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Ethnic Identity and Cultural Diplomacy of Indian Diaspora in Indonesia

Ni Kadek Surpi¹, Amarjiva Lochan², and Si Luh Nyoman Seriadi³

^{1,3}Hindu University of I Gusti Bagus Sugriwa Denpasar, Indonesia, ²Department of History, University of Delhi, Delhi, India

Correspondence: nikadeksurpi@uhnsugriwa.ac.id

Abstract

This study examines the role of the Indian diaspora in Indonesia in advancing cultural diplomacy, with a focus on the interplay between ethnic identity, media representation, and cultural integration. The Indian diaspora, historically rooted in regions such as North Sumatra, Aceh, Surabaya, Jakarta, and Bali, has contributed significantly to various sectors, including trade, textiles, manufacturing, and film. However, the community continues to face challenges related to citizenship status, remittances, sociocultural acceptance, and integration within Indonesia's predominantly Muslim society. Using a qualitative research approach, the study employs semi-structured interviews with key diaspora figures, content analysis of media representations, and policy document review to explore how ethnic identity both facilitates and complicates cultural diplomacy between India and Indonesia. Key findings reveal that while the diaspora acts as an effective conduit for India's soft power and cultural exchange, structural limitations constrain their diplomatic potential, such as exclusion from policy-making, cultural stereotyping, and institutional invisibility. The novelty of this research lies in its focus on the intersection of media, mindset, and diasporic cultural practice as strategic elements in public diplomacy. It argues that recognizing the nuanced role of diaspora identity is vital for fostering inclusive cultural diplomacy and enhancing bilateral relations in multicultural settings like Indonesia.

Keywords: Cross-culture, Cultural Diplomacy, Diaspora, Indian, Indonesia

Suggested citation:

Surpi, N. K., Lochan, A., & Seriadi, S. L. N. (2025). Ethnic Identity and Cultural Diplomacy of Indian Diaspora in Indonesia. *International Journal on Culture, History, and Religion*, 7(1), 55-72. <https://doi.org/10.63931/ijchr.v7i1.99>

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Introduction

India and Indonesia share a long-standing historical relationship rooted in trade, cultural exchange, and religious influence. One of the enduring legacies of this transnational interaction is the presence of the Indian diaspora in Indonesia. Comprising diverse ethnic groups such as Tamil, Gujarati, Punjabi, and Sindhi, the Indian diaspora has established its presence through multiple waves of migration, ranging from ancient spice trade routes and colonial labor systems to contemporary professional and entrepreneurial movements (Mishra, 2007; Ramstedt, 2004). Despite being numerically small within Indonesia's vast population, this diaspora has disproportionately impacted the nation's cultural, economic, and religious landscape.

In regions such as North Sumatra, Jakarta, Bali, and Surabaya, members of the Indian diaspora have contributed to trade, education, media, and health services. Historical figures such as Pandit Narendra Dev Pandit Shastri, who played a pivotal role in the official recognition of Hinduism in Indonesia, and contemporary personalities like Dr. Ravinjay Kuckreja and Sonia Kaur illustrate how this community has been active in shaping both religious and socio-economic life. However, their contributions are not without challenges. Issues such as cultural misrepresentation, limited participation in political and institutional frameworks, and persistent societal stereotypes reveal ongoing struggles in asserting ethnic identity while navigating national belonging.

While studies on diaspora communities often highlight their role in transnational engagement and soft power, limited attention has been paid to how ethnic identity operates as both a facilitator and obstacle in the context of cultural diplomacy (Bharucha, Rajeswaran, & Stierstorfer, 2021). In Indonesia, a Muslim-majority, multiethnic nation with a complex postcolonial history, ethnic minorities like the Indian diaspora face unique dilemmas in negotiating cultural preservation, social integration, and diplomatic representation. The growing global relevance of cultural diplomacy as a tool for soft power makes it critical to examine how diasporic communities like the Indian diaspora in Indonesia navigate these processes.

