



Bharat and Dvipantara: Advancing Cultural and Civilizational ties between India and Indonesia

The unique cultural links between India and Indonesia offer immense potential for future cooperation between the two thriving Asian nations.

by [Hadza Min Fadhli Robby](#) | August 26, 2020



1.100 years-old Pustakashala Temple dedicated to Ganesha, located within the Central Library of the Islamic University of Indonesia, Yogyakarta (Source: personal documentation)

India and Indonesia have celebrated their 73rd and 75th independence anniversaries this year. Although India declared its independence three years after Indonesia, it was the leadership and activism of the Indian independence movement in international forums that guaranteed and paved the way for Indonesia's independence.

At that time, it was the conviction of the founding fathers of India that Indonesia would be India's partner for the long run just as it had been in the ancient past. Relations between *Bharat* and *Dvipantara* (or in another term, *Nusantara*) had endured against all odds long before the advent of the Westphalian nation-state order. With this deep-rooted historical memory, the first independent leaders of India and Indonesia believed that this linkage would eventually become an anchor for a lasting partnership.

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Consequently, during the early years of the Cold War, both countries promoted similar values, particularly on the idea of Non-Alignment. The relations between the two countries suffered some setbacks due to the circumstances forced by the Cold War, which eventually affected both countries in their political choices. Nevertheless, the realities of the post-Cold War global order stimulated them to build a closer relationship than ever before.

The sentiment of close relations could be felt when Prime Minister Narendra Modi addressed his speech at the Ram Mandir in early August. He mentioned Indonesia when he referred to the legacy that the Ramayana had left behind in the Asian countries. Although Indonesia is a predominantly Muslim country, the Prime Minister emphasised that most of the Indonesian people still cherish the Indic values left behind by their ancestors. The preservation of oral, textual and visual Indic tradition through literary works like *Kakawin Ramayana*, the legendary architectural heritage like the *Prambanan Temple* and the continuing usage of Sanskrit for the motto of governmental agencies stands as proof that Indonesia is willing to keep to the exhortation of its founding father, Soekarno: "Never ever forget history." It is also widely known that Islam in Indonesia was propagated using the infusion of Indic culture with Islamic values. This style of propagation was done by *Wali Songo*, the revered nine Muslim saints in Java.

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Recently, despite the rising tendency of radicalism and anti-historicism stemming from close-minded religious groups, the Indonesian government and Indonesian people are still not willing to forsake the past. One of the recent examples of the effort to preserve the Indic heritage of Indonesia can be seen in the institution to which the writer is affiliated.

When the excavation began in 2010 to build a new university library in the Islamic University of Indonesia, the construction team found two 1,100-year-old temples with two altars, lingam, yoni, and the statue of Ganesha within the complex. (Pic above) Given the presence of a murti of

Ganesha, there is a probability that our ancestors thought the place where they built the temple could be a place of study and knowledge.

When the Waqf Board of the Islamic University of Indonesia discussed the fate of the temple, it was finally decided that the construction of the institute library would continue with necessary modifications so as to ensure the protection and conservation of the original foundations of the monument. The temple was then named as Pustakashala Temple as it is located within the library complex. Until now, the temple is still standing close to the University's grand mosque, as a symbol of respect toward Indic heritage by Indonesian Muslims. The existence of a historical Hindu temple in an Islamic university is also proof that Indonesia has shown that it could be a ground of harmony between different cultures and civilisations.

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With this strong civilisational and enduring cultural linkage, Indonesia and India should realise that the advancement of bilateral relations between the two countries could have a positive impact on the dynamic and young population of both countries.

There are three points that could be improved upon to further strengthen the cultural and people-to-people exchanges between India and Indonesia. As both countries signed the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2018, India and Indonesia expressed intent to expand collaborations not only at high-level official levels, amongst governmental bodies and Multi-National Companies but also between the people of both the countries.

Firstly, India and Indonesia need to have more city-to-city collaborations. Paradiplomacy or diplomacy conducted by regional governments could be a way to close the existing gaps between the two countries. Driven by a more local-centric developmental outlook, local governments in India and Indonesia are both playing important roles to contribute to the national economy and development projects. The significant economic growth experienced by regional governments in India and Indonesia has influenced positively toward the welfare and well-being of local citizens. Based on this achievement, India and Indonesia must venture a new approach and work to benefit from the best local practices of each other. Recently, India and Indonesia have agreed to strengthen connectivity between two neighbouring regions, the Province of Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam and the Union Territory of Andaman and Nicobar Islands. This connectivity would help strengthen a shared vision on the future of the Indian Ocean.

Nevertheless, this kind of arrangement should also be expanded into cities in different sectors. One of the possible models that can be considered is a city-to-city or state-to-state collaboration between the Yogyakarta Special Region in Java and the State of Uttar Pradesh in India in the field of cultural interactions. As both provinces have a lot to offer in terms of their architectural and cultural heritage, both Yogyakarta and Uttar Pradesh could learn from each other on how to protect historical sites and advance cultural development. Both provinces could also exchange art students and art workers to learn best practices and ideas.

As the Indian foreign policy analyst Falguni Tiwari has said in her [report](#), the development of paradiplomacy in India is still at a nascent stage. A lot of work needs to be done in terms of formulating a common ground between the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India and regional governments. Whereas in Indonesia, Indonesian Foreign Policy experts, Surwandono and Ali Maksum [explained](#) that the implementation of paradiplomacy in Indonesia still needs more improvement because of the strongly bureaucratic nature of the local governments. Keeping these challenges in mind, India and Indonesia should consider paradiplomacy as a key part of the agenda for bilateral relations.

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Secondly, people-to-people engagements, either people-led or government-led, should be encouraged by both governments. Until recently, most Indonesian people only knew India and Indian people mainly from Bollywood series and documentary movies. Most Indians have relatively minor knowledge about Indonesia and the Indonesian people. A more grounded diplomacy effort needs to be conducted by both governments with the help of research institutes and civil society organisations. An excellent example of a recent people-led initiative is the webinar recently conducted online between CSIS, Jakarta and ORF, New Delhi on the issue of the Indian Ocean.

Additionally, there are events such as Bali Yatra, an annual festivity which celebrates the age-old India-Indonesia relation. However more such venues must be discovered and encouraged for cooperation. Deeper cultural and civilisational ties could be revived through inter-faith and inter-cultural dialogues conducted not only between prominent figures but also especially between academics, youth and women.

Finally, the reinforcement and multiplication of cultural and civilisational ties between the two countries should not solely rely upon formal agreements and mere paperwork. Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore had led the way in this regard when he visited Indonesia in 1913 to find inspiration for the foundation of Visva Bharati. India and Indonesia could be Gurus for each other to create a better future.

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