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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

A Temple the Jungle Swallowed: What Prambanan Teaches About Heritage

 **INDIAN EXPRESS**

11 July 2026

HISTORY & CULTURE

GS1

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THE LIFT LINE

A monument is not merely old stone but a memory the present chooses to keep alive, and Prambanan survives because generations decided its silence was worth breaking.

WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

Prambanan, the towering 9th-century Hindu temple complex on the island of Java, was abandoned for centuries, buried by earthquakes and volcanic ash, rediscovered in the colonial era and slowly restored into a UNESCO World Heritage Site. For **GS1** it is a case study in temple architecture and the Indianisation of Southeast Asia; for **GS2** it is a study in cultural diplomacy and the soft power that shared heritage confers on India.

GS Paper 1: Indian art, architecture and culture; the spread of Indian culture abroad; world history and the cultural links of ancient and medieval Asia.

GS Paper 2: India's soft power and cultural diplomacy; **bilateral** (<https://ujjari.com/vocab/bilateral/>) and regional relations shaped by shared civilisational heritage.

For **Prelims**, remember that Prambanan is the largest Hindu temple compound in Indonesia, dedicated to the Trimurti with the central and tallest shrine devoted to Shiva, flanked by shrines to Brahma and Vishnu, its walls carved with reliefs of the Ramayana. For **Mains**, argue that heritage abroad is both a conservation responsibility and a diplomatic asset that India can use to deepen ties across the Indo-Pacific.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

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Prambanan was built in the 9th century under the Hindu Sanjaya dynasty of the Mataram kingdom, close in time and place to the great Buddhist stupa of Borobudur, evidence that Hindu and Buddhist traditions flourished side by side in ancient Java. Within a century or two the seat of power shifted, and the complex fell into neglect. Earthquakes toppled its slender towers and volcanic activity buried its base, leaving a field of scattered stones that villagers gradually forgot the meaning of.

The site drew scholarly attention again during the colonial period, when European surveyors documented the ruins and clearance began. Reconstruction proper started in the 20th century and continues in stages to this day, guided by the principle of anastylosis, the careful reassembly of a monument from its original fallen pieces. Prambanan was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List, and even after a major earthquake damaged it again in the 2000s, restoration resumed. Its story is thus not a single act of rescue but a long, unfinished act of care.

THE CORE ARGUMENT / ISSUE

An Indic imprint on a distant shore

Prambanan is among the clearest surviving proofs of what historians call the Indianisation of Southeast Asia, the diffusion of Indian religion, script, statecraft and art across maritime trade routes over the first millennium. This was not conquest but cultural influence carried by merchants, priests and travellers, absorbed and reworked by local kingdoms into forms uniquely their own. The Ramayana carved on Prambanan's walls is Indian in source and Javanese in expression.

Conservation as a long discipline

The temple's revival illustrates why heritage conservation is difficult. Monuments face slow decay, natural disaster and the pressure of tourism, and their restoration demands scholarship, funding, community involvement and patience across generations.

DIMENSION	WHAT PRAMBANAN SHOWS
Origin	9th-century Hindu temple, Mataram kingdom, Java
Dedication	Trimurti, with the tallest shrine to Shiva
Iconography	Ramayana reliefs, Indianised Javanese style
Threats	Earthquakes, volcanic burial, neglect, tourism
Method	Anastylosis, staged reconstruction, UNESCO listing

Heritage as soft power

Shared civilisational roots give India a natural bridge to Indonesia and the wider region. Cultural cooperation, joint restoration, scholarship and tourism can convert this inheritance into living diplomacy that does not depend on trade balances or security pacts alone.

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS (ANALYTICAL FRAME)

Treat a restored monument as a choice the present makes about the past. The transferable rule: heritage has no automatic survival, it endures only where societies invest in remembering, and its meaning today is as much diplomatic and educational as it is archaeological. For India, monuments like Prambanan are not foreign curiosities but nodes in a wider Indic cultural map worth engaging with respectfully and jointly.

THE DIAGRAM IN WORDS

Indian cultural diffusion via maritime trade -> 9th-century Prambanan built in Java -> abandonment, earthquake and volcanic burial -> colonial-era rediscovery -> staged restoration by anastylosis -> UNESCO World Heritage listing -> living symbol of Indic heritage -> platform for India-Indonesia cultural diplomacy and soft power

WAY FORWARD

- ① **Deepen conservation partnerships.** Expand India's cooperation on heritage restoration across Southeast Asia, sharing expertise as it has done at other sites in the region.
- ② **Invest in scholarship and exchange.** Fund joint research, student exchange and museum collaboration that keep the shared history studied and understood rather than forgotten.
- ③ **Use culture in diplomacy deliberately.** Weave civilisational links into India's Act East engagement so that soft power complements strategic and economic ties.
- ④ **Promote responsible heritage tourism.** Encourage travel that funds conservation and respects local communities, rather than tourism that erodes the very sites it celebrates.

PYQ LINKAGE AND PRACTICE

UPSC has asked how ancient Indian culture and art spread to Southeast Asia and how India can leverage (<http://ujjayi.com/vocab/leverage/>) soft power in foreign policy. Prambanan connects the history of Indianisation directly to contemporary cultural diplomacy.

Practice question: "The temples of Southeast Asia are monuments to the Indianisation of the region and assets for India's cultural diplomacy today." Discuss with reference to sites such as Prambanan. (250 words, 15 marks)

Sources: *The Indian Express* (<https://indianexpress.com/>), *UNESCO World Heritage Centre* (<https://whc.unesco.org/>)

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