This study draws upon two primary theoretical perspectives: cultural diplomacy theory and diaspora/identity theory. The concept of soft power, as introduced by Nye (2004), is central to understanding how states and non-state actors leverage cultural influence to achieve diplomatic objectives. In this context, cultural diplomacy refers to the use of cultural engagement to foster positive international relations, promote mutual understanding, and enhance national prestige. For this study, it is essential to explore how the Indian diaspora in Indonesia contributes to soft power through cultural exchanges, media representation, and intercultural dialogue.

In parallel, the study incorporates diaspora and identity theory, drawing on the works of Stuart Hall and Benedict Anderson. Hall's notion of cultural identity as fluid and multiple provides a valuable framework for understanding how the Indian diaspora navigates its ethnic identity within Indonesia's multicultural national framework. Anderson's concept of imagined communities further contextualizes how diasporic groups perceive their connection to their homeland and host society (Mukherji, 2020). Together, these theoretical lenses help to examine how ethnic identity within the Indian diaspora functions not only as a personal and communal marker but also as a tool for cultural diplomacy. By analyzing the intersection of diaspora identity and cultural diplomacy, this study offers important insights into the role of the Indian diaspora in shaping Indonesia's diplomatic landscape (McSweeney & Nakamura, 2019). These theoretical lenses are applied to explore how ethnic identity within the Indian diaspora functions as a personal and communal marker and a tool for cultural diplomacy. By examining the intersection of diaspora identity and cultural diplomacy, this study provides insights into the role of the Indian diaspora in Indonesia's diplomatic landscape

This research is significant for two primary reasons. First, it addresses a gap in diaspora studies by focusing on Indonesia, a geopolitically strategic partner for India in Southeast Asia, a region that has yet to be fully explored in the context of diaspora studies. Second, it investigates the intersection of identity, media representation, and cultural participation, examining how these factors shape both public perceptions and diplomatic influence. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for academic inquiry and informing policies that promote inclusive multiculturalism and strengthen bilateral relations between India and Indonesia. This study specifically aims to explore how ethnic identity influences the role of the Indian diaspora in cultural diplomacy between the two nations. In doing so, it seeks to analyze how the Indian diaspora in Indonesia negotiates its ethnic identity within the multicultural national framework, examine the role of media and cultural practices in shaping public perceptions of the diaspora, and investigate how the diaspora contributes to India-Indonesia cultural diplomacy while identifying the structural and societal challenges they face. To achieve these objectives, the study will address three main interrelated questions: first, how does the ethnic identity of the Indian diaspora function ambivalently as both a bridge and an obstacle in their engagement with cultural diplomacy, particularly in strengthening the relationship between India and Indonesia? Second, how do media narratives and cultural representations shape public perceptions, influence social integration processes, and mediate the visibility of the Indian diaspora in Indonesia's multicultural public sphere? Finally, what strategies can be proposed to enhance the

role of the Indian diaspora as agents of soft power and constructive cultural exchange? These questions will guide the research in understanding the complexities of ethnic identity, cultural diplomacy, and diaspora agency in the context of Indonesia's multicultural society.

Based on the formulated research objectives, this study seeks to answer three main interrelated questions in analyzing the role and challenges of Indian diaspora ethnic identity in Indonesia's cultural diplomacy context. First, this study questions how the ethnic identity of the Indian diaspora functions ambivalently as both a bridge and an obstacle in their engagement with cultural diplomacy, particularly in bridging the relationship between the country of origin (India) and the country of residence (Indonesia). Secondly, this study explores how media narratives and cultural representations shape public perceptions, influence social integration processes, and mediate the visibility of the Indian diaspora in Indonesia's multicultural public sphere. Third, this study also aims to identify and propose strategies that can strengthen the role of the Indian diaspora as agents of soft power and constructive cultural exchange. These three questions are designed to unpack the dynamics of identity, agency, and diplomacy within an interdisciplinary framework that combines the perspectives of diaspora studies, media studies, and international relations while emphasizing the contribution of this research to the development of a more inclusive and community-based approach to cultural diplomacy. By focusing on these questions, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how diaspora identity can be strategically mobilized to promote inclusive, reciprocal, and context-sensitive cultural diplomacy in Indonesia.

