



Japan's Ancient Indic Heritage: A Review of *"Hindu Deities Worshipped in Japan"* by Benoy K. Behl

BOOK REVIEW

Text and photographs by Benoy K. Behl, with an essay on 'The Japanese Perspective' by Dr. Mihoko Hiraoka, co-researched by Sujata Chatterji, The Hindu Group Publishing Private Limited, 2019, ISBN 978-9387791312.

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ABSTRACT

Benoy K Behl is an art historian, photographer and film-maker whose work aims at presenting a wider perspective in understanding the art of India and Asia. This book was published based on the research output of a photographic exhibition of the same name that the author produced for the Japan Foundation, New Delhi and on a film titled "Indian Deities Worshipped in Japan" also produced by the author for the External Publicity Division of The Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India.

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An important cultural history that Japan shares with India started in 538 CE when Buddhism was introduced in the country, resulting in changes not only in religion but also in Japanese philosophy, political thought, social customs, aesthetics and artistic expression. Buddhism reached Japan through China and Korea, and interacted with the indigenous Shintō religion to produce various distinctively Japanese versions of the Buddhist faith that incorporated beliefs and traditions that shared Indic roots with Hinduism including Hindu deities like Saraswati, Shiva and Lakshmi, which are the subject of this book. While the first five chapters of the book focus on the worship of deities of the Hindu pantheon in Japan, and the significance given by the Japanese to Sanskrit as a divine language, the next five chapters introduce the reader to medieval historical Indian figures venerated by the Japanese and to other perspectives such as Indian influences on Japanese art.

In the first chapter 'Indian Deities', the author outlines the origin of gods and goddesses in Vedic thought and the evolution of their iconography by giving examples of some of the earliest surviving depictions of deities like Lakshmi, Saraswati, Surya and Indra, such as the Surya relief at the 2nd-century Buddhist caves of Bhaja in Western India. Also discussed is the *Suvarnabhasottama-sutra* or the 'Sutra of Golden Light' and the *Mahavairocana-sutra* or the 'Sutra of the Great Cosmic Buddha' as having been the two sutras that were responsible for the transmission of Hindu deities such as Saraswati and Lakshmi to Japan, which resulted in the widespread worship of both goddesses in imperial and private ceremonies. A unique perspective presented in this chapter is the preservation of ancient Indian traditions in modern Japanese society both through iconography such as the representation of Saraswati with the veena, and through nomenclature such as the district of Kichijōji on the outskirts of Tokyo, which could be translated as 'Lakshmi Town' as it is named after the temple of Kichijō a goddess who has evolved from the Hindu deity Lakshmi.

The chapters titled 'Saraswati or Benzaiten', 'Deities of Good Fortune and Abundance' and 'Other Deities of the Hindu Tradition' describe the visual manifestations of some of most revered deities in Japan with an Indic origin. In these chapters the text is accompanied by a wide range of photographs of temples, shrines and idols that have never before been seen in past scholarship. This enables readers to appreciate how early Indian ideologies and beliefs were translated into Japanese thought, such as the close association the shrines of Benzaiten (or Saraswati), like the one at the 8th-century Eikan-dō Zenrin-ji in Kyoto have with pools of water, given the Indic association with the deified river of the same name that played a significant role in Vedic religion. The inspiration of Indian divinity is further exemplified in the third chapter in which the author highlights the carrying forward in Japan of the Indian tradition of worshipping deities of fruitfulness, abundance and good fortune with three of the seven Japanese 'Deities of Fortune' – Bishamonten, Benzaiten and Daikokuten being of Indian origin. Through varied images of idols in India and Japan the author demonstrates the syncretic nature of Japanese deities – Bishamonten who serves as the Japanese god of fortune (in war) is drawn from the Hindu god of wealth Kubera, also known as Vaishravana in the Buddhist faith, while Mahakala the Buddhist version of the Hindu god Shiva who is known to destroy the illusion of time is transformed to the Japanese deity of fortune and wealth, Daikokuten.

In the fifth chapter, the author has located multiple examples of temples as well as independent shrines in large temple complexes which are dedicated to Japanese Buddhist gods of Indian origin. The main deity at the Daikyō-ji temple in Tokyo is Indra or Taishakuten, and there are several shrines in temples across the country dedicated to Varuna, Kama and Ganesha (Suiten, Enma and Kangiten in Japanese). The author argues that while deities like Indra (Taishakuten) and Brahma (Bonten) often appear on either side of the Buddha in Japanese temples, it must also be noted that they are also independently worshipped in Japan. The chapter ends with a comparative analysis of the varied representations of Ganesha – both as the conventional elephant-headed single male deity Shōten (Noble God) or Kangiten, and also in an esoteric version as a male-female couple (both with elephant heads) standing in an embrace in an iconographic depiction known as the Embracing Kangiten or Sōshin. The only purely Indic visualisation of a Hindu deity that the author's research has located and presented in this book is an intricately carved figure resembling the Venugopala Krishna on the octagonal lantern of the Tōdai-ji temple in Nara which was founded in the year 738 CE. It would have been useful for future scholarship if the antecedents of this particular image as well as other examples of such iconography had been explored further.

