



A temple in Prambanan. All Photos: Courtesy Remote Lands

Hit the Road
by **Devanshi Mody**

Seek, Pray, Learn

ELEMENTS OF INDIAN ARCHITECTURE ARE TO BE FOUND IN THE MAGNIFICENT TEMPLES OF BALI, WHICH GIVE RISE TO THE QUESTIONS OF WHEN AND HOW THIS CROSS-CULTURAL EXCHANGE WAS FACILITATED. FOLLOW THE TRAIL AND YOU WILL HAVE A FASCINATING LESSON IN HISTORY AND SPIRITUAL THOUGHT

If you thought Tamil Nadu is temple land, you have not visited Bali, the only Hindu island in Indonesia's kitty of 17,500 islands where pervasions of jagged-edged temples jostle for space with the mighty onslaught of luxury resorts (which, incidentally, have their own temples, just as every Balinese home has a 'family temple' in their yard). Bali's temples, their prodigious quantum notwithstanding, have not the architectural splendour and stratospheric proportions of Tamil Nadu's great temples. In Indonesia's culture capital Yogyakarta, in Central Java, ninth century Buddhist and Hindu UNESCO sites Borobudur and Prambanan alone match the craftsmanship of Tamil Nadu's temples - but that is perhaps because sculptors from Tamil Nadu and Odisha crafted them.

History tells us that the Cholas attained Cambodia and Indonesia, and that Chola architecture inspired Angkor Wat in Siem Reap. I was told that Rajendra Chola swashbucklingly led an ocean fleet, captured and colonised certain Indonesian islands and brought Hinduism to Indonesia. Dubiety taints this tale however much it excites Tamil pride, because Rajendra Chola did not come into existence until the eleventh century and Hindu temples in Indonesia date from the ninth century, at least. We do, however, know that Rajendra Chola's naval expedition to Indo-China accomplished the historic conquest of Srivijaya (modern Kedah), marking a unique chapter in pacifist Indian history. Now, the port Rajendra captured, Srivijaya, and the Sailendra Dynasty, whose collapse he achieved, bore Sanskrit names, suggesting the anterior advent of Hinduism into the region. Java legends of 78 AD refer to the 'Saka Era' and stories from The *Mahabharata* have been detected since the first century, together with extensive use of Sanskrit words, Indian deity names and religious concepts.

Yet, there seems little academic rigour and, concomitantly, consensus on precisely when, how and from where in India Hinduism and Buddhism voyaged to Indonesia. History is shrouded in hearsay, and opinions abound, obfuscating fact. Hinduism came in the fourth century with the Sanjay

A series of shrines in Prambanan.





Buddhist influences abound in Borodbudur (top and below).



Dynasty, says guide Sutan Ismail from Remote Lands. He is only one of four that the excessively stringent and terrifyingly exclusive tour operator Remote Lands recruited from 150 applicants - which inspires confidence in his authority. Moreover, his commentary, delivered in eloquent English, evinces a certain erudition. And, crucially, he has a sense of humour. So when my mother mistakenly calls him "Sultan", he quips, "If my name were Sultan, I wouldn't be here," as he fetches us from 100-year-old heritage hotel Phoenix Yogyakarta, the base from which to explore Yogyakarta's heritage sites, including the nearby Sultan's Palace.

In implacable rain, we embark to Prambanan, a complex of temples enshrining each of the Hindu Trinity

Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva and their respective carriers (Hamsa, Garuda and Nandi) in the embrace of several incidental shrines. Ovoid temple tops uncannily resemble those in Odisha, except that in Indonesia they get tagged UNESCO. Temple architecture seems a Dravidian and Orian architectural hybrid, with sculptural adornments evoking the Great Chola Temples. Unsurprisingly then, Sutan reveals the artists were Indian exports, comprising 10 per cent of the workforce. "The locals only provided labour." Why and how they were brought remains a mystery, but Sutan says Tamil-looking descendants still survive in Java.

Prambanan predates Hampi. While at Hampi, the *Ramayana* is told on stone in its entirety in one temple, the epic scrolls enclosures across the principle temples at Prambanan. Deciphering an especially pronounced panel from The *Ramayana* of Sugriva combatting Vali to get back his wife, Sutan winks, "It's all about the women," and proceeds to establish that the Great Wall of China and the Rama Setu (built by the army of monkeys led by Hanuman) linking India and Lanka are the only two things on Earth visible from space.