Methodology

This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study design to explore the role and challenges of ethnic identity of the Indian diaspora in Indonesia in the context of cultural diplomacy. This approach was chosen because it can capture the complexity of subjective experiences, identity construction, and sociocultural dynamics. Data collection is conducted through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, media content analysis, and participatory observation. The interviews involved 85 informants from Indian diaspora communities, including Tamil, Gujarati, Punjabi, and Sindhi, living in cities such as Jakarta, Medan, Bali, and Surabaya. The informants included businessmen, educators, religious leaders, artists, and community leaders actively involved in cultural diplomacy activities. A purposive sampling technique is used to capture relevant informants, with snowball sampling as a complement to reach

hard-to-access individuals, particularly digital content creators and young cultural activists.

In addition to interviews, this research will also analyze digital media content such as TikTok videos, podcasts, blogs, and social media posts produced by diaspora members. This analysis aims to understand how ethnic identity and cultural diplomacy practices are represented and negotiated in digital spaces. Participatory observations will also be conducted in various cultural activities, such as religious festivals, culinary exhibitions, and art performances, to capture the direct interactions between diasporas and local communities and the cultural symbolism that appears in public spaces.

All qualitative data, including interview transcripts, field notes, and media artifacts, will be analyzed using thematic analysis methods. This process will include open coding and stepwise categorization to identify key patterns and themes related to identity negotiation, media representation, and cultural diplomacy strategies. The analysis will be conducted with the support of NVivo software to ensure systematization and interpretative rigor. The analytical framework is informed by theories in diaspora studies, cultural diplomacy, and identity theory in a postcolonial context.

This research also takes ethical considerations seriously. All participants were provided with written information about the purpose and scope of the study and their right to voluntary participation. Confidentiality of identity and cultural sensitivity will be strictly maintained, especially in religious and traditional contexts. By combining interviews, observation, and media analysis in the context of diverse diaspora communities, this research is expected to make conceptual and practical contributions to understanding diasporas' role in strengthening relations between nations through inclusive cultural diplomacy.

Results and Discussion

The Indian diaspora in Indonesia is a multifaceted community with a long history of migration, cultural exchange, and contribution to the country's social, economic, and cultural life. This section discusses the role and challenges of ethnic identity in the context of cultural diplomacy, focusing on the Indian diaspora in Indonesia, with emphasis on how it has influenced and interacted with Indonesian society across various dimensions. Each subsection presents a comprehensive view of the diaspora's contributions, challenges, and ongoing role in shaping Indonesian cultural diplomacy.

Historical Context of Indian Migration to Indonesia

The migration of Indians to Indonesia spans several centuries, beginning with the ancient spice trade. The first significant Indian presence in Indonesia emerged as early as the 9th century, with maritime trade routes facilitating the movement of Indian merchants and artisans to Southeast Asian islands. These early migrations were both economic and cultural, with Indian religions, particularly Hinduism and Buddhism, making lasting impressions on the region (Chandra, 1999). The influence of Indian civilization on Indonesia is still evident today in the religious practices, architectural structures, and even the linguistic characteristics of various regions.

A second wave of migration occurred during the colonial era, particularly in the 19th century, with the arrival of Indian laborers and traders who were brought to the archipelago by the Dutch colonial administration. The Tamil community, in particular, settled in parts of Sumatra and Java, working primarily in the plantation economy (Singh, 2012). These laborers became integral to the economic activities of the colonial state and played a crucial role in the growth of the plantation industry. This wave in the nineteenth century was dominated by Tamils (Mani & Varadarajan, 2005). Another small-scale migration took place in the early twentieth century by Punjabi Sikhs who were interested in opening shops in Java, especially in Batavia. Migration in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries occurred before India and Indonesia's independence. Over time, this group began to establish its own social networks and economic structures, contributing to the creation of a distinct Indian community within Indonesia.

The third wave of migration occurred after the partition of India in 1947, with large numbers of refugees fleeing the newly formed nations of India and Pakistan. Many of these refugees sought asylum in Indonesia, and their arrival added to the already established communities of Indians. This migration period helped reinforce the diverse nature of the Indian diaspora in Indonesia, with different subgroups such as Punjabis, Gujaratis, and Bengalis forming distinct but interconnected networks in Indonesian cities (Pande, 2014).

