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# Sunday

## READING



## A tropical paradise

**DR. MANOJ CHOUDHURY** revels in the scenic and cultural wonders of Java.

Travellers seeking a blend of excitement, serenity, and cultural immersion often find Indonesia to be an irresistible destination. The country's strategic location has influenced its global standing. Indonesia, a former prosperous Dutch colony, asserted its independence in 1945, post-World War II. This tropical paradise derives its name from two Greek words — *Indos*, referring to the Indus River, and *Nesos*, meaning 'island'. The literal translation of Indonesia as 'Indian Islands' underscores its historical ties to the Indian subcontinent.

Java is one of the Greater Sunda Islands in Indonesia, which is nestled between the Indian Ocean and Java Sea. This island lies in the southeast of Malaysia and Sumatra, south of Borneo (Kalimantan), and west of Bali. It is the fourth largest island in the archipelago that serves as the cultural, political and economic centre of Indonesia. From its status as the most populous island in the world to boasting of a stunning array of landscapes, towering volcanoes, serene rice paddy fields, and a rich tapestry of cultures, Java ensures a wealth of experience to explorers.

Java is home to both active and dormant volcanoes, such as Mount Merapi and Mount Bromo, which profoundly influenced its geological and agricultural landscape. Rice cultivation is the cornerstone of Java's economy, and its terraced rice fields are a stunning sight.

### Tourism in Java

The diverse landscapes, cultural and heritage sites in Java offer a wide range of tourist attractions that cater to travellers of all ages. The ninth century Borobudur Temple, adorned with 2,672 intricate reliefs and 504 statues of Buddha, in Magelang, Central Java, offers a majestic sunrise and is a sight to behold. It is also a UNESCO World Heritage Site. For an alternative sunrise point, consider Punthuk Setumbu, a hill surrounded by Mount Merapi and Merbabu.

Padar Island, Pink Beach Island, Komodo Island, Loh Liang Komodo National Park, Taka Makassar Island, and Manta Point are some of the other attractions located nearby. Dieng Plateau, renowned for its spectacular golden and silver sunrise, is a revered site for Hindu and Buddhist traditions. For its spiritual significance, the plateau is also known as 'the land beyond the sky'.



Arjuna Temple, Sikidang Crater, Tambora Tea Plantation, Bedakah Lake, Telaga Menjer Lake, and Birns Water Spring are some of the other places to visit in the cultural city of Yogyakarta, or Jogja, which is known for its vibrant art scene, traditional markets, and delicious local cuisine.

Jomblang Cave is not for the faint at heart, as the 90-metre descent through the cave using a pulley system can be quite daunting. But the stunning sight of sunlight plunging into the cave is worth the effort.

The places that can be covered on the same day are a city tour to Maloboro, Beringharjo Market, Sultan Palace (located between Winongo River and Code River), Jogja Palace (which depicts the sublime grandeur of Javanese architecture), Batik home industry and Kotagede (to view and buy the unique works of silversmiths).

Tucked away in the Tengger Mountain range, the Madakaripura Waterfall, also called the Eternal Waterfall,

is a hidden gem that offers a dome of cascading water surrounded by untouched Nature. Rising to 2,782 metres (9,127 feet), Mount Panarjan offers a panoramic vista of the iconic Mount Bromo (a majestic volcano with a crater) and the surrounding volcanic landscape.

### A deeper dive into Javanese culture

Java is a melting cultural pot. Javanese culture, one of the most influential in Southeast Asia, is an incredible blend of Malay, Javanese, and other ethnic influences. Despite the diversity in their traditions, art, cuisine and deep spiritual beliefs, the coexistence of different faiths — Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam being the predominant, and animistic beliefs — in the region are truly remarkable.

Shadow puppet performances, often based on Hindu epics and accompanied by Gamelan music, are the cornerstone of Javanese culture. Gamelan is a percussion ensemble consisting of gongs, xylophones, and other instruments.

Batik art holds cultural significance. In fact, this intricate fabric dyeing technique is a symbol of Javanese identity. The patterns of this art form often depict Nature, mythology or social themes.

### Tourism in Indonesia and NE India

Both India and Indonesia offer diverse tourism experiences, but as compared to the Northeastern states of India, Indonesia stands out for its pro-tourism stance,

combining professional service with a personal touch. Indonesia's infrastructure, including transportation, accommodation, and tourist facilities, surpass that of the North-East, despite the latter's stunning landscapes, diverse flora and fauna, and rich and unique cultural heritage.

