

Returning the Pucangan Stone:

Why India must reclaim its Indian Ocean History

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The decision to return the Pucangan inscription to Indonesia would be more than an act of cultural restitution. It would amount to a recognition that the history of the Indian Ocean cannot be neatly divided into modern national compartments, nor can the objects through which that history is understood remain indefinitely stranded in museums far from the societies that produced them.

On August 7, on the sidelines of the BRICS Culture Ministers' Meeting in Bhopal, India and Indonesia agreed on a joint action plan to restore 100 sub-shrines surrounding the great medieval Shaiva temple complex of Prambanan in Central Java. The meeting also produced the Bhopal Declaration, whose signatories committed themselves to returning cultural property removed through theft or illicit means. At the same bilateral meeting, Indonesian Culture Minister Fadli Zon and his Indian counterpart, Gajendra Singh Shekhawat, discussed another matter of considerably greater historical consequence: the possible return of the Pucangan inscription, an eleventh-century stone inscription currently held by the Indian Museum in Kolkata.

The Pucangan stone is not an ordinary archaeological object. Issued during the reign of Airlangga, one of medieval Java's most important rulers, it records a period of political collapse, recovery and state formation in eastern Java. For modern Indonesia, Airlangga occupies a place comparable, in terms of national historical memory, to the place occupied by Ashoka in India. The inscription therefore represents not merely a piece of stone from a distant past, but one of the principal surviving sources for the chronology and genealogy of a foundational figure in Indonesian history.

Its continued presence in India is difficult to justify.

There is also a deeper irony. India has increasingly sought the return of objects removed from the subcontinent during the colonial period. That demand is morally justified. Yet India cannot consistently argue that colonial extraction deprived it of its cultural inheritance while retaining in Kolkata an important historical document that was itself removed from another Asian society during the colonial era.

The issue is therefore larger than restitution. It is about whether India is prepared to acknowledge the complicated, interconnected history of the Indian Ocean and to participate seriously in recovering it.

A monument that challenges the idea of one-way influence

Prambanan provides an appropriate setting for such a conversation.

Built in Central Java in the ninth century, the temple complex emerged at roughly the same time that the foundations of the imperial Chola state were taking shape in the Kaveri delta. For more than a century, before the construction of the Brihadishvara temple at Thanjavur under Rajaraja Chola, Prambanan was arguably the largest Shaiva temple in the Indian Ocean world.

Its architecture is unmistakably connected to the wider Hindu religious world, but it cannot simply be explained as an Indian import transplanted into Java. The central sanctuary housed a three-metre standing representation of Shiva mounted on a yoni, while Brahma and Vishnu occupied adjoining shrines of their own. The arrangement, scale and relationship with water and landscape reveal a regional architectural culture that developed its own vocabulary.

This distinction matters because the history of Southeast Asia has too often been described through the language of Indian "influence". Such terminology suggests a passive region receiving ideas from a supposedly dominant Indian civilisation. The archaeological record tells a more complicated story.

No Indian temple of the ninth century had attempted precisely the monumental architectural experiment represented by Prambanan. The complex should therefore be understood not as evidence of India's cultural superiority, but as evidence of a shared intellectual and religious world in which ideas travelled, were absorbed, modified and transformed.

The role of water is particularly revealing. Scholars have proposed that the temple complex may have been designed to evoke the cosmic Ocean of Milk, perhaps through the deliberate flooding of its inner courtyard. Another interpretation sees the thousands of ribbed finials across the complex as a vast array of symbolic lingas, with their form evoking the descent of the Ganga through Shiva's matted hair.

Neither interpretation has achieved universal scholarly acceptance. That is precisely the point. Prambanan still has questions to ask.

The answers will not come from nationalist certainty but from patient archaeology, comparative history and collaboration across countries.

The Indian Ocean was a connected world
The same caution is required when considering the relationship between India and Southeast Asia during the medieval period.

Around 860 CE, King Balaputra of the Srivijaya confederacy in Sumatra established a monastery at Nalanda in present-day Bihar. He claimed descent from the Shailendra rulers of Java and sought an endowment from the Pala king Devapala for the institution's maintenance.

This was not an isolated act of religious charity. It was an early example of a form of diplomacy in which rulers of maritime Southeast Asia established religious institutions and patronage networks in distant territories. Religious, commercial and political interests frequently trav-



The statue of King Airlangga riding the Garuda Bird with its legs gripping a dragon. This statue depicts the greatness of his kingdom and himself as the incarnation of Vishnu who gives him authority.

elled together.

The Bay of Bengal was not a barrier separating two civilisations. It was a highway.