As such, these early diasporas had no attachment to either the Indian Republic or the newly independent Indonesia; they were not indigenous but considered foreign. India also maintained a 'hands-off' approach towards them, even in cases where people of Indian descent were denied fundamental rights, such as in Myanmar and Malaysia (Pande, 2014). The opposite happened between India and indigenous Indonesians. Indonesian nationalists established Theosophical Societies originating from Madras in Java, Medan, Gorontalo, and Denpasar. Javanese organizations such as Boedi Oetomo (founded 1908), Mimpitoe (founded 1909), Java Instituut (founded

1919), and Taman Siswa (founded 1922) interacted closely with Indonesian and Indian Theosophists (Ramstedt, 2008). This also included visits in 1927 by Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore, philologist Suniti Kumar Chatterji, artist-archaeologist Surendhranath Kar, and painter-musician Dhirendra Krishna Deva Varman as a form of renewed interest in the Hindu-Buddhist heritage of Java (Das, 2002). The Greater Indian Society (founded in 1926) also celebrated Indonesia's historical relationship with India, focusing on research activities. The third and final wave occurred during the partition of Pakistan and India, which was part of their declaration of independence in 1947. Some 14 to 18 million people had to move across the border to secular India, Islamic Pakistan, or elsewhere, including (but not limited to) Southeast Asia (Dyson, 2019). This mass migration resulted in the highest casualty rate for migration, according to the 2014 Guinness Book of World Records. One million people were killed, and another 12 million were displaced. Most of them were from the Punjabi and Sindhi ethnic groups. The 1930 Dutch census recorded 21,000 Indians in North Sumatra. Smaller groups comprised 5,500 Indians in Java, 2,900 in Kalimantan, and about 1,500 in other islands. Most of them were single men born in the Dutch East Indies (Mani, 2006). However, the Japanese occupation and World War II saw this number decline as the Indian business community was displaced, while some were recruited as soldiers.

The historical context of Indian migration to Indonesia demonstrates how these communities have evolved over time from isolated groups of traders and laborers to a complex and integrated part of Indonesian society, influencing everything from economics to religion.

Cultural and Religious Influence

The cultural and religious contributions of the Indian diaspora in Indonesia are among the most enduring aspects of their presence. The Indian diaspora has brought with it a rich tapestry of traditions, religious practices, and cultural customs that have significantly influenced Indonesian culture. Hinduism, Buddhism, and later Sikhism and Islam, practiced by various Indian communities, have shaped the religious landscape of Indonesia, particularly in Bali, North Sumatra, and Java.

Hinduism, as brought by Indian traders and priests, has had a profound influence on Indonesian culture, particularly in Bali, where it remains the dominant religion. The practice of Hindu rituals, the establishment of temples, and the celebration of festivals such as Diwali and Nyepi reflect the deep-rooted cultural ties between India and Indonesia (Vijayakumar, 2010). Similarly, Indian music, dance forms like Bharatanatyam, and literature have found their way into Indonesian

cultural expressions, especially in Java, where many traditional performances were inspired by Indian epics such as the Ramayana and Mahabharata (Sari, 2016).

Religiously, the Tamil community has introduced various forms of Hindu worship, focusing on deities like Murugan and Mariamman, with temples like the Mariamman Temple in Medan playing a central role in the community's religious life. The Sikh community, while maintaining its distinct religious practices, has also integrated elements of Indonesian culture, especially in urban centers like Jakarta, where gurdwaras (Sikh temples) serve as centers for both religious worship and community engagement (Ramstedt, 2008).

