderate groups like Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) – the largest Islamic group in the country and a group that has so far has been supportive of the puppet theater – keep silent about these new forces, the moderates may lose out, and this could create problems for our cultural heritage.

It is not just the responsibility of NU, the government or UNESCO, however, but of all moderate Muslims who enjoy the puppet theater and want to keep it and nurture this cultural challenge. Unless we care, we may eventually lose the puppet theater.

**Bank of India**  
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**Wishing You All**

**26<sup>th</sup> JANUARY**

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