Tamil merchants travelled towards the ports of Southeast Asia. Buddhist monks and scholars moved between monastic centres. Royal courts exchanged gifts and envoys. Merchant guilds established settlements abroad. Inscriptions recorded communities of people from different parts of India living and trading alongside Sinhalese, Southeast Asians and others.

The medieval Indian Ocean was consequently neither Indian nor Southeast Asian in any exclusive sense. It was a shared zone of movement.

Tamil literature itself recognised this interconnected geography. Places such as Java and Sri Lanka appeared within a wider maritime imagination rather than as completely foreign worlds. The political boundaries of modern nation-states did not exist, and neither did the rigid categories through which the past is sometimes interpreted today.

That is why archaeological evidence matters so greatly. It can recover a history that written national narratives tend to simplify.

The disappearance of Central Java remains a mystery

The history becomes more uncertain in the early tenth century.

Central Java's court moved east, and the stream of inscriptions and monumental construction associated with the earlier political centre abruptly diminished. Prambanan was left behind. Scholars have proposed several explanations, including volcanic activity, pressure from Srivijaya and changes in maritime trade routes.

Nearly half a century after these theories began to be debated, there is still no definitive answer.

The absence of evidence is itself a historical problem.

Around the same period, political changes were taking place across the maritime world. The rulers of Kedah, on the Malay Peninsula, were gaining influence within the Srivijaya network. By 1005, a ruler of Kedah was engaged in religious and diplomatic activity on the Tamil coast, establishing a Buddhist monastery and making Shaiva offerings at Nagapattinam while maintaining contact with Rajaraja Chola.

Then came a sequence of upheavals.

In 1016, the East Javanese court was destroyed during a royal wedding by a ruler named Wurawari, who may have acted with Srivijayan support. The king and his daughter were killed. Less than a decade later, in 1025, Rajendra Chola launched an expedition against Kedah and captured its ruler, taking the title Kadaram-konda,

or conqueror of Kedah.

Yet the precise nature and consequences of the Chola campaign remain unclear.

Chola inscriptions celebrate the expedition, but they do not demonstrate a lasting Chola occupation of Kedah. Archaeological investigations have so far yielded little evidence of an invasion on the scale suggested by some historical interpretations.

This is exactly where a serious archaeological programme could transform our understanding. What happened in Kedah? Was the Chola campaign primarily a military strike against a commercial network? Did it permanently disrupt Srivijaya? How did maritime trade respond? Why is the archaeological footprint of the campaign comparatively limited? What happened to Tamil merchant communities afterwards?

These are not merely academic questions. They are questions about how the medieval Indian Ocean actually functioned.

Airlangga and the recovery of Java

It was from this period of political destruction that Airlangga emerged.

The Pucangan inscription tells the story of a prince born to a Javanese princess and a Balinese prince who survived the destruction of his family by retreating into the forest. For three years he lived as an ascetic before being approached by religious authorities representing Shaiva, Buddhist and Mahabrahmana traditions and installed as ruler around 1019.

His reign was one of reconstruction.

Over roughly 15 years of campaigning, Airlangga consolidated eastern Java and then turned towards economic recovery. Ports were rebuilt, trade was encouraged and merchant communities became central to the restoration of political authority.

The inscriptions associated with his reign offer an unusually vivid picture of this cosmopolitan world. One inscription records foreign communities including people from northern and southern India, Sri Lanka, Bengal, the Chola country, Kerala, Karnataka, Champa and the Mon regions.

Tamil merchant guilds, including the Ayyavole, Manigramam and Nanadesi traditions, appear in the documentary record.

This is crucial evidence because it demonstrates that Indian participation in Southeast Asian commerce was not simply a matter of rulers exchanging religious gifts. Merchant organisations, traders and migrant communities were embedded in local economies.

Airlangga's political recovery was therefore linked to the restoration of maritime commerce.

The Pucangan inscription provides one of the

principal windows into this transformation. Its value is not confined to Indonesian history. It belongs to the history of the entire Indian Ocean.

Colonialism scattered the evidence

The tragedy is that many of the surviving documents of this interconnected world were subsequently separated from the places where they were created.

The Pucangan stone was removed from Java in 1813 by Stamford Raffles during the British occupation of the Dutch East Indies. It was presented to Lord Minto, then Governor-General of India, along with another Javanese inscription that eventually reached Minto's Scottish estate and a large collection of manuscripts from Yogyakarta.

The circumstances are a reminder of how colonial power operated. Objects were collected, classified and transported according to imperial priorities. Their removal was not simply an intellectual exercise in preserving antiquities. It was part of a larger system in which political power determined who could possess, interpret and display the material remains of other societies.

There is another irony. The British expedition that seized Java depended in part on several thousand Indian soldiers. The colonial machinery that removed Javanese heritage was therefore not entirely European in its personnel, even though its command structure and political purpose were imperial.