Post-Independence in Indonesia, the Balinese folk religion was transformed into Hinduism, which was officially recognized by the state. This process began in the 1950s with attempts to formalize Hinduism as independent of Balinese culture (Picard, 2017). This process was required to ensure Hinduism was a universal religion, not exclusive to any ethnic group (Aryadharma, 2009). Being a universal religion is one of the many requirements to become an official religion in Indonesia, which has a position and receives a budget under the Ministry of Religious Affairs. This reformulation of Hinduism transformed Dharma-based Religion into a religion like Islam, and thus has created a new Hindu movement, Agama Hindu Dharma Indonesia. This transformation is also linked to the reformation of Hinduism in India. Hindu nationalists such as Rammohun Roy, Dayānanda Saraswati, Swāmi Vivekānanda, and Mohandas K. Gandhi shaped anti-colonial movements as well as universalized Hinduism in a development now known as Neo-Hinduism. These movements in India formed a monotheistic, devotional-based, and liberal version of Hinduism that was "universalistic and all-embracing." One such movement was the Ārya Samaj, founded by Dayānanda Sarasvati (1824-83) in Mumbai in 1875. A missionary of the Ārya Samaj, Narendra Dev Pandit Shastri, contributed to the formation of Indonesian Hinduism through his writings, his active role in Hindu leadership in Indonesia (Ramstedt, 2008), and even in the formation of the Tri Sandhyā prayer (Lanus, 2014). Pandit Shastri became an essential figure in the efforts to recognize Hinduism as an official religion in Indonesia, which solidified the role of the Indian diaspora in the field of Hinduism.

Indian cultural influence is also evident in food, clothing, and language. Indian cuisine, particularly dishes like biryani and curry, has been absorbed into Indonesian culinary traditions, especially in regions with significant Indian populations. Furthermore, many members of the Indian diaspora still speak Tamil, Hindi, and Punjabi, contributing to Indonesia's linguistic diversity.

However, despite these cultural contributions, the Indian diaspora has faced challenges in maintaining its religious and cultural identity in the face of Indonesia's strong national identity, which is centered around Pancasila and the nation's predominantly Muslim population (Vijayakumar, 2010). This has led to tensions in some regions, especially in times of political or social unrest.

Economic Contributions and Integration

Economically, the Indian diaspora has been instrumental in shaping Indonesia's business landscape. From early trade activities during the colonial era, Indian-descended entrepreneurs and laborers have moved from the periphery to the center of Indonesia's economic life. The diaspora has played a crucial role in sectors such as agriculture, trade, textiles, and manufacturing.

The Indian community's involvement in the trade of spices, textiles, and precious metals helped lay the foundation for modern economic activity in Indonesia. In the post-independence period, members of the diaspora transitioned from small-scale traders to major business leaders. Families like the Tolarams and the Lohia family played pivotal roles in the development of industries such as textiles, chemicals, and consumer goods (Mani, 2006). Furthermore, Indian businesses in Indonesia have made significant contributions to job creation and economic development, particularly in regions like Jakarta and Surabaya.

In recent decades, the Indian diaspora has also become involved in modern industries, including information technology, education, and financial services. The Indian community has established a strong presence in the tech industry, with figures like Bhavin Turakhia, the founder of Flock, and the other members of his family contributing to Indonesia's growing tech sector (Surpi, 2022).

Indian Diaspora businesspeople have played an important role in Indonesia's economic development. They contribute significantly to the field of trade and other sectors such as manufacturing, banking, and technology. Many businessmen of Indian descent started their businesses in the trade sector. They were involved in trade in textiles, spices, gold, and other consumer goods. A successful example is the Tolaram Group, which distributes and produces food and beverages in Indonesia. Several businessmen of Indian descent have established factories and manufacturing companies that produce products such as textiles, plastics, and chemicals. For example, the Texmaco Group is well-known in the textiles and machinery industry. They also play an important role in the banking and financial sector. Many are involved in establishing banks, investment companies, and insurance companies. Some well-known figures in this sector are Shanti Shamdasani, who has a network of

companies in various sectors, including finance. Many of the new generation of businesspeople of Indian descent are engaged in the technology and startup sectors. They founded companies operating in the fields of information technology, fintech, and e-commerce. One example is Bhavin Turakhia, founder of Flock, a communications technology company based in Indonesia. Many businesspeople of Indian descent are involved in philanthropy and community development activities. They established foundations and social institutions focusing on education, health, and community economic empowerment. For example, the Bina Sejahtera Foundation was founded by the extended Lohia family, also known as the owners of the Indorama Group, one of the largest manufacturing companies in Indonesia. Indonesian cinema also experienced rapid development due to the role of the Indian diaspora, Raam Jethmal Punjabi (born 6 October 1944). Raam Punjabi is a film and soap opera producer with Indian and Indonesian ancestry. He is the most successful producer with the production house Multivision Plus. Also, Manoj Punjabi is currently a very popular Indonesian film producer of Indian descent. Manoj and his father are the founders of the largest production house in Indonesia, MD Entertainment, and are also the figures behind the success of the film "KKN di Desa Penari." Due to the creativity of the Indian Diaspora in the field of cinema, Indonesia has been able to show rapid progress in the world of entertainment

Indian diaspora businesspeople in Indonesia have proven to be integral to the country's economic and social development. Through various sectors, they create jobs, increase economic prosperity, and maintain and enrich Indonesia's cultural diversity.

