

Buddhas, Deities, and Scripts: Tracing India's Legacy in Japan

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Abstract

The cultural connections between India and Japan span centuries, deeply influencing Japanese spirituality, language, and artistic traditions. Central to this exchange was the transmission of Buddhism, which reached Japan in the 6th century A.D. through China and Korea, reshaping its religious and philosophical landscape. The influence of Sanskrit, the assimilation of Hindu deities like Saraswati (Benzaiten) and Vishnu (Bishamonten), and the integration of Indian scriptures such as the Suvarabhāsottama-sūtra and Mahāvairocana-sūtra further exemplify India's imprint on Japan. Concepts like the honji suijaku doctrine enabled the synthesis of Hindu and Buddhist traditions within the Japanese religious framework. Additionally, artistic and literary adaptations of the Ramayana in Japan highlight the cultural continuity between the two regions. This paper explores the depth of Indian influence on Japanese culture, tracing its impact on religion, language, and iconography while highlighting enduring cultural exchanges.

Keywords

Indian influence, Japan, Buddhism, Sanskrit, Prince Shotoku, Hindu deities, cultural exchange, honji suijaku, Mahāvairocana-sutra, Suvarabhāsottama-sūtra, Bodhisena, Buddhist temples, Shingon Buddhism, Tendai Buddhism, Benzaiten, Kichijoten, Bichnuten, Mandala, Ramayana in Japan

Indian Influence on Japanese Culture

The cultural ties between India and Japan are profound, rooted in shared philosophies and traditions. Hajime Nakamura observed that "India is culturally the Mother of Japan," highlighting India's influence on Japanese society, particularly through Buddhism. He noted that without Indian ideas, Japanese culture would not be what it is today (Nakamura, 1964).

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The introduction of Buddhism to Japan in the 6th century A.D. marked a pivotal moment in this exchange. Originating in India, Buddhism spread via China and Korea, profoundly shaping Japan's spiritual landscape. Prince Shotoku, recognizing its unifying potential, promoted Buddhism and made it the state religion in 645 A.D. This integration fostered a unique synthesis of Buddhism, Shinto, and Confucianism (Tamura, 2000). Beyond religion, Sanskrit also influenced the Japanese language, illustrating the depth of this cultural dialogue.

Buddhism's Journey to Japan

The journey of Buddhism from India to Japan is a remarkable tale of cultural exchange that spans several centuries and involves numerous key figures and events. It began in the 6th century A.D., making its way to China in 65 B.C., and from there it reached Korea in 372 A.D. The pivotal moment for Japan came in 538 A.D. when Buddhism was officially introduced through the Korean kingdom of Baekje (Bechert & Gombrich, 1984).

One of the most significant figures in this early phase was Prince Shotoku, who was instrumental in promoting Buddhism within Japan. Recognizing its potential to unify the nation and enrich its culture, he embraced Buddhism wholeheartedly. His efforts culminated in the establishment of Buddhism as the state religion in 645 A.D. during the reign of Emperor Kotoku. This marked a pivotal shift in Japanese spirituality, as Buddhism began to replace Shinto as the dominant faith (Aston, 2005).

Prince Shotoku's contributions went beyond mere endorsement; he actively sought to integrate Buddhist teachings with Japan's indigenous beliefs. He established temples, such as the Hōryū-ji, and advocated for the adoption of Buddhist practices, which laid the foundation for a harmonious coexistence between Buddhism, Shinto, and Confucianism. His promulgation of the Seventeen Article Constitution further emphasized the moral and ethical principles derived from Buddhist philosophy.

The journey of Buddhism to Japan did not occur in isolation. It was accompanied by Indian influences that shaped Japanese thought and culture, including the adaptation of the Sanskrit language into Japanese.

Impact of Sanskrit on the Japanese Language

The influence of Sanskrit on the Japanese language is a testament to the profound cultural exchange facilitated by Buddhism. As Buddhism spread from India to Japan, it brought not only religious teachings but also linguistic elements that shaped the development of the Japanese language. This adaptation was significantly advanced by Buddhist monks, notably Bodhisena, who arrived in Japan during the 8th century. His efforts in translating Buddhist texts were instrumental in this linguistic transformation.

