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India Launches ASI-Led Restoration of Indonesia's Prambanan Temple, Reinforcing Cultural Diplomacy and Shared Civilisational Heritage

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Recent Developments:

- **Prime Minister Narendra Modi**, during his **three-day visit to Indonesia**, announced India's assistance for the **restoration and conservation of the UNESCO-listed Prambanan Temple Compounds** at Yogyakarta.
- **PM Modi** and **President Prabowo Subianto** jointly inaugurated the **ASI-led conservation project**, describing **Prambanan** as a symbol of the enduring **civilisational and cultural ties** between **India and Indonesia**.
- The restoration project follows the understanding reached during **President Prabowo's State Visit to India (2025)** and forms part of a broader strategic partnership under which **more than 20 agreements** were signed covering **defence, maritime cooperation, critical minerals, digital payments, technology, education, and cultural cooperation**.

Historical Background:

Origins and Foundation:

- **Prambanan** was constructed during the **9th century CE** in **Central Java** under the **Mataram Kingdom**.
- The temple symbolised the political resurgence of the **Sanjaya Dynasty**, which revived **Shaivite Hinduism** after a prolonged phase of **Buddhist predominance** under the **Sailendra Dynasty**.
- **Rakai Pikatan**, after marrying the daughter of **Samaratungga**, commissioned the temple to demonstrate the restoration of **Hindroyal authority**.
- The **consecration inscription of 856 CE** records the formal dedication of the temple complex.

Political and Religious Context:

- The **Sanjaya Dynasty** primarily patronised **Hinduism**, whereas the **Sailendra Dynasty** promoted **Mahayana Buddhism**.

The matrimonial alliance between **Rakai Pikatan** and a **Buddhist princess** reflected political reconciliation and encouraged peaceful religious coexistence in ancient Java.

Architectural Features:

Temple Layout:

- **Prambanan** is the **largest Hindtemple complex in Indonesia** and is dedicated to the **Trimurti—Brahma, Vishnand Shiva**.
- The original complex consisted of **240 temples**, developed mainly under **Rakai Pikatan** and **Rakai Balitung**.

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- The complex follows a **three concentric square layout**, with the **innermost enclosure** containing **16 principal temples**.

Main Temples:

- The **47-metre Shiva Temple** occupies the central position and represents the most important shrine.
- The **Brahma Temple** stands to the **north**, while the **Vishnu Temple** stands to the **south** of the Shiva Temple.
- The **Shiva Temple** contains four chambers housing the images of **Shiva, Durga, Agastya, and Ganesha**.

Artistic Significance:

- The temple walls contain elaborate **bas-relief carvings depicting episodes from the Ramayana**.

The site continues to host the internationally recognised **Ramayana Ballet**, performed in an open-air theatre during **May–October**.

Religious Harmony and Cultural Significance:

Coexistence of Faiths:

- **Prambanan** represents the harmonious coexistence of **Hinduism** and **Buddhism** in medieval Java.
- The royal marriage between a **Hindking** and a **Buddhist princess** symbolised interfaith accommodation rather than religious conflict.
- A **stupa-like architectural element** incorporated into the temple superstructure reflects Buddhist artistic influence.

Associated Buddhist Monuments:

- Several Buddhist temples, including **Candi Sewu, Candi Bubrah, and Candi Lumbung**, were constructed around the same period.

In modern **Indonesia**, the term "**Candi**" refers collectively to ancient **Hindian and Buddhist religious monuments**.

Decline, Rediscovery and Restoration:

Decline:

- Around **929–930 CE**, the political centre of the **Mataram Kingdom** shifted to **East Java**.
- The relocation was influenced by a combination of **Mount Merapi's volcanic activity**, political developments, and changing economic conditions.
- The abandoned temple gradually became buried beneath **vegetation** and **volcanic deposits**.

Rediscovery:

- References to the ruins appeared in **Javanese literary works** before European documentation.
- **C.A. Lons**, an official of the **Dutch East India Company**, documented the ruins in **1733**.
- **Thomas Stamford Raffles**, during the **British administration of Java (1811–1816)**, promoted systematic documentation of Central Java's archaeological heritage.

Modern Restoration:

- Scientific restoration commenced in **1918**.
- Restoration activities were delayed by the **Second World War** and **Indonesia's independence movement**.

Reconstruction of the principal temple concluded in **1953** and was inaugurated by **President Soekarno**.

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UNESCO and Heritage Status:

International Recognition:

- **Prambanan Temple Compounds** were inscribed on the **UNESCO World Heritage List** in **1991** for their outstanding universal cultural value.
- The site was declared a **National Cultural Property** in **1998**.

Indonesia strengthened legal protection through a dedicated **Cultural Heritage Law (2010)** supporting long-term conservation.

India's Restoration Initiative:

Role of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI):

- The conservation work is being executed by the **Archaeological Survey of India (ASI)** in collaboration with the **Indonesian Heritage Agency**.
- An **ASI technical team** surveyed the monument during **March 2026** before preparing the restoration strategy.

Anastylosis Technique:

- Restoration will employ the **Anastylosis Technique**, under which damaged structures are reconstructed primarily using their **original architectural components** recovered from the site.

New materials are introduced only where structurally essential, thereby preserving the monument's historical authenticity.

India's Heritage Diplomacy in Asia:

Major Conservation Projects:

- **Vietnam (2014):** Restoration of the **M? S?n Sanctuary**, the religious centre of the ancient **Champa Kingdom**.
- **Myanmar (2017):** Conservation of monuments in the **Bagan Archaeological Zone** damaged by the **2016 earthquake**.
- **Cambodia:** Long-term conservation of important monuments within the **Angkor** complex.
- **Laos (2024):** Completion of restoration work at the **Vat Pho Temple**, an ancient **Shaivite temple complex**.

Sri Lanka and Bangladesh: Implementation of multiple heritage conservation projects reflecting India's cultural engagement in the region.

Strategic Importance for India:

Soft Power Diplomacy:

- **Heritage conservation** has emerged as an important instrument of India's **soft power diplomacy**.
- Restoration of shared civilisational sites strengthens **people-to-people contacts**, **cultural trust**, and **regional goodwill**.
- Cultural diplomacy complements India's broader engagement under the **Act East Policy** and strengthens partnerships across the **Indo-Pacific**.

India-Indonesia Relations:

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- Cultural cooperation reinforces the **Comprehensive Strategic Partnership** between the two countries.

Heritage projects deepen collaboration beyond traditional sectors such as **trade**, **defence**, and **maritime security**.

Value Addition for UPSC:

Key Terms:

- **Anastylosis:** Scientific conservation method involving reconstruction using **original architectural elements** with minimal replacement material.
- **Cultural Diplomacy:** Use of **heritage**, **culture**, and **civilisational links** to strengthen international relations.
- **Soft Power:** Ability of a country to influence others through **culture**, **values**, **heritage**, and **diplomacy** rather than coercion.
- **Trimurti:** The three principal Hindu deities—**Brahma (Creator)**, **Vishnu (Preserver)**, and **Shiva (Destroyer)**.
- **Act East Policy:** India's strategic framework for enhancing **economic**, **cultural**, and **strategic engagement** with **Southeast Asia** and the **Indo-Pacific** region