

## INDONESIA AND INDIA: LIVING WITH DIFFERENCE \*)

By Laksmi Pamuntjak

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As a bookish primary school student in Jakarta during the seventies and early eighties, I was taught much at school about the cultural similarities between Indonesia and India. Still now, I have retained a surprising amount from those so-called ‘history’ lessons, which consisted mostly of memorizing dates of battles and the names of kings and temples. But while such shallow exercises in rote-learning do little service to the analytical mind, they may have unwittingly sharpened my memory for other similarities too—the ones that surface at moments when I find myself borne away by memories of personal experience: the leap in my heart every time I catch sight of the otherworldly Tanah Lot temple in Bali, which I first visited when I was six; the first time I was taught, at the age of nine, to prepare incense in the kitchen of the Court of Surakarta; the many times I have been mistaken for an Indian (mostly on the account of my name, I’m sure, but perhaps also partly because of my looks); the stone statue of the deity Krishna that my parents brought back from Bali after their honeymoon, in 1967, and that has graced our family porch ever since.

Of course, one only has to look beyond oneself to realize that however personal these moments of cultural resonance may be, they are rooted in a wider reality. Our names and our words bear the marks of a common history: a friend or an acquaintance whose name may be Dewi or Saraswati, Rama or Yudhistira; everyday words such as ‘jasa’ (service), “samudra’ (‘ocean’) and

sastra ('literature'), and the introduction into popular usage, at some point, of nouns such as 'wacana' ('discourse') and sulawan ('paradox').

The city makes this heritage even more concrete: There are, of course, the things you can't escape, whether you want to or not: all those imposing Hindu-themed statues strewn around Jakarta, from the horse-drawn chariots of Arjuna Wijaya's in the Monas Roundabout to the Majapahit-era strongman Gajah Mada on the lawn of the National Police Headquarters; all those monolithic buildings that bear their Sanskrit names with pride—Bina Graha (where cabinet meetings are held), Graha Purna Yudha (a building dedicated to the war veterans) and Graha Bakti Budaya, the main auditorium at the Taman Ismail Marzuki Arts Centre; all those dental practices and hairdressing salons with names like Gayatri and Shinta and Drupadi.

And so, funnily enough, it is my own home I recognize anew when I am traveling in India, reinforcing abroad my identification with my own country: the buildings in certain neighborhoods in Bombay with their Palladian columns, ornate faux-European facades and bombastic entrances that could as well have belonged to the Jakarta suburb where I now live; the feeling I had when I first came out of customs in the Delhi airport—terror at the sheer number of people per square meter, huddling, waving placards or simply staring, a sensation not unlike stepping out of almost any airport in Java ten years ago, before most of them were 'modernized'; the frustration I felt with a cab driver who took me for a two hour joyride, at my expense, before I was finally deposited to the arts complex where the literary festival I participated in was being held; the grand wedding of an Indian friend, with its wide assortment of cousins and uncles twice removed, friends of parents, and friends of friends of friends of parents, and the familiar pang of anxiety I

momentarily felt, like pangs felt at grand weddings back home: *But are they, the couple, truly happy?*

Victor Hugo famously said, ‘All great cities are schizophrenic.’ And indeed, nothing could be truer of the cities of Indonesia and India. When you have lived long enough in a city like Bombay or Delhi, Jakarta or Medan, you learn to love and loathe it in equal measure. You will be easily suspicious of the people you meet for the first time, but also pleasantly surprised at how easy it is to get along with them. You will be frustrated, shocked, and disgusted, by endemic corruption, by ghastly violence, by intolerable poverty, but you will also delight in or be inspired by the music, the food, the fabrics—all of which the two countries, too, hold much in common.

You will develop a taste for this and that, humbled by a certain gesture or person. You will fall in love. You may even learn to live with daily ineptitude and inefficiency—hours in traffic, things breaking down regularly—because deep down you know there is compensation elsewhere: a technician at the ready, even on a weekend, when your sink bursts, or your washing machine malfunctions; a masseuse you can call or text at a whim and who will be at your doorstep within the hour. For all the tiny frustrations I experienced during my visit to Delhi, there were lovely moments aplenty: interacting with the members of the poetry class I presided at, many of whom I found exceptionally warm, open-minded and rigorous (and very talented poets!); savoring beautiful food, and trading stories through the night, both new and familiar.