Bodhisena's work involved adapting Sanskrit into Japanese, introducing vocabulary that enriched the linguistic landscape of the archipelago. This process facilitated the understanding of Buddhist teachings and contributed to Japanese literature's aesthetic and philosophical dimensions.

Moreover, Sanskrit's use in Buddhist rituals and texts established a cultural framework emphasizing language in spiritual practice. The incorporation of Sanskrit terms into Japanese helped bridge cultural gaps, fostering a deeper appreciation of Buddhist philosophy. Words like "butsu" (仏, derived from "Buddha") and "kannon" (観音, from "Avalokiteshvara") illustrate how Sanskrit's spiritual significance was preserved and adapted within Japan (Snodgrass, 1985).

Hindu Divinities in Japan

The arrival of Hindu deities in Japan, closely intertwined with Buddhism, marked a significant chapter in the nation's spiritual evolution. This integration was facilitated through various sects and doctrines, particularly the *honji suijaku* concept, which posited that indigenous Japanese gods were manifestations of Buddhist divinities. Such beliefs allowed Hinduism and Buddhism to coexist harmoniously.

Buddhism's introduction to Japan in the 6th century A.D. heralded the arrival of Hindu deities. Sects like Shingon and Tendai Buddhism actively worshipped these deities alongside Buddhist figures, enabling their assimilation into Japanese spiritual practices (Grapard, 1992).

The *honji suijaku* doctrine played a crucial role, allowing for the reinterpretation of Shinto deities as incarnations of Hindu gods. For instance, Benzaiten, originally Saraswati, became celebrated for her association with water, music, and knowledge, while Daikokuten, associated with

prosperity, is linked to Shiva. This blending facilitated the acceptance of Hindu deities in Japanese spiritual life (Swanson, 1989).

Early Japanese literature and art reflect this integration, with stories of Hindu divinities like Indra, Lakshmi, and Ganesha interwoven into folklore. Temples dedicated to these deities emerged, showcasing Indian culture's profound impact. The coexistence of Hindu and Buddhist elements in Japan illustrates a unique religious tapestry that continues to influence contemporary beliefs and practices.

As Bernard Faure argues, the assimilation of Indian deities into Japanese Buddhism also reflects a broader strategy of ritual and institutional legitimation. Temples leveraged the imagery and authority of powerful deities such as Bishamonten (Vaisravana) or Benzaiten (Saraswati) to assert spiritual dominance and political legitimacy, particularly during the Heian and Kamakura periods (Faure, 1996).

Sutras and Their Role in Religion

The *Suvarnabhāsottama-sūtra* and the *Mahāvairocana-sutra* hold significant positions in the transmission of Hindu concepts to Japan, serving as critical texts in the fusion of Indian and Japanese spiritual traditions.

The *Suvarnabhāsottama-sūtra*, often referred to as the "Sutra of Golden Light," was instrumental in establishing Hindu deities' divine authority within a Buddhist framework. Translated into Chinese and later Japanese, this sutra emphasized prosperity, peace, and the blessings of deities like Vishnu and Lakshmi. It influenced the Heian period, where emperors such as Shōmu endorsed its practices to ensure harmony and abundance.

Similarly, the *Mahāvairocana-sutra* introduced the concept of the cosmic Buddha, embodying universal consciousness (Davidson, 2002). This sutra deepened philosophical understandings of reality and merged with Shinto beliefs, shaping Japanese spirituality. The rise of esoteric Buddhism saw sects like Shingon embrace it as a foundational text encapsulating enlightenment principles (Orzech, 1998).

The Lotus Sutra, central to many Mahayana traditions in Japan, also reflects deep Indic roots. Kanno (2004) notes that its triadic structure and emphasis on universal Buddhahood echo early Indian Mahayana themes. Sectarian movements such as Tendai and Nichiren heavily relied on this sutra to advocate for individual salvation and social harmony, underscoring the continuing relevance of Indian scriptural philosophy.

As these sutras were interpreted across different dynasties, their meanings evolved, reflecting Japan's shifting socio-political landscape. The Kamakura period emphasized personal devotion and accessibility, integrating Hindu concepts further. This adaptability allowed continuous dialogue between Indian and Japanese spirituality, ensuring Hindu ideas remained influential in Japanese religion (Abé, 1999).

