# One hundred entangled years

## In the centenary year of Tagore's visit to Indonesia, **Sandeep Chakravorty** recalls the Bengali's olden link with the island nation

Some relationships between civilisations outlast the political arrangements built around them. For more than 2,000 years, the Indian Ocean has carried spices and textiles between India and Indonesia, and with them stories, beliefs and ways of seeing the world.

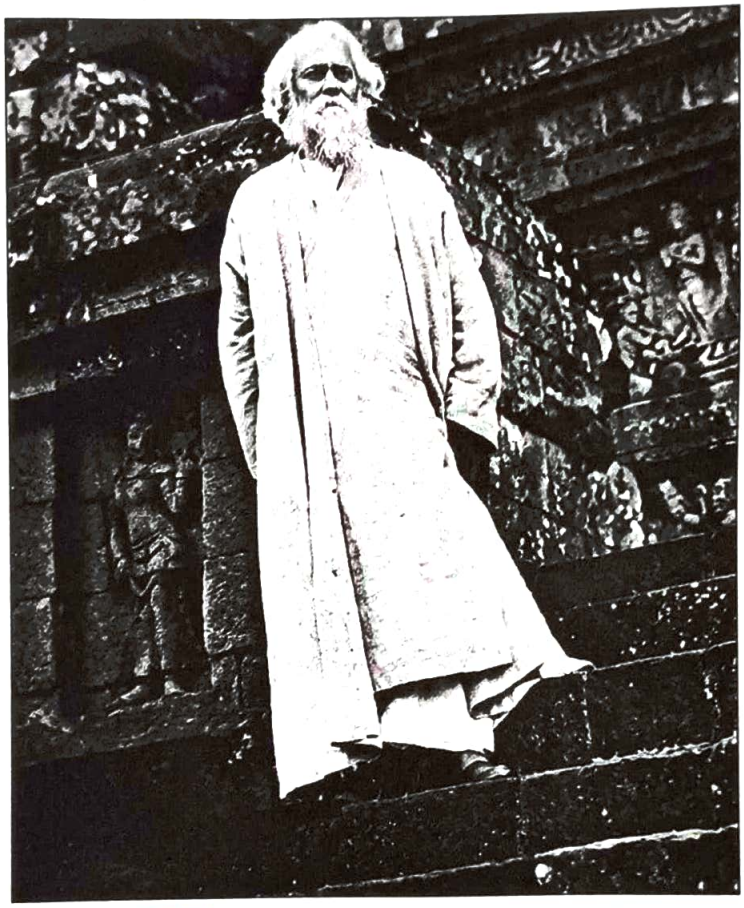
Rabindranath Tagore was 66 when he sailed for Indonesia in 1927. He believed India's ancient voyages had carried language and spiritual imagination, never conquest. In Java, he found a civilisation that had lived with the Ramayana and Mahabharata for 15 centuries and made them its own, in dance, theatre, music and stone. Many people had built that bridge before him. Two of them were fellow Bengalis.

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One morning around AD 774, King Panangkaran of the Hindu Mataram kingdom in Central Java was admiring the *tanjung* or *bakul* trees in his palace garden when a servant rushed in. Buddhist monks had arrived from the Srivijaya-Shailendra kingdom, led by Kumaraghosa, a renowned monk from Bengal.

Panangkaran was startled. Dharmasetu, the Shailendra king, would not send so venerable a monk without an important assignment. Little is known about Kumaraghosa beyond his origins in Gauda. He most likely came from the patronage of the Pala kings of Bengal, great promoters of Mahayana Buddhism, sailed from Tamralipta and became Rajguru to the Shailendras. Inscriptions call him Gaudi-dvipa-guru, and royal texts say the king was "purified by the dust of his feet".

Panangkaran made the monks comfortable, served local delicacies: durian and betel nut with *daun sirih* and baked lime, what we in India know as *pan*. He remarked that *pan* was proof of human ingenuity. Each of the three ingredients tastes unpleasant on its own. Together, they are delicious. Formalities over, the wily Kumaraghosa revealed his master's request. Dharmasetu wished to build a temple to the Buddhist goddess Tara at Kalasan near Prambanan. Then the monk turned the king's own words back on him. Just as the ingredients of pan combine in harmony, he said, so could different religions. Dharmasetu, he added, would be pleased if Panangkaran agreed. Whether the idea was the king's or the monk's is not known.



**MONUMENT: Tagore at Borobudur.** Photo sourced by The Telegraph

Panangkaran knew the shrewd Bengali had cornered him with honeyed words. A temple just outside the Hindu heartland was a clever foothold for Buddhism, and defying Dharmasetu meant war. Hiding his anxiety, he called it an honour to support so noble a cause. Since he would be paying, he set one condition: the inscription must record that Dharmasetu had asked and Panangkaran had granted. The Kalasan *prasasti*, presently at the National Museum in Jakarta, bears testimony to this.

Kumaraghosa, aware of the fate of messengers who carry bad news, was relieved. Kalasan, the first Buddhist temple in Java, was consecrated in AD 778, with Kumaraghosa as master of ceremonies. Tara, depicted in green, became the protector of sailors and later merged with Nyi Roro Kidul, Queen of the Southern Sea, who drags anyone wearing green into the waves. People still avoid green on the beaches near Yogyakarta. Once inside the heartland of Java, Buddhism found its grandest expression at Borobudur.

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Atisha Dipankara Srijnana (AD 982-1054) was born a prince in Bikrampur, near present-day Dhaka, and gave up his inheritance to become an acharya at Nalanda and Vikramshila. He endured a 13-month sea voyage to Suvarnadwipa and studied at Muara Jambi in Sumatra from 1011 to 1023 under Serlingpa Dharmakirti.

Back in India, his fame grew until the kings of western Tibet spent years collecting gold to invite him north. He arrived in 1042, spent his last 13 years there, and wrote *Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment*. His teachings founded the Kadam school, which evolved into the Gelug tradition of the Dalai Lamas. Tibetan monasteries still hold manuscripts he brought from Sumatra.

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Tagore arrived almost 1,150 years after Kumaraghosa. Before reaching Java in 1927, he wrote the poem *Srivijayalakshmi*. It goes: *In a dim, distant, unrecorded age/We had met, thou and I,/When my speech became entangled in thine.* Within three weeks of his reciting it in Batavia, Mangkunegara VII had translated it into Javanese and staged it in Surakarta. A Javanese poet answered with a poem — a dialogue, if you will — of his own.

At Ki Hadjar Dewantara's Taman Siswa school in Yogyakarta, Tagore found something close to Santiniketan — education rooted in the people's own language and culture, not in the needs of the colonial administration. Two institutions built on similar ideals were meeting for the first time.

Tagore later advised Santidev Ghosh, then studying Javanese dance, "Learn, absorb and bring back what is valuable, but don't lose your own voice." Santidev's work enriched Santiniketan's dance.

Surendranath Kar brought home the open pavilions and shaded verandas of Java and Bali, which shaped some of India's earliest climate-responsive buildings. Batik, taken up by Pratima Devi and the Karu Sangha collective, absorbed alpana and Ajanta motifs and became distinctly Indian. Indonesia was a participant in Santiniketan's modernism, not merely a source.

Kumaraghosa, Atisha, Tagore, each kept a civilisational conversation going. During Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit in July 2026, the two countries declared 2026-27 the Tagore-Dewantara Year of Cultural and Educational Diplomacy. While writing about the three Bengalis, I realised that among the 27 ambassadors of India to Indonesia since 1949, I am the first Bengali.

**Sandeep Chakravorty is India's ambassador to Indonesia**