Despite these successes, integrating the Indian diaspora into Indonesia's broader economic life has not been without challenges. Many members of the diaspora have faced barriers related to nationality, ethnicity, and religion, which have sometimes hindered their ability to fully integrate into the wider economic fabric of the country. Additionally, political tensions, such as the anti-Chinese riots of 1998, have at times created a climate of insecurity for both Indian and Chinese communities, resulting in a retreat to more insular economic networks (Dyson, 2019).

Cultural Diplomacy and Educational Initiatives

The role of the Indian diaspora in cultural diplomacy between India and Indonesia is a significant aspect of their contribution to both countries. Cultural diplomacy refers to the use of cultural exchanges and interactions as tools for fostering mutual understanding and strengthening bilateral relations. The Indian diaspora has played an important role in promoting Indian culture in Indonesia through various educational and cultural initiatives.

Indian language schools, such as those offering Hindi and Tamil courses, have been central to preserving and disseminating Indian cultural practices in Indonesia. These schools not only serve the Indian community but also attract a broader Indonesian audience interested in learning about Indian languages and culture (Mohanty, 2010). Additionally, cultural festivals like Diwali and Holi, which have gained popularity among Indonesians, serve as major platforms for cultural diplomacy, with performances, dance, and culinary events showcasing Indian traditions.

The Indian diaspora has also contributed to educational exchanges between India and Indonesia, with students and professionals traveling between the two countries for academic and professional development. Institutions such as the Indian Cultural Centre in Jakarta serve as hubs for promoting educational and cultural exchanges, strengthening the ties between the two nations (Untara et al., 2024).

Moreover, through their involvement in media and the arts, members of the Indian diaspora have shaped the entertainment industry in Indonesia. Figures such as Raam Jethmal Punjabi and Manoj Punjabi have made significant contributions to Indonesian cinema, particularly in the production of popular TV shows and films, which often feature Indian themes or storylines, thereby contributing to the cultural dialogue between the two nations (Wedakarna et al., 2016).

Social Integration and Cultural Exchanges

The integration of the Indian diaspora into Indonesian society has been complex, shaped by both the contributions of diaspora communities and the challenges they face in terms of identity and cultural preservation. While the Indian diaspora has largely been accepted in urban areas and in sectors where their economic contributions are most visible, in more rural or less developed areas, they have sometimes been marginalized and viewed as outsiders (Ramstedt, 2008).

The challenges of integration were particularly evident during the 1998 anti-Chinese and anti-Indian riots, which saw the eruption of racial and religious tensions in Indonesia. These events, while not targeted specifically at the Indian community, highlighted the vulnerabilities faced by ethnic minorities in a nation where ethnic and religious identities often intersect with political and economic power (Pande, 2014).

In 1998, ethnic Chinese became the target of mobs in Jakarta and in various major cities in Indonesia. This did not only happen to the Chinese but to other ethnicities, such as Indian descent. Therefore, many students and families of Indian descent chose to leave Indonesia. One of them is Ravinjay, a young man who found his calling as a teacher. For those who were students, many returned to Indonesia

when education ended and things returned to normal, although not a few chose not to return. One of the triggers of the 1998 tragedy in Indonesia was the lingering trauma of the Indonesian people with the colonizers. Ethnic Chinese and Indians are still classified as 'foreigners' who are synonymous with colonizers.