The punctuality, discipline, hygiene, hospitality, and positive attitude of the Indonesian workforce contributes significantly to the country's tourism appeal. The 'Meet and Greet' is an astounding segment of their tourism sector. The tourists are warmly greeted and spoken to upon arrival and until departure from their country. Despite their limited proficiency in English, unlike in the North-East, effective communication with the tourists has never been a challenge to Indonesians. Even the cabbies in Indonesia, like tourist guides, have deep understanding of their culture and knowledge of historical sites and they willingly engage in informative conversations with curious tourists.

They have excellent air and road connectivity, ensuring comfortable and safe travel experiences.

By creatively educating the children and ourselves about our rich history and culture, instilling values like discipline, punctuality and hospitality, and aggressively investing in tourism infrastructure, in a nutshell, becoming tourist friendly, can pave the way for making the Northeastern states economically self-reliant.

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### UP CLOSE

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**BIBHAB TALUKDAR'S**  
unwavering  
mission to protect  
wildlife continues  
unabated.



## A conservation crusader

It has been over three decades and for Bibhab Talukdar, the fight is still on. The man is on a mission. His love for wildlife not only inspired him to study Animal Ecology and Wildlife Biology but also motivated him to start Aaranyak, now a household name in conservation across Assam and India. Over the years, Talukdar's tireless work in the field of wildlife conservation has turned him into a figure synonymous with hope and resilience in the conservation community. Among his numerous accomplishments in a field marked by struggles and challenges, Talukdar was recently honoured with the prestigious IUCN Harry Messel Award.

### IUCN Harry Messel Award

The Harry Messel Award, instituted by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Species Survival Commission (SSC) in 2004, is an honour given to individuals who demonstrate extraordinary service to species conservation, especially through leadership or field work as part of SSC Specialist Groups or Task Forces. For Talukdar, receiving this global recognition is a validation of years of dedication. In his words, the award acknowledges his specific efforts to conserve Asian rhinos, a cause he has championed tirelessly. The award has bolstered his confidence, confirming the impact his work has made not just regionally but internationally.

For Bibhab Talukdar, however, this recognition is not just a personal milestone. It serves as a beacon of hope for Assam's conservation community and especially for the young conservationists from the Northeastern region of India. Reflecting on this achievement, he humbly shares that his journey from Assam to a global stage is proof that passion and hard work can carve a path for others.

"If I could make a contribution in the field of wildlife conservation over the past three decades that the global community recognises, the next generation of conservationists from this region holds the same potential to create changes conducive for wildlife to thrive," he says.

### International collaboration

Talukdar has been part of several influential committees globally and nationally, from the International Rhino Foundation to India's National Board of Wildlife. He emphasises that while international agreements address overarching environmental concerns, country-specific approaches are crucial for effective conservation.

"The environmental issues and their severity may vary from country to country. As such, country-specific plans to ensure ecological as well as economic security is very much essential," he explains.

In India, where population pressures are high, the stakes are particularly acute. "India is unique as the most populous country on the planet, yet it shelters

some of the world's most iconic and endangered species — from tigers and the Greater One-Horned Rhino to the Golden Langur, Hoolock Gibbons, and Great Indian Bustards," he says.

For Talukdar, this biodiversity is both a privilege and a responsibility, underscoring the need for a more nuanced approach to development in ecologically sensitive areas, such as North-East India and the Western Ghats.

Talukdar advocates for "green infrastructure" in these regions — development that minimises environmental harm and supports sustainable coexistence with wildlife. "Development is essential, but it must be aligned with environmental priorities. Projects should be least damaging to the environment, wildlife, and critical water sources," he asserts. This holistic approach, he believes, is essential for long-term resilience, not only for India's biodiversity but also for the well-being of communities that depend on these ecosystems.

### Touching young minds

Talukdar is clear on one thing: fostering a love for Nature in young minds is essential. He believes that instilling a sense of environmental stewardship in students is not only about imparting knowledge but also about shaping positive attitudes towards addressing ecological issues holistically. "We need to equip the next generation with a strong understanding of the environment and the ecological processes that support life," he emphasises, noting that a clean and green environment should be a shared goal of every nation.

Talukdar points out that making students more responsive to environmental concerns is critical, especially given the urgent challenges ahead. "Any further environmental degradation could have catastrophic effects on human survival. The COVID pandemic was a stark warning — we must respect Nature's processes and human interventions that may disrupt these must be carefully monitored," he says.

