

Everlasting Bond

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As two of the largest democratic countries in the world, the ambassador of The Republic of India H.E. Shri Manoj K. Bharti underlines the importance of cooperation and trust-building between Indonesia and India.



Like of those of several other countries, Indian seafarers travelled to Indonesia to ply their trade from the first century, bringing with them scholars and priests who also introduced Hinduism and Buddhism influences to Indonesia. Although Muslim influences later replaced Hinduism across much of Indonesia, there remain many pockets of communities, most notably in Bali, where the earlier influences are prevalent. Additionally, whether it is in historical statues and landmarks, the arts, cooking or the style of Sanskrit seen in Java and Bali, the connection to their Indian roots is strong.

More recently, there have been several waves of migration from India to Indonesia and both countries shared a common bond in being among the earliest former colonies to declare independence following the end of the second world war, Indonesia in 1945 and India just two years later, in 1947. Their successful transition to self-rule, no doubt playing an important part in influencing the wave of other Asian and African countries who followed suit in the ensuing decades.

With India celebrating its 75th anniversary of independence this year, and with both countries committed to strengthening economic ties with each other, Forbes Indonesia caught up with the Ambassador of India to Indonesia, H.E. Shri Manoj K. Bharti to talk about these enduring relations.

Forbes Indonesia (FI): India is celebrating its 75th anniversary, how significant is this moment for the republic? How have you been marking this celebration within the Indian community in Indonesia?

Manoj K. Bharti (MB): It is both an important milestone and a marker. When India got independence in 1947, almost everyone in the world said democracy is not going to work in India, because until that time democracy was a concept adopted only in developed countries and so India was the first poor country to experiment with it. However, over the last 75 years, India has not only survived but also has prospered and contributed to the notion of democracy. One of these was to be the first country to give equal voting rights to women in its first democratic elections, the provincial government elections held in 1935, at a time where these rights were not universally given across the rest of the democratic world. India today has a vibrant and developing economy and so it is important we should celebrate this milestone. We have marked it with the phrase “*Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav*” which in English literally means the elixir and energy, or grand festival, of independence, like the notion of nectar. This is also to remind us to also focus on the next 25 years when we will reach 100 years of independence. There is a large Indian diaspora, somewhere around 150,000 people, many of whose families have been based in Indonesia for generations. We have been holding many formal and more social events to gather these communities together to share the celebrations and engage with them on the opportunities for the next chapter.

FI: Indonesia and India have long been allies, what importance does this relationship hold?

MB: India and Indonesia are the world’s largest and third largest democracies. Cooperation between these two countries can reinforce that democracy as a system of governance still works, despite setbacks in several other countries lately. Hence the success story for India and Indonesia is a success story for democracy as a system of governance. To me, that is the importance of these two countries coming closer and working together. This is what I want to



H.E. Shri Manoj K. Bharti graduated from the Indian Institute of Technology Kanpur with a degree in Electrical Engineering. He joined the Indian Foreign Service in 1988 and his first posting was to Iran. After further postings in various countries including, Netherlands, Nepal, Turkey, and Bangladesh, he was appointed as the Indian Ambassador to Belarus. He also served as the Ambassador to Ukraine and in January 2021 he was appointed as the Ambassador to Indonesia. He has also written a book entitled *Understanding Indian Philosophy through Modern Science*, through which he reconciled his scientific mindset and his understanding of religion.



show during my assignment here, to convey to our people, government, and also the people of the world that us two democracies can prosper, work together, and show a way to the world. This will be achieved through the building of a strong trust and cooperation between us and so I see this as an important part of my mission.

FI: India is frequently described as one of Indonesia's most important trade partners, how is the current state of trade and investment between both countries?

MB: Both countries have strong aspirations to develop their economies and per capita income significantly over the next 10-15 years. We are coming from similar starting points and have similar roadmaps, so rather than seeing it as a competition, building cooperation and trading relationships together can be mutually beneficial. India's trading deficit with Indonesia is its largest with any trading partner but there are many opportunities to grow our trading volumes further. In 2019, we set a target of \$50 billion in trade by 2025 and, despite the pandemic, we are on track to achieve this. The new world dynamics make it possible to achieve greater diversification of trade, and new tradeable commodities are coming into the picture such as wheat, rice, and engineering goods. Much of the current business between India and Indonesia is happening through the private sector, it will serve both governments better if we can have a government-to-government agreement for a long-term purchase of essential commodities.

Investment-wise, there has been a lot of direct investment by Indian entities into Indonesia, around \$1.5 billion over the last 20 years, and if you add that which comes from Indian subsidiaries based overseas, like in Singapore, that number rises to nearly \$54 billion. There is a lot of interest to grow this further and one of the initiatives I have taken is to prepare a book outlining these opportunities in the different industries.

FI: In July 2022 a joint venture between Angkasa Pura II and Indian company GMR Airports started operating in the Kuala Namu Airport in North Sumatra, what can we expect from this collaboration?

MB: We have the satisfaction that GMR was not given that project, it competed against international companies, so it shows the research quality and assurance that Indian companies can give. The GMR model is to create a transit center for international flights to come to Medan, North Sumatra, and from there, they will go to different destinations in Indonesia. I'm sure this model will be beneficial for Indonesia and help them compete with places like Singapore to become an international travel hub in this region.

As an aside, one thing I'm currently working on is establishing an Indonesia-India direct flight, we are the second and fourth largest population in the world with a total population of 1.7 billion people, but we do not have a direct flight. However, I am sure there is a huge potential to be tapped so I have been in touch with airlines in India to solve this issue.

FI: What other potential opportunities can be explored further?

MB: India has many opportunities in digital technology, rural and electronic governance, and solar energy. India is known for its cost-effective technology and projects. That is why we can provide technology to many developing countries around the world. We hope that we can convince our Indonesian partners that if they do a project with Indian assistance, it will lessen their total economic burden. To give an already-existing example, a well-known Indian company called ION Exchange who does wild water purification has taken several projects in different islands of Indonesia. Their technology is one of the best in the world and at a much reduced cost than anywhere else.

FI: And tourism, cultural and other links?

MB: The main draw for Indian tourists, particularly to Bali is the quality of the destination and the welcoming of the people. It's becoming a favorite wedding destination and popular with families. But talking of cultural linkages, the most important one connecting the people of India to Bali is a tradition called *Bali Jatra*, which means "recall travel to Bali." It started during the early Christian Era, where each year on a full moon day in *Kartik* month of the Hindu calendar (around October-November), a very large contingent of young Indian men will start their boats from Odisha and the currents will then take them to Indonesia, especially Bali. In February or March, the currents will change, and they will come back from Bali to Odisha. This became an annual ritual ingrained so much that even though the voyage is no longer done now, each year the people of Odisha hold a festival on the full moon day in *Kartik* month and leave paper boats into the water, indicating a sendoff to their dear ones for a sea voyage. Before COVID-19 outbreak, we worked with the Government of Bali to link the island with this tradition, and we hope to start this again next year. We are also offering hundreds of scholarship opportunities for Indonesians to study across a range of technical subjects in India and we hope to develop the uptake this program further. **F**