INDONESIA, The Beautiful Archipelago



Author Biren Nanda

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The book *INDONESIA The Beautiful Archipelago* (Birch Books, 2026) by Ambassador Aftab Seth is an in-depth examination of Indonesia's post-independence history from the perspective of an Indian diplomat. Ambassador Seth comes across as an astute observer and his commentary gives a unique perspective on political, social and cultural developments in Indonesia. The underlying theme of the book is the melding together of a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society during the eight decades since Indonesia's independence. The author points out that Indonesia is a Muslim majority country but it is not an Islamic State. Indonesia's national motto *"Bhineka Tungal Eka"* – "even though they appear separate, they are one and the same" or "unity and diversity" – gives the essence of how the country manages diversity while giving equal status to all religions. Indonesia did not distance itself from religions by adopting a secular constitution, but rather by actively managing diversity through a Ministry of Religious Affairs.

Ambassador Seth observes that the ideology of *Panchsila* was the foundation of the Indonesian State: (1) belief in one supreme God, (2) just and civilized ideology, (3) unity of Indonesia, (4) democracy guided by wisdom of deliberation, and (5) social justice. Indeed, Suharto, Indonesia's second president, deliberately used syncretic culture as a counter-balance to Islamic orthodoxy.

The author avers that there are certain unique characteristics that have helped Indonesia maintain communal harmony. Islam came to Indonesia through preachers and traders – including those from Gujarat. There is no legacy of conflict. The Indic legacy was overlayed by the gradual spread of Islam across the archipelago resulting in the emergence of a syncretic Islam embracing important elements from the pre-Islamic culture.

Ambassador Seth points out that a significant section of Indonesian Muslims are members of two nationwide Islamic organizations – Nahdlatul Ulama (90 million) and the Muhammadiyah (70 million). The NU runs a network of *pesantren* or religious schools in the countryside which are gradually being absorbed into the formal school system. The Muhammadiyah emphasizes Islamic education and has established schools and colleges across the country. Members of the Muhammadiyah are to be found in urban areas and they are better represented in government and state institutions. The NU, which has more members, is concentrated in the countryside. The NU embraces some pre-Islamic customs and beliefs. The Muhammadiyah, on the other hand, would like to purge Indonesian Islam of pre-Islamic practices and beliefs and restore it to a level of religious purity.

As pointed out by the author, when the Islamic revolution occurred in Iran the Indonesian government sought to keep at arms-length from these developments and kept a close eye on activities of Iranian diplomats in Indonesia. Saudi Arabia played an active role in Islamic education by arranging teachers and the funding of Islamic institutions in Indonesia. One aspect of interest was the deep admiration in some circles in Indonesia towards Pakistan which had established an Islamic State in 1947, whereas Indonesia had been unable to accomplish this to date.

Ambassador Seth walks the reader through Indonesia's post-independence era – the coup that dethroned Sukarno, the anti-communist purges of 1965-1966, and the New Order regime that lasted till 1998. He fondly recalls his meetings with Abdurrahman Wahid, the first democratically elected president of Indonesia. Wahid was a great friend of India and had great respect for India's handling of religious diversity.

While the first half of the book is about Islam and political governance in Indonesia, the second half touches on a range of topics – the Vietnamese invasion of Kampuchea, the Chinese invasion of Vietnam, and the Indonesian provinces of Aceh and West Sumatra. Aceh is significant as it is the nearest to the Andamans. West Sumatra, for long a center for education under the Dutch colonial rule, gave Indonesia many leaders during the independence movement – notable was Vice President Hatta, personally known by many Indian leaders in India's freedom movement.

The book concludes with a chapter on Tagore and his advocacy of an Asian cultural renaissance. Tagore visited Indonesia in 1927 and was hoping to see glimpses of India's past in Indonesian fine arts and performing arts. Instead, what he found was a rich indigenous cultural legacy of Indonesian art and culture. He made a call for a Swadeshi education. Pursuant to his efforts, some Indonesian artists studied at Shantiniketan, including the famous Affandi who studied under Nandlal Bose. The last chapter is about the author's advocacy of and contributions towards the establishment of an Indian Cultural Center in Bali.

This book is an engaging history-cum-memoir that reflects the deep knowledge and empathy with which the author approaches his subject. The book focuses mainly on the period 1983 to 1985 when the author was posted as deputy chief of mission in Jakarta. A few notable exceptions from a later period are the events 1997-1998 (the collapse of the New Order State), the election of Wahid as president in 1999, and the election of Probowo Subianto in 2024. The book is elegantly designed and includes some beautiful photographs of places referred to in the text. JS

Biren Nanda is a former ambassador to Indonesia and later to Australia. Before these assignments, he was consul general of India in Shanghai and deputy chief of the Indian Embassy in Tokyo.