In addition, these two ethnicities are very inclusive, limiting their association with local people, and many of them are successful businessmen. Economic disparity led to riots and looting of Chinese-owned shops, as well as violence against 'foreigners.' The Indian diaspora, too, are still stigmatized as foreigners even though they have been in Indonesia for generations. Likewise, this stigma builds its own identity pattern for the Indian diaspora. Meanwhile, Arab descendants are very accepted by the Indonesian population because of the initial strategy carried out. Namely, the scholars and people of Arab descent came to Indonesia without bringing wives, even if they married more than one wife. This marriage bond makes Arab descendants more accepted. In addition, religious ideology, namely the Qibla to Mecca and respect for the scholars and the blood of the Prophet, creates a strong bond for the Indonesian population, which is predominantly Muslim.

In general, there is a prayer pattern of identification of the Indian diaspora; first, those who still identify themselves as descendant Indians, who still have strong ties to Indian society, still practice several ancestral traditions. Second, those who identify as Indonesians have little contact with Indian society and no longer practice the inherited traditions. Dr. Ravinjay represents the Indian diaspora, which identifies as Indonesians, is not active in Indian diaspora activities, is not associated with business, and does not actively follow Indian ancestral traditions. Dr. Ravinjay chooses to study Hinduism academically and delves into the roots of Hindu traditions in Indonesia through various ancient texts of the archipelago. In general, the role of culture and diplomacy is essential for the Indian diaspora. In various cities in Indonesia, several cultural and religious activities are celebrated by the Indian diaspora community and invite residents to participate, such as Holi celebrations, Diwali, and Indian art and cultural performances, even collaborating with Indonesian cultures, such as Indian dance collaborating with Balinese dance, thus creating admiration and a sense of bridging between the two cultures, namely India and Bali. The Indian Diaspora also actively organizes various activities other than art. Activities in Vedic-based knowledge and technology as an exchange of knowledge. Seminars, workshops, and research activities are often held, strengthening people-to-people relations (Surpi, 2022).

According to the Indian Diaspora, Indonesia is not the foremost destination for migration from the Land of India for several reasons, including religion. Since before

its independence, the Dutch East Indies have been known as a region that has successfully implemented Islamization. With a different religion, it will undoubtedly limit the movement of the Indian diaspora and is also vulnerable to religious and cultural friction. The strong religious presence in Indonesia has also led to many Indian diasporas embracing Islam and, more recently, the phenomenon of Indian diasporas converting to Christianity. However, in general, those who embrace Hinduism build communities and temples of worship that are exclusive in nature; even Indonesians who are Hindus very rarely visit Indian Hindu Temples because of the form of buildings, worship procedures, and calculation of holy days to different traditions. Thus, to this day, the Indian diaspora is still very exclusive, not even joining the Hindu Indonesian community.

However, in areas not identified with temples and shrines, Indian diasporic communities and local communities can merge closely and beautifully, for example, at the Satya Sai Baba Spiritual Teacher gathering place or other activities such as yoga and meditation (Surpi et al., 2020). However, there has not been an approach concerning places of worship such as temples and shrines; Indian diasporic Hindus focus on temples complete with Indian worship procedures, and Balinese ethnic Hindus focus on temple worship. In general, local ethnic Hindus are not accustomed to praying in Indian temples, and vice versa. Indian diaspora Hindus are not accustomed to praying in Balinese-style temples or Javanese Candi.

Despite these challenges, the Indian diaspora has made significant strides in fostering cultural exchanges with the wider Indonesian community. Social integration has been promoted through communal activities such as yoga, meditation, and joint participation in cultural festivals. These activities have helped build bridges between Indian and Indonesian populations, promoting mutual understanding and respect across cultural boundaries.

Diaspora Networks and Cultural Diplomacy

The formation of diaspora networks has been a crucial factor in the success of Indian cultural diplomacy in Indonesia. These networks not only provide support and resources for the Indian community but also facilitate cultural exchanges and economic partnerships between India and Indonesia. Diaspora networks have played an essential role in organizing events, promoting bilateral business ventures, and advancing the interests of both countries in international forums.

One of the most prominent examples of diaspora networks is the Indian Business Association of Indonesia (IBAI), which helps Indian businesses in Indonesia connect with each other and with local Indonesian companies. These networks foster

a sense of solidarity and shared identity among members of the Indian diaspora while also serving as a bridge for wider economic and cultural collaboration between the two countries (Somvir, 2005). The role of the Indian diaspora in cultural diplomacy is not always formal and centralized. In many cases, diaspora communities carry out what is referred to as diaspora diplomacy or grassroots cultural diplomacy (Ho & McConnell, 2017). In Indonesia, festivals such as Diwali, Holi, and Navaratri organized by the Indian community have become important moments in introducing Indian culture to Indonesians. These events strengthen the diaspora community's relationship with the local community and reinforce positive perceptions of India as a country of origin.

