



Mosaics of Cultures: Investigating the Role of Cultural Linkages in India- Indonesia Relations



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Summary

Contrary to popular belief, India has not only been 'Looking East' for more than the past two millennia, but has also engaged the east during this period, though intermittently. Cultural interactions have been the bedrock of this engagement. However, in the past two decades, India has neglected the culture factor in its engagement with the region in general and Indonesia in particular. The cultural linkages between India and Indonesia have to be leveraged, as a foreign policy tool, to take India-Indonesia relations to the next level.

Introduction

India's comprehensive engagement with the Southeast Asian region started with the 'Look East Policy; flagged off in 1991. However, historical evidence - both oral and written - shows that India has not only been 'Looking East' for the past two millennia, but has also engaged the east during this period, though intermittently. Cultural interactions along with trade ties have formed the bedrock of this connection. However, in the past two decades, India has not adequately leveraged the culture factor in its interaction with the countries of the region; which together, form the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Although India has had robust cultural connections with these countries in the past, this connection was particularly pronounced in the case of Indonesia.

Historical Background

There are no two views on the fact that countries and civilisations across the world have evolved as a result of cultures intermingling over thousands of years. Depending on the existing socio-political dynamics of a particular country, however, there have been various stages of mutational changes as well. As H.B. Sarkar argues, a culture is not born, Minerva-like, armed at all points from the start: it is a complex phenomenon fed by streams from different lands at various points of time in manifold ways through various agencies. The process is a continuous one and is transmitted from one generation to another.¹

India's case in this regard is curious. An amalgam of various cultures, India also has the distinction of being a major influence in the evolution of the complex culture of South East Asia. Indo-Aryan culture made its way into Southeast Asia, sometimes in a gush, sometimes in a trickle, for nearly sixteen hundred years, adding newer nuances and meaning in different centuries, but never losing its idiom.² The blending of cultural specificities also took place because Southeast Asia itself has been a tremendously diverse, yet culturally flexible and accommodative region in terms of its social and cultural milieu, thus furthering assimilation. Highly impressed by the Indian influence in the region, historian George Coedes termed Southeast Asian states as *les etats hindouise* - 'the hinduised states of Southeast Asia'.³ It is in this context that this paper tries to analyse India's cultural engagement with Indonesia; the largest member of the ASEAN.

The cultural bridge between India and Indonesia that has been in existence since the Neolithic period operates at several levels: art, architecture, popular drama and literature, Indian communities in Indonesia, and even the societal configuration of Indonesia and their struggle for freedom from colonialism. This speaks volumes about the historic

¹ H.B. Sarkar, *Cultural relations between India and Southeast Asian countries* (New Delhi: ICCR, 1985), pp. xi-xxi.

² *ibid*, pp. xi-xxi.

³ D.G. Hall, *A History of Southeast Asia* (London: Macmillan, 1981), pp. 11-14.

linkages between the two countries.⁴ Today, both countries have the distinction of being termed 'Mosaics of Cultures'.

The commodities produced by a country greatly determine its place in the world, and Indonesia is no exception in that regard. Java and Sumatra have been major trade hubs for long. In fact, from the beginning Indonesia and Southeast Asia were renowned for their monopoly over the world's spice trade. Classic texts repeatedly mentioned them as great trading places. Ptolemy, the Alexandrian astronomer who wrote his geography about the middle of the 2nd century AD, refers to Java as Jabadieu (Yavadvipa) - a name which he himself translates as the 'island of barley'.⁵ Java also finds mention in ancient Indian literature. The Ramayana describes Java and probably also Sumatra (known as the *Suvarnadvipa*) as being rich in gold mines. Fa-hien found it necessary to pay a visit to these islands in the early 5th century because they were important centres of the *Mula-Sarvastivadins* sect of Buddhism.⁶ The Malay peninsula and the Indian archipelago saw the rise and fall of two major Hindu empires. The first, founded by the Sailendra dynasty in the eighth century AD, comprised almost the entire archipelago including the islands of Sumatra, Java, Bali and Borneo. The Arabs, who traded in these parts, described in rapturous terms the power, wealth and magnificence of the grand monarch who had a powerful navy and exercised supreme sway, and styled him 'maharaja'. The Sailendras were followers of *Mahayana* Buddhism and had strong ties with India.⁷

Architecture

The temples at Bali, Borobudur, and Prambanan bear testimony to the Indian presence in Indonesia. These are also great examples of the cross-cultural influences in the field of architecture and temple design and the architectural skills common to both countries.⁸ Borobudur, the most visited tourist attraction of Indonesia, is situated in Central Java. It is a 9th century Mahayana Buddhist monument dedicated to the Buddha, and was built by the Sailendras. Situated on top of a hill, it consists of nine terraces, each receding from the one beneath it, and the whole is crowned by a bell-shaped Stupa at the centre of topmost terrace. According to historians, the vacant space in the sanctum sanctorum of the Balinese temples served as a meeting place of the mountain spirits and the Hindu trinity, in which a preponderant role was assigned to Siva-Girisa, the lord of the mountains. This can also be seen in temples in Java. The earliest reference to the lord of the hills occurs in an epigraph

⁴ For instance, Indian classic texts such as the *Arthashastra* and the *Niddesa* mention Indonesian place names. *Brhatsamhita* and *Kathasaritasagara* also reveal the fact that India and Indonesia had robust linkages.