Hindu Deities in Japan

Lord Vishnu

Fig 1. Lord Vishnu transforms into Bichnuten



(Image source: <https://sanatanadham.blogspot.com/2017/01/japan-phoenix-of-bharata.html>)

Vishnu is considered supreme in Vedas and all Vedic texts. In Japan, Vishnu appears in various versions. The name Vishnu is transliterated as Bichnuten (Vishnu = Bichnu = Bichnuten). Creator Vishnu takes the form of Bichnuten in Japan, the guardian who protects the entrance of the temple. Vishnu's mount is the bird man deity, Karura in the Japanese regarded him as a minor deity, a protector of Buddhism. He suffered degradation at the hands of the Buddhists and was reduced to the status of a mere guardian deity of temples and houses at temple gates. In this form, he carries a vajra in his hand and is hence called vajrapani. He is a deity of great strength, residing in the realm of Kamadhatu. Vishnu has many different names in Japanese known

as Narasha (Narayana 那羅延天) and Narcshahmsa (Narsihma 婆藪天). Lord Krishna who is Vishnu, indeed the origin of Vishnu, stays in the supreme abode Golok Dham or Gokula which is transliterated as the divine court Gaikongobuin.

Lord Garuda

Fig 2. Lord Garuda transforms into Karura



(Image source: <https://sanatanadham.blogspot.com/2017/01/japan-phoenix-of-bharata.html>)

Lord Garuda – Vishnu’s carrier who is an eagle-headed deity known as Garuda which is transliterated into a Japanese pantheon as Karura. It is the enemy and devourer of serpents (Nāgas) and it carries the wish-fulfilling (cintāmani) gem around its neck. He is the great devotee thus the mount or Vahana of Lord Vishnu. Scriptures like Garuda-Purana and Garuda-upanishad are dedicated to him.

Lord Rama

In Japan, Ramayana arrived in Japan with the introduction of Buddhism. The Ramayana is known as 'Ramaenna' or 'Ramaensho' in Japan. In this, the character of Hanuman was ignored. In other variants, Suwa Engi Na Kato (Ramayana) written in the 14th century, the protagonist, Koga Saburo Yorikata, is the youngest son whose exile is caused by his brothers. Written during the 10th century as Sambo Ekotoba and the 12th century as Hobutsushu. In Japan, 'Hobutsushu' and 'Sambo Ekotoba' are the most popular versions of the Ramayana. 'Hobutshu' contains a concise Rama Katha. It was composed by Taira no Yasuyori in the 12th century. In another version it is known as Bontenkoku, Tamawaka (Lord Rama) is portrayed as a flute player who rescues Himegini (Sita), his wife who was being held captive by King Baramon (Ravana). Japanese filmmaker Yugo Sako

Fig 3. Rama



(Imagesource: <https://www.freepressjournal.in/ampstories/lifestyle/10-countries-where-ramayana-is-celebrated-here-is-what-the-epic-is-called-in-different-countries>)

made one of the best animated versions of the Ramayana ever. 'Bugaku' and 'Gagaku' dance styles are based on Indian classical dances and are popular in depicting Japanese Ramayana.

Lord Shiva

Fig 4. Lord Shiva transforms into Daikoku



(Image source <https://sanatanadham.blogspot.com/2017/01/japan-phoenix-of-bharata.html>:)

Shiva is the greatest devotee of Lord Krishna. He is well known to the Japanese culture as **Daikoku** (literally god of darkness), which is a Chinese and Japanese equivalent of the Indian Mahakala, another name of Shiva. **Mahesvara**. Also transliterated in Japan as Makeishura 摩醯首羅. Lord of Cosmic Destruction. In Japan, Siva comes in various forms, including **Daikokuten** 大黒天, **Daijizaiten** 大自在天, and **Ishanaten** 伊舍那天. Daikokuten as Mahākāla is the patron god of farmers and peasants. He is identified with the Shinto figure Okuninushi no Mikoto. In western Japan, Daikoku is identified with the protection of the rice fields and is worshipped as the god of agriculture. On his chest, he has a golden sun disk and in his hand, he holds a magic mallet (with male and female symbols) which fulfils all wishes.