The same broad pattern affected India's own heritage.

The recently returned Leiden Plates, which illuminate medieval connections between South India and Southeast Asia, are a reminder that colonial extraction disrupted a history that had once been geographically fluid. Documents and objects were removed from the places where their historical meaning was embedded and deposited in European collections.

The Pucangan stone is another part of that scattered archive.

Restitution must become the beginning, not the end

India should return it.

There is a straightforward moral argument. If India expects European museums and institutions to return cultural property taken from the subcontinent under colonial circumstances, it must be prepared to apply the same principle when another Asian country makes a credible claim.

There is also a diplomatic argument. India and Indonesia share a history that predates modern diplomacy by more than a millennium. Cultural restitution can strengthen that relationship in a manner that ceremonial declara-

tions cannot.

But the strongest argument may be historical.

Returning the Pucangan inscription could become the starting point for a much more ambitious Indian engagement with the archaeology of Southeast Asia.

India has been remarkably absent from several of the most important archaeological investigations into its own maritime past. Sites associated with Tamil merchants in Sumatra and Java have received attention from international teams, while Indian participation has often been limited. The Sumatran port of Kota Cina, where Tamil merchants established themselves, raises questions about the nature of Indian settlements abroad that cannot be answered through Indian inscriptions alone.

What did these communities look like?

Were they permanent settlements or seasonal trading stations? How were they organised? What languages did they use? How did they interact with local political authorities? Did merchant guilds maintain their own religious institutions? How did marriages and cultural exchange alter these communities over generations?

The answers lie partly underground.

Yet archaeological investigation requires money, fieldwork, conservation, technical expertise and, above all, intellectual humility.

Beyond romantic versions of the past

This is where India's current cultural debate becomes particularly important.

There is a temptation to use archaeology to confirm a predetermined story about civilisational greatness. Such an approach is ultimately destructive because archaeology does not exist to flatter modern identities.

The medieval Indian Ocean was messy. Kingdoms fought one another. Merchants crossed political boundaries. Religious traditions travelled in multiple directions. Ideas associated with India were transformed in Southeast Asia. Southeast Asian rulers patronised institutions in India. Political influence shifted repeatedly between Java, Sumatra, the Malay Peninsula and the Indian subcontinent.

There is no single centre from which this history radiated.

A serious understanding of the past may therefore unsettle rather than reinforce nationalist narratives.

That should not be feared.

The India-Indonesia Cultural Exchange Programme for 2025-28, with provisions for archaeological field schools, joint research and digitisation of archives, provides an opportunity to move beyond cultural diplomacy as a succession of official ceremonies. It should be expanded into a sustained programme of collaborative research across the Bay of Bengal.

Indian universities, museums and archaeological institutions should participate directly in excavations and conservation projects in Indonesia, Malaysia and other parts of maritime Southeast Asia. Archives should be digitised jointly. Inscriptions should be studied across linguistic traditions rather than within national silos. Young archaeologists should be trained through international field programmes.

Most importantly, research should be protected from political pressure.

Decolonisation is not achieved simply by moving an artefact from one museum to another. Nor is it achieved by replacing one national mythology with another. It requires recovering histories that colonialism fragmented while resisting the temptation to reconstruct them according to present-day political demands.

A stone, and the history around it

The Pucangan inscription therefore represents an opportunity.

Its return would acknowledge Indonesia's legitimate historical claim. It would strengthen India's credibility when seeking the return of its own cultural property. It would deepen cultural relations between two major Asian societies. But, above all, it would remind India that its maritime history is far larger than the conventional story of the subcontinent.

For centuries, the Bay of Bengal connected rather than divided its shores.

The temples of Java, the monasteries of Nalanda, the ports of Nagapattinam, the merchant settlements of Sumatra and the royal courts of Southeast Asia belonged to an interconnected world in which people, ideas, religions, technologies and commodities travelled continuously.

Colonialism scattered the evidence of that world. Modern nationalism can scatter its meaning just as effectively.

India now has a choice. It can continue to invoke the ancient Indian Ocean as evidence of a glorious past while doing comparatively little to investigate the archaeological record that survives beyond its borders. Or it can treat the region as a shared historical field and invest in the patient, international scholarship required to understand it.

The Pucangan stone should return to Indonesia. But its return should not close a chapter. It should open one.

The real task is to recover the Indian Ocean history that lies behind the stone — a history neither exclusively Indian nor exclusively Indonesian, but one shaped by centuries of movement, exchange, conflict and accommodation.

That history may complicate the stories modern nations tell about themselves. It may even make some cherished certainties uncomfortable.

That is not a weakness of history.

It is precisely its value.