The incongruities within both Indonesian and Indian society are numerous indeed—humanity both at its worst and at its best, life at its most inconveniencing and most accommodating, community at its most polarized

and most tight-knit. It is odd that such incongruities can form the basis of such commonality between two nations: and yet, in a fundamental sense, they really do. For perhaps even more compelling than the linguistic, architectural and urban similarities they share is the astounding cultural and religious diversity that, paradoxically, holds each nation together.

I will never forget the day I was invited to interview an Indian woman for a segment in my culinary program. She had prepared a veritable feast consisting of some twenty dishes, all representing different parts of India, and it was only then, after thirty-two years of thinking I knew what Indian cuisine was, that I realized I knew only a fraction of it. A zesty prawn curry from Goa tasted as different from a mustard seed-heavy fruit salad from Mangalore as *rendang* from Bukittinggi did from a *rujak cingur* from East Java. I remember being enthralled, if a tad bemused: I could almost hear the call of the culinary nationalists, similar to those who had long taken to blaming Indonesian cuisine's poor exposure on the lack of a "nationalizing" effort, yet there I was, asking myself: who could possibly want out of this maddening yet wonderful heterogeneity one type of aloo gobi or one type of raita? Why would anybody want to reduce irreducibly complex regional cooking styles to a few stereotyped, ill-represented dishes?

As with the memorable assorted curries I sampled at the Indian lady's house all those years ago, none of which could claim, rightly or otherwise, to be more Indian than the other, neither can I think of any one *soto* that could claim to be more Indonesian than the other. Known somewhat unceremoniously as 'Indonesian chicken soup', nothing could be further from the truth. *Soto Madura*, from Madura, East Java, is a rich, creamy concoction made of tripe, coconut milk and fried onions. *Soto Banjar*, a specialty of the Banjar people of South Kalimantan, is a light milky broth filled with potato fritters, cellophane noodles, hard-boiled duck eggs and chunks of compressed

rice steamed in small cases woven of coconut palm fronds. There are probably a host of other variants that originate not from a regency, or a province, but from a single city.

No wonder, then, that the culinary tensions in Indonesia—as in India, despite the slight edge the latter has over the former, thanks to the size of its diaspora—are not merely circumscribed to the tussle between regional versus national or between gourmet and popular. Rather, it is still the old class tug-of-war: between the roadside eatery versus the air-conditioned restaurant, between Indonesian/Indian food versus International cuisine, between the homegrown ‘locals’ and the overseas graduates, and between Jakarta/Delhi and the rest of the country.

Difference is in our national cuisine and in our national past. We certainly have had our share of shameful Ayodhya moments, in which members of a religious group massacred members of another, burning and looting their houses. We have had our share of cities and islands going to war with themselves, as with the Maluku Islands at turn of the new millennium. And yet, even if we are the largest Muslim population in the world, we have never elected a Muslim party to lead the country. Like India, we have also, for the most part, been able to fend off fundamentalism, even though the complex workings of democracy sometimes undermine the rights of minorities. I need only to remember a peace parade I participated in, some eight years ago, against a government bill that sought to curtail women’s expression. To impose the law, we chanted, is to be anti-Pancasila, and therefore ‘anti-Indonesia.’ That our national ideology, *Pancasila* (The Five Principles), and our national slogan, *Bhineka Tunggal Ika* (often translated as Unity in Diversity), reek of Sanskrit speaks volumes not only of the place accorded our Hindu legacy in our political and cultural life, but (perhaps counter-

intuitively) the role it has played in ensuring the religious and cultural diversity of our nation.