With these, the Indian diaspora in Indonesia has made significant contributions to the country's social, economic, and cultural life. Despite challenges related to integration and identity, the diaspora has played a crucial role in promoting cultural diplomacy, fostering economic development, and preserving cultural heritage. By maintaining strong cultural ties to India while actively participating in Indonesian society, the Indian diaspora is an important link between the two nations, facilitating greater understanding and cooperation.

Although this study has historically and analytically described the role of the Indian diaspora in Indonesia in relation to ethnic identity and cultural diplomacy, several limitations should be noted. First, the approach in this study is still descriptive and based on secondary literature, so it has not been able to capture in depth the subjective experiences and cultural dynamics from within the diaspora community itself. Secondly, the focus of this study is still limited to certain communities, such as Tamils and Sindhis in big cities such as Medan and Jakarta, Bali, and Surabaya, while the diversity of Indian diaspora communities in other regions has not been much touched upon. In addition, the practices of non-formal cultural diplomacy carried out through daily activities, interpersonal relationships, and community activities are also less systematically mapped in this study, even though they are often the main force in building cultural bridges across nations.

Based on these limitations, future research can be directed toward more contextualized ethnographic studies in various parts of Indonesia to directly reveal the cultural practices that live in diaspora communities. Research can also adopt an intersectionality approach to understand how ethnic identity in the diaspora interacts with other factors such as social class, gender, and generation, especially in the context of young diasporic generations who experience the process of negotiating identity between two cultural worlds. Finally, a comparative study between the Indian diaspora in Indonesia and other Southeast Asian countries, such as Malaysia,

Singapore, or Thailand, can enrich our understanding of patterns of cultural diplomacy that emerge from different Asian cultural roots and historical relations. As such, this study is expected to be a starting point for a broader, more critical, and in-depth exploration of the role of diasporas as important actors in transnational cultural diplomacy.

Conclusions

The Indian Diaspora in Indonesia plays a multifaceted role in bridging cultures and promoting diplomacy between India and Indonesia. Through cultural dissemination, education, arts, culinary, economic collaboration, social activities, media, community networks, and participation in public policy, they contribute significantly to strengthening cultural relations and diplomacy between the two countries. The challenges faced in maintaining ethnic identity and local acceptance can be addressed through inclusive and sustainable strategies, enhancing cross-cultural understanding and international cooperation. The Indian diaspora in Indonesia is a crucial component of the cultural relationship between the two countries. Their ethnic identity plays a key role in cultural diplomacy but is not free from challenges. By understanding these roles and challenges, we can develop more effective strategies to promote cross-cultural understanding and international cooperation. This research seeks to provide deep insight into these dynamics and contribute to the development of a more inclusive and effective cultural diplomacy.

Despite facing various challenges, ranging from stereotypes and limited socio-political representation to issues of cultural acceptance, the Indian diaspora in Indonesia has demonstrated remarkable resilience and adaptability. These challenges necessitate more inclusive, participatory, and sustainable approaches to cultural diplomacy. Strengthening their role requires cross-sectoral strategies that include multicultural education, media representation, cultural exchange initiatives, and institutional cooperation between India and Indonesia.

This study underscores the need for a deeper understanding of the roles and obstacles faced by the Indian diaspora in order to formulate more effective policies that enhance cross-cultural understanding and promote harmonious international collaboration. The diaspora should not merely be seen as a minority community but rather as a crucial element in the cultural diplomacy architecture between the two nations. Ultimately, the presence and contributions of the Indian diaspora enrich Indonesia's multicultural landscape while simultaneously reinforcing the foundations of diplomacy grounded in inclusivity, tolerance, and intercultural dialogue. Their role exemplifies how ethnic identity, when supported by strategic and inclusive frameworks, can serve as a powerful instrument for fostering long-term bilateral cooperation and cultural synergy.

Conflicts of Interests

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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