The influence of Sanskrit on Japanese language, culture, rituals and prayers and the significance associated with it are discussed in Chapter Three, 'Sanskrit: Divine Language'. The author argues that the importance accorded to Sanskrit as the holiest of languages is evident in Japan, as the 6th-century Siddham script of the language that is no longer used in India continues to be used for Beejaaksharas or 'seed-letters' that are used for deities and are believed to be mantras or sacred utterances that invoke their power and presence. Furthermore, several words in the Japanese language are originally from Sanskrit and Pali, the sacred language of Theravada Buddhism, with linguistic scholars believing that the Japanese Kana script owed its formation and sequencing to the former. The final chapters in the book describe the impact of some of the earliest direct influences on the art, aesthetics and culture of Japan, including the reverence accorded to Indian intellectuals including the Tamil Brahmin Buddhist monk Bodhisena (704–760 CE) and acharyas from the Nalanda University such as Nagarjuna, Nagabodhi, Vasubandhu, Asanga and Maudgalyayana. In Chapter Six, 'Indian Historical Figures', the author elaborates on these early influences such as the visit to Japan in the 8th century by Bodhisena to conduct the 'Eye-Opening' consecration ceremony of the Daibutsu (Big Buddha) statue at the Tōdai-ji temple in Nara, after which he continued to reside in the country where he taught Sanskrit and introduced elements of Indian culture, including ritualistic dance, to the Japanese. Various Buddhist temples in Japan, such as Ryōsen-ji, Gokoku-ji, Kōfuku-ji and Daihōon-ji, have statues and commemoration stones of Bodhisena as well as various acharyas from Nalanda who are venerated by different Buddhist sects as important Buddhist philosophers as well as formulators of Japanese esoteric or Vajrayana Buddhism.

The seventh chapter, 'Joy of Beauty: Autumn in Temples of Japan' and the eighth chapter, 'Indian Influence in Japanese Art' are brief overviews of the influences of Indian aesthetic philosophy and visual vocabulary on Japanese art. The author presents his point of view on how Buddhist temples in Japan have absorbed some aspects of the Indic philosophy of aesthetics, wherein the veils of 'maya' and 'mithya' (passing illusions of the material world) are lifted, to enable the viewer to observe the beauty and grace that there is to see. Through several visual examples of temples in Kyoto, Tokyo, and Nara captured in autumn, which is considered to be the appropriate season to capture the quality of the 'sublime', the author is able to give the reader a true understanding of the Japanese sense of architectural beauty, which is also evident in the final chapter, 'Japanese Temples'.

In Chapter Eight, Dr Mihoko Hiraoka, a leading Buddhist scholar and priestess of the Tōdai-ji Temple in Nara presents her argument in an essay titled 'The Japanese Perspective' – that although the cultural exchange between India and Japan started in the 8th century with Bodhisena's visit, most of the devout Buddhists visiting Japanese temples are unaware that many of the deities being worshipped are of Indian origin. However with recent co-operation on political, economic, and cultural fronts, she is hopeful of a narrowing of the distance between the two countries. Hiraoka also argues that one of the driving forces behind the establishment of the Buddhist faith in Japan was the construction of temples such as the Tōdai-ji Temple in Nara in the first millennium CE, and it was the Indic-origin deities located within them that played a crucial role in attracting people to the Buddhist faith by creating a 'sensitive impression' on the visitors through 'excellent artistic expressions' (p. 179). In the essay, Hiraoka traces the evolutionary path of the more significant Japanese Buddhist idols by referencing their Indian Buddhist roots and considering the deep connection between Buddhism and Hinduism, while at the same time keeping their inherent 'Japaneseness' in perspective. The importance of these idols in modern-day Japan was demonstrated when the government recently decided to relocate two of them from the Hokke-dō Hall of the Tōdai-ji Temple to the Tōdai-ji Museum for safe-keeping. One was the oldest representation of Saraswati, an 8-armed 8th-century idol of Benzaiten, and the other, an idol of Lakshmi (as Kisshōten or Kichijōten), both considered national art treasures in the country.

In conclusion, the reviewer found that this book is the only one of its kind that not only writes about a subject matter that has been largely ignored by past scholarship, but also accompanies the text with a vast collection of images taken by the author including photographs of idols and temple interiors that have been seen in a printed medium for the first time in Indian art historical writing. This ensures that the book will be an invaluable resource for students and scholars studying about the cross-cultural connections between India and Japan in the first millennium CE, as well as to those interested in Buddhist art and architecture, particularly in

respect of its multiple manifestations across Asia. The book would have met the expectations of the reviewer if it had focussed more on the subject matter of its title, 'Hindu Deities Worshipped in Japan', and elaborated more on the exact nature of assimilation and appropriation of Hindu and Buddhist aesthetics accompanied by a comparative study of the iconography of each deity in India and Japan. The last few chapters of the book which briefly touch upon the Japanese sense of beauty and the influence of India in Japanese art, deal with vast subject areas which could have been included as an introduction to the book instead. That being said, 'Hindu Deities Worshipped in Japan' presents to researchers a mine of information and analyses on Japanese deities of Indic origin, giving both the Indian perspective of the author as well as a Japanese expert's point of view – thereby making this book a useful addition to the reading list of scholars of Asian art, aesthetics, architecture and archaeology.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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