"Environmental protection must become a shared responsibility for every citizen," he asserts.

### Development and conservation

For Talukdar, the challenge of balancing development with environmental preservation in Assam is one that requires careful thought and planning. He acknowledges that development is inevitable, but stresses that it should not come at the cost of irreplaceable ecological and environmental heritage. "There has to be a balance, but pristine and historically significant areas — whether they are forests or age-old trees — should never be compromised," he says firmly.

Talukdar advocates for better planning and an ecological orientation in the development process. "With proper planning, the cutting of trees can be minimised significantly," he explains, pointing to examples from other cities like Bengaluru and New Delhi. "In Bengaluru, even when roads are being expanded or constructed, old trees are carefully preserved. Delhi, too, has managed to save mature trees during roadworks," he notes.

He adds that the slow pace of ecological recovery is often overlooked. "We must realise that dieback — the loss of older trees — happens quickly, but regrowth is much slower," he says. Talukdar believes that preserving mature trees is not just about aesthetics but about maintaining the balance of the ecosystem, which provides critical services like air purification, carbon sequestration, and wildlife habitat.

For Assam, Talukdar proposes that urbanisation projects incorporate green infrastructure and eco-friendly design principles. He stresses that development should not be at odds with Nature but should rather work in harmony with it, ensuring that both urban needs and environmental preservation are addressed in tandem.

## Amazing art

**ANANYA GOGOI** on the enduring legacy  
of ancient Assamese art.



Mahadev (on Sanchi Paat) — From Nakul Chandra Mahanta's collection

imagery in the *Chitra Yatra* reflects his profound artistic insight. Another eminent litterateur, Dr. Nagen Salka, categorises Assamese paintings into three distinct styles — Sattriya, Raigharia, and Decorative, underscoring how Sattriya art carries a rich spiritual essence.

The *History of the Assamese People* delves into this vibrant legacy, particularly highlighting the *Chitra Bhagavata*, which beautifully narrates Lord Krishna's childhood adventures. The essence of *satra* culture, steeped in devotion, resonates through the paintings and crafts created within the sacred confines of the *satras*. The straightforward yet profound expressions found in Sattriya art, characterised by linear designs and symbolic motifs, bring these tales to life. The at-

tire depicted in these paintings features garments that drape elegantly around the body's contours, upper garments wrap artfully around the torso, while lower garments cascade from the waist in a signature style that defines Sattriya



From the Tirtha Kourmudi manuscript

artistry. Noteworthy is the headgear in these artworks, adorned with crowns and turbans echoing Mughal aesthetics, suggesting rich cultural exchanges of the era. This blending of styles coincides with historical events, such as the gifting of a bejewelled turban (*sarpechi*) by Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb to Ahom king Chakradhwaj Singha. In *Chitra Bhagavata*, characters like Kansa and various cloud deities are resplendent in similar lavish attire, showcasing an intricate melding of Mughal aesthetics with elements from Rajput and Jain art traditions.

The Sattriya style stands alongside the opulent royal Gerghaon style rooted in

folk traditions, the Darrangi style, and distinctive Ahom styles found in religious manuscripts crafted in Tai-Ahom script. Among notable manuscripts like *Chitra Bhagavata*, *Hasticharyana*, *Ananda Lahari*, and *Gita Govinda*, painting reveals its abundance and allure. These manuscripts serve as visual records, showcasing artistic evolution significantly influenced by the patronage of the Ahom and Koch dynasties. During the reigns of Jeng Rudra Singha and Shiva Singha, a modern sensibility emerged within these artworks, paving the way for expansive explorations of the spiritual connection, beauty, and creative genius inherent in humanity's relationship with Nature. The vibrant hues of *henu* (red pigment) and *haila* (yellow pigment) employed in these paintings add layers of meaning to their visual narrative.

As one examines the *Fung Chon* and *Chuk-Tanta-Kimpong* manuscripts, renowned for their Tai-Ahom style, a powerful flow of spiritual consciousness becomes evident. These artworks transcend mere aesthetics; they reflect the historical and cultural milieu of Assamese art. In essence, Assamese painting is not just a celebration of artistic expression but also a profound testament to the rich landscape woven from history, spirituality, and creativity that continues to inspire and resonate within our society. As we celebrate this rich heritage, it is essential to support contemporary artists who strive to preserve these traditions for future generations. Through their work, they keep alive not only the techniques but also the stories that have shaped Assam's cultural landscape over time.

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