The overwhelming use of Sanskrit in the Indonesian political domain dates back to the Sukarno era and peaked during the Suharto years, by which time the bureaucratese was practically constructed around word combinations such as '*Sapta Marga*' (the seven pledges of the Indonesian army), and '*Dharma Wanita*.' It is quite evident in such a choice that all our political leaders, drawn mostly from the secular traditions, saw the merit in opting for the summit of Indonesian political power in Southeast Asia—that of the era of the Hindu and Buddhist kingdoms—as a way of representing its 'essence,' even though that essence, we all know, is that of a fiercely plural tradition, as fixed as it is hybrid, as restrained as it is freewheeling, as habituated as it is co-habited, a pastiche of elements as disparate as ancient Kutai and contemporary Top Chef American.

There is, of course, a glaring exception to the overall emphasis on pluralism exhibited by our republic's founding fathers: what claim, after all, did 'Melayu'—a language originally spoken by a tiny and politically marginal group of Malays on the east coast of Sumatra have on being anointed, in 1928, the unifying language of the archipelago? When our leaders declared us one nation, one people, and one language, all under the name of 'Indonesia,' what they did, in effect, was reinterpret 'Melayu' and change its name to 'Indonesia'—it was violent, appropriative, an act of aggression and betrayal. 'Indonesia,' as Benedict Anderson tells us in *Imagined Communities*, is a 20th-century invention, imposed upon a nation that now consists of some 17,000 islands, some 700 written languages, a space that is constantly in flux and never 'one' thing. It would inevitably go down the way of similar acts carried out in the name of nationhood, i.e., it would offer itself to be fixed, frozen, fossilized, unless it made the effort to rapidly remake itself. Unlike

French *haute cuisine*, its designated supremacy makes it all the more urgent to borrow from, rather than elbow aside, other languages, dialects and patois. And thankfully, borrow it has.

And it is this spirit of reinvention, of self-enrichment and unabashed borrowings that underlies what we are witnessing in Indonesia's contemporary arts today. The *vital elan* our most promising new novelists, poets, painters, film directors, cinematographers, graphic designers and choreographers have brought into their art, and their courage to tackle difficult issues with intelligence and panache, are the hallmark of the post-Suharto era and remain a worthy victory.

Having followed the career of this new generation of artists since 2004, when I was still working for an international performing arts company in Singapore, until 2012, after I had completed my tenure as international jury member of the Prince Claus Awards in the Netherlands, I saw a great many similarities between them and their Indian counterparts. The works of the Delhi-based Raqs Media Collective could very well be the work of the Bandung-based Ruang Rupa. The works that made up a major India contemporary arts exhibition at the Centre Pompidou in May 2011 could have easily been an Indonesian one. Rarely ever did I encounter an artist, or an artwork, that was not a distillation of many disciplines: I saw the musician in the poet, the painter in the musician, the poet in the architect, the architect in the painter. They were computer-savvy, unafraid of experimenting with forms and methods, and enjoyed playing a plurality of roles. They made art, edited books, curated exhibitions, staged events, directed films, encouraged activism, and worked closely with artists from other branches of the art. At once hardworking, grounded and worldly, they kept pushing and pushing the boundaries of what was possible, and, like culture itself, grew ever outward.

Like India, Indonesia has little, if any, need to look outside for its models of tolerance. To be an Indonesian is to live with difference, a fellow writer once said, and I think he is right. Anybody who grew up in Indonesia has had to learn, one way or the other, the codes of the others, how to dress and act appropriately, what to say and what not to say, how to hide dislike behind a smile. That is why, with so many traits in common, Indonesia and India should be working together, harder than ever, to further their mutual understanding.

For the way certainly has been paved, some more fluidly than others: cross-cultural discussions between Indian and Indonesian artists on literature, visual arts and performing arts; collaborations on dance performances, dance dramas based on the Hindu epics, and a modern TV series loosely adapted on the *Mahabharata* or *Ramayana* aimed at a contemporary audience (i.e., without the ancient costumes and bad make up); cooking workshops focused on the two cuisines and what they have in common; forums for sharing and commenting on each other's writings, making available one's works for each other through long term translation projects.

This last point is particularly pertinent: many major works of literature in Indonesian are not yet translated into English, which makes the 'sharing' somewhat lopsided. It would be wonderful, however, if India could take the lead in supporting Indonesian efforts to produce more English translations. And all this while bearing in mind that society is never a passive thing: it is always a cultural project, a work in process.