⁵ Kalidas Nag, *Greater India* (Bombay: The Book Centre Private Limited, 1960), pp. 19-21.

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ R. C. Majumdar et al., *An Advanced history of India* (Madras: Macmillan India, 1978), p. 212.

⁸ K. Kesavapany et al., (eds.), *Indian Communities in East Asia* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008), pp. 90-94.

on a boulder from east Java dating from the fifth century AD.⁹ The sculptures of Amravati found at various sites in the region were evidently carried by the early Buddhist missionaries who sailed from this region through the ports of the Palura-Apheterion complex on the Orissa coast. There also appears to be a strong connection with the Amravati school of art in the later phase.¹⁰ The images and sculptures found, especially in Borobudur, are the finest examples of Indo-Javanese art.¹¹

The temple was restored in the 1980s, but India did not show much interest nor did it undertake to send archaeologists there – an opportunity to enhance the bilateral relationship. This can still be done in case of other historical buildings in Indonesia, as there are hundreds of monuments that need restoration.

Linguistic influences

Sanskrit and Pali have been the most important languages in Indonesian history. The common names and even the names of many of the cities of Indonesia reflect this influence. Further, many cities in India and Southeast Asia have similar names, such as: *Kurukshetra*, *Vijayanagar*, *Amravati*, *Ratnagiri*, *Pandurangapura*, etc.¹² Indonesia's *Bahasa* also has many words that are similar to Sanskrit and Hindi. However, despite striking similarities, *Bahasa* Indonesia is almost an alien language to India, since except for a few universities like Delhi's Jawaharlal Nehru University it is not commonly taught in India where language schools remain Euro-centric.

The Art of Writing

Indian scripts played a key role in the development of writing in Indonesia, which enabled a better understanding of India and introduced the people of Indonesia to Indian literature and which in turn led to the development of their own vernacular and literary compositions. There is hardly any doubt that much of the cultural heritage of Southeast Asia would have been lost forever if its people had not learned the art of writing from India.¹³ There is much evidence to support this. For instance, the *Siddhamatrkā* (pre-Nagari/ proto-Bengali) script used in the Sailendra records of Java has been used on the golden disc and inscribed in stone in the relic chamber of Maura Takus (Sumatra) and Bali.¹⁴ The first old Javanese script, evolved from the late Brahmi, as seen in the inscription of Dinaja dated AD 760.¹⁵ Needless to say, all these scripts owe their origin to the late Brahmi scripts of India. According to G. Coedes: 'The native languages have not only been enriched and

⁹ Sarkar, Note 1, p 122-124.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p 122-126.

¹¹ Nag, Note 5, pp. 201-229

¹² Majumdar, Note 7, pp. 90-98.

¹³ Sarkar, Note 1, p. 168

¹⁴ K.A.N Sastri, *History of Srivijaya*, pp .45-46, quoted in Sarkar, Note 1, pp. 165-177.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 177.

made more flexible by India; they have above all been stabilised, thanks to the use of Indian script.¹⁶

Popular Drama

Another interesting facet of the India-Indonesia cultural linkage is the *Wayang*. *Wayang* is the Indonesian term for theatre. *Wayang* performances are accompanied by *gamelan* and *gender Wayang* in Java and Bali respectively. *Wayang* has survived for more than thousand years in Java, Bali and other islands of Indonesia. The plays are inspired by the Mahabharata, though stories, characters and places have been adapted to Indonesian cultural settings. The puppet shows are more than just a part of theatre, and have become a part of the politico-economic and social life of Indonesians.¹⁷ Though the Indian Council of Cultural Relations sponsors the *Wayang* on cultural platforms in India, not much has been done to actively promote the art in India.

Diaspora linkages

Indian migration to Indonesia can be divided in four major groups. First are those who went to Indonesia in early history, settled there and transformed themselves beyond recognition. Indians have been migrating to places like Java and Sumatra right from the dawn of the first century. By the 5th century AD, Buddhism is believed to have reached Sumatra. Evidences of the settlements of Indian traders in the archipelago are found from the 16th century onwards and Indian missionaries in Southeast Asia were integral to the spread of Islam in Indonesia.¹⁸

The second group consists of those who arrived during the colonial era as labourers.¹⁹ This group too is no longer Indian and rightly considers itself to be Indonesian. The third set of Indians reached Indonesia during the pre- and post-war years. Their ability to assimilate into Indonesian culture by learning the dialects and through intermarriage cemented their place in Indonesian society.²⁰ An area that is marked for Indians is Pasar Baru - otherwise referred to as 'little India'.²¹ Along with the business sector, the entertainment industry has witnessed the rise of firms owned by Indonesian Indians. Another success story of Indian community in Indonesia is that of steel tycoon Lakshmi Mittal, who owns Ispat Indo, which has emerged as Indonesia's largest privately owned steel company. In politics, the emergence of H.S. Dhillon has been pivotal.²² The fourth lot

¹⁶ G. Coedès, *The Indianised States of Southeast Asi*, (Honolulu: The University Press of Hawaii, 1968), pp. 254-256.