We stroll 800 m to Sewu, an eighth century Buddhist temple, Indonesia's second largest, which lately acquired UNESCO status. (Odisha's more architecturally dense

contemporaneous trio of sixth- to twelfth century Buddhist sites Ratnagiri, Lalitgiri and Udayagiri have not yet gained UNESCO status, neither has the tremendously pretty Sarnath, outside Varanasi, where the Buddha first discoursed.) Sutan says Indonesia aggressively secured for Sewu the much-sought UNESCO brand label that seems easily procured everywhere but in India. Sutan prescribes that the Indian government should make more strenuous efforts, for he too has heard of the heritage marvel that is India and longs to visit.

Prambanan, however, is astonishingly beautiful and I wonder why Borobudur enjoys greater fame. Sutan replies enigmatically, "You tell me."

But first, he tells me, en route to Borobudur, as we pass lush rice fields, about how the Buddhists and Hindus coexisted (with a few squabbles) in these fertile volcanic parts until the Muslims descended from Yemen and Gujarat. They then mass converted Buddhists and Hindus, except those who fled to East Java, and eventually hopped across to Bali where they engendered a unique temple architecture, notably those ingeniously and famously around water systems. You have spectacular monstrous 'guardians' vigilantly

contouring Balinese temples with otherwise little of the architectural finesse of Indian temples and without icons of stupendous stature as in India. However, tenth century water temple Tirta Empul and Bali's most sacred



Intricate architectural influences are seen in Pura Besakih (top and below).

temple, the thirteenth century Pura Besakih with roofs like stacked Chinese hats are endowed with magnificent sculpted monoliths of dragons, snakes and buffalo, echoing Chinese influences. Bali practises an adulterated Hinduism – ritualistic and simplistic. Yet, the Balinese grasp the recondite monotheistic quintessence underlying Hinduism – 'Many manifestations, One Divinity' – from which the immense pantheon of Hindu gods has proliferated.

Now, Borobudur is like nothing I have seen. Monumental, multi-tiered, rising majestically from plush lawns, it is the world's largest single Buddhist temple. Its tapering tiers, with circular passages, 'galleries', flanked by streaming sculpted finery of Buddhist significance, divinity incarnate in stone, are a pilgrimage. Belaboured though by a querulous and unmitigated rain that commenced its peevish assault at dawn and would not relent, we escalate.

The now-concealed base with illustrations of deviant sexuality, seen in Dutch books only as they alone accessed this gallery during colonial rule, represents human carnality. The second level, comprising four elaborately carved galleries, begins with the most ornate gallery with expositions of the





life of the Buddha in splendid detail. It becomes increasingly more rarefied and esoteric as you rise, symbolising the mind's cleansing and corresponding discarnation. It is a sensitive apprehension of abstruse philosophical concepts and precepts 'transliterated', if you will, in a graphic artistic language.

If Sutan assumed that like his other guests we would just saunter past, he is overwhelmed when prevailed upon to interpret every panel (the ones on the circumscribing wall we quite simply cannot manage simultaneously). In 21 years of guiding, Sutan has rarely been asked exhaustive details.

When we get to the more arcane carvings of the third and fourth galleries, Sutan confesses he cannot interpret them; not even the anchorites at the nearby monastery can. But the monks of yore who meticulously circumambulated each level, imbibing the lesson in each panel, clearly had some decoding tool, which not even the most erudite literature on the temple, Sutan says, has disclosed. Instead, Sutan enlarges on the significance of the number 9, as in Hinduism, (504 human-sized Buddha statues, and so on).

When you reach the final 'philosophical' tier's two levels, you have Buddhas in butter-dish-like stone encasings, with diamond-shaped apertures suggesting that the external world has not yet been eradicated from the mind. The rarefaction apotheosised in the stark, opaque stupa symbolises

BALI PRACTISES AN ADULTERATED HINDUISM - RITUALISTIC AND SIMPLISTIC. YET, THE BALINESE GRASP THE MONOTHEISTIC QUINTESSENCE UNDERLYING HINDUISM - 'MANY MANIFESTATIONS, ONE DIVINITY'

disembodiment and signifies extermination from the mind of all desire and the external world in Nirvana. The view from the top is exhilarating and liberating. The experience should enlighten, too.

Sutan said we could see Borobudur in one hour; three hours later, we hardly feel we have seen anything. But the point is to see with the 'Third Eye'. Indeed, Sutan avers every time he comes here he feels a subtle, elevating refinement of being. You certainly feel lighter, as if you have shed some of your toilsome embodiment. I now see why Borobudur is more famous than Prambanan.

Just when we complete our visit, the rain stops. Haggard clouds, exhausted from a day's labouring, hang limply in abashed skies. I had said that morning, "It is my destiny to see UNESCO sites in the rain, and once you accept your destiny, life simplifies." Sutan winks; I seem to have acquired philosophical insight even before the circumambulation of Borobudur. ■