¹⁷ Irfa Puspita Sari, "Wirata Parwo in Modern Indraprastha," *Jurnal Perjuangan Kita*, Vol. 2, September 2010, pp. 26-30.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

of Indians in Indonesia is the present generation of professionals settled there. Most are academicians, business consultants, and IT professionals.

There are several institutions run by Indians in Indonesia that could help to disseminate knowledge about India, Indians and Indian culture to Indonesians. These include the India Club, the Economic Council of Indonesia and India (ECII), Amar Jyoti, and the Jawaharlal Nehru Cultural Centre.²³

Freedom Struggle

Colonialism brought India and Indonesia under British and Dutch rule respectively. This also led to a period of disconnect, which continued until the rise of the Indian independence movement when Indian leaders began to take active interest in Southeast Asian affairs. For instance, Nehru organised and celebrated 'Southeast Asia Day' at Lucknow on October 24, 1945, and expressed solidarity with Indonesia.²⁴ The relationship got a fillip when Asian countries became independent, with Nehru playing a key role in developing Asian solidarity. The Asian Relations Conference 1947, the Conference on Indonesia, 1949 and the Bandung Conference, 1955, served as important milestones on the path of Asian solidarity. In these conferences India played a predominant role.²⁵

However, India-Indonesia relations went on a downward spiral due to the China factor, Indonesia's support to Pakistan, and differences that arose between Nehru and Sukarno. In subsequent years, the relationship was neglected by both countries, until the Look East policy opened India up towards East Asia in general. India has done much in terms of implementing the LEP, and some steps have been taken on the cultural diplomacy front as well, both before and after 1993. In 1955, the two countries signed a Cultural Agreement which acted as the central guideline for bilateral cultural interaction. This agreement has been updated regularly and Cultural Exchange Programmes have facilitated inter-institutional linkages and collaborative research programmes. The Indian Council of Cultural Relations also provided an institutional support system for cooperation in human resources development through its education programmes and scholarships including the General Cultural Scholarship Scheme. Further, in 1989, the Indian government set up the Jawaharlal Nehru Indian Culture Centre in Jakarta. In November 2005, the two countries agreed to establish the Indonesia-India Friendship Association, facilitating people-to-people cultural linkages.²⁶ However, there is still a lot to be done to promote India's cultural linkages with Indonesia.

²³ Majumdar, Note 7, p 247

²⁴ Saroj Pathak, *India and Southeast Asia: A Study of Indian Perspective and Policy Since 1962*, (Delhi: Atma Ram & Sons, 1990), pp.42-43

²⁵ Ibid. p. 55

²⁶ Susanto, "Language as a Means of Promoting Fraternity between Indonesia and India: A Study of Language as a Semiotic System," *Jurnal Perjuangan Kita*, Vol. 2, September 2010, pp. 40-48.

By virtue of being the biggest country in the region and a growing economy, Indonesia deserves to be accorded special importance. The year ahead is a great opportunity for doing so since Indonesia will be chairing the ASEAN. Through intensive and extensive cultural interactions with Indonesia, India has to provide a boost to its cultural diplomacy and strengthen its 'soft power'.

India has already taken the first step by inviting the Indonesian president to be the chief guest for this year's Republic Day parade. That, however, has to be followed by several other steps to ensure that this unique relationship is given priority in Indian foreign policy.

Recommendations

- = Diaspora: Our cultural ambassadors should be encouraged to disseminate knowledge about India. A working group could be established focussing on promoting inter linkages, with the diaspora in the driving seat.
- = India could share its expertise with Indonesia for the restoration of archeologically important sites. This will not only promote better understanding but also encourage tourism.
- = Nalanda University, an ancient Indian centre of learning, has been restored lately through the collective efforts of India, Japan and Singapore. Similarly, India and Indonesia could jointly restore historical centres of learning in Indonesia. A joint working group needs to be set up to explore the possibility of restoring educational institutions, with Pali, Sanskrit, and Bahasa, as centres of excellence.
- = 'India year' in Indonesia and vice versa should be celebrated regularly and on a large scale to promote cultural interaction and tourism.
- = Every year, after the India-ASEAN annual summit, India should take up a member country of ASEAN as the 'focus country'. The year long series of interactions should start-off from there. This should not only include interaction among diplomats and officials, but also teachers, students, cultural activists, NGOs, and small scale entrepreneurs. The focus at present seems to be on MNCs and big business. This has of course helped in the expansion of bilateral trade, but not in people to people contact, which is crucial for strengthening bilateral ties.