Goddess Laxmi

Fig 5. Lakshmi (Stamp of Goddess Lakshmi in Japan; Lakshmi transforms into Kutukuden)



(Image source: <https://sanatanadham.blogspot.com/2017/01/japan-phoenix-of-bharata.html>)

Eternal consort of Lord Vishnu or Bichnuten, Lakshmi who is also known as Katyayani is transliterated as **Kutukuden**. The Hindu goddess Laxmi, the symbol of wealth and prosperity, is known as a Kichijoten, a goddess of beauty, in Japan. According to Japanese mythology, Kichijo (Laxmi) is worshipped to ensure the peace of land, wind and rain, good seasons, good harvest, joy of people, and the good of all living beings. She is the expansion of supreme energy of bliss called Shrimati Radharni and thus serves Radha with great devotion and love by accompanying Her in various pastimes.

Goddess Saraswati

Fig 6. Goddess Saraswati transforms into Benzaiten

Benzaiten (Sarasvatī)



(Image source: <https://sanatanadham.blogspot.com/2017/01/japan-phoenix-of-bharata.html>)

In India, the goddess of wisdom, knowledge, and all kinds of arts is depicted as sitting on the lotus flower, playing the veena, carrying a book in one hand and a garland of beads. Saraswati transformed into Benzaiten in Japan is considered to be a goddess of everything that flows water, time, words, speech, eloquence, music, and knowledge. In Japanese mythology Benzaiten sometimes appeared as sitting on a Lotus flower with eight arms, playing Japanese Lute. In India, she carries the vīnā, and in Japan, she carries the biwa (a short-necked lute that is related to the Chinese pipa). Sarasvatī is also the River Goddess and so her shrines are almost invariably in the neighbourhood of water -- the sea, a river, or a pond. In many ways, the original concept of Saraswati and her association with the natural order and good fortune are very well preserved in Japan. Saraswati shrine Ginkakuji Temple is dedicated to the goddess of wisdom in Koyoto.

Lord Brahma

Brahma appears in Japanese tradition as **Bontea** (Brahma=Bonma=Bontea). The creator god has become Bonten with three heads and four hands seated upon a full bloom lotus flower very similar to Brahma in India. While Brahma is often credited as the creator of the universe and various beings in it, several Puranas describe him as being born from a lotus emerging from the navel of

the god Vishnu. In Japan, Bonten is said to have four infinite virtues: bestower of all sorts of happiness, eradicator of sufferings of living beings, helping human beings to get rid of all their desires and facilitating them to abandon attachments to love and hate as promulgated by Lord Krishna in Shrimad Bhagwat Geeta.

Fig 7. Lord Brahma transforms as Bonten in Japan



(Image source: <https://sanatanadham.blogspot.com/2017/01/japan-phoenix-of-bharata.html>)

Lord Ganesha

Fig 8. Hindu god, Ganesha transforms to Kangiten in Japan



(Image source: <https://www.mumbai.in.emb-japan.go.jp/en/aboutus/20151201/20151201.html>)

Lord Ganesha, vigna-harta, the first God worshipped in India, transforms into Kangiten in Japan. The name Kangiten is generally connected to Tantric embracing deity icons, venerated as the givers of joy and prosperity. The Dual *Kangiten* icon called *Soshin Kangi-ten* (“dual-bodied god

of bliss”) is a unique feature of Shingon Buddhism. It is also called *Soshin Binayaka* in Japanese and is really the same as *Nandikeshvara* in Sanskrit. In India, Ganesha is depicted as an elephant-headed male figure with one tooth and a large belly whereas Kangiten of Japan is also represented as an elephant-headed male and female pair standing embracing each other, a female wearing a crown. Kangiten is regarded as a protector of temples and worshiped by the young boys and girls for the success of their courtship. Merchants also worship to gain success in their businesses. Matsuchinama Shoten Temple, Tokyo is the most ancient temple of Lord Ganesha / Kangiten which has been continuously in worship for the last 1000 years.

Lord Kartikeya

Fig 9. Lord Kartikeya transforms into Hachiman



(Image source: <https://sanatanadham.blogspot.com/2017/01/japan-phoenix-of-bharata.html>)

He was known as **Hachiman** in ancient Japan. Karthikeya is the indigenous god of war. He is the Commander-in-Chief of the army of the Devas. He is also the primary deity of the Kaumaram sect of Hinduism.

Lord Hanuman

He is a great devotee of Lord Rama who is an incarnation (Avtara) of Vishnu, the expansion of Lord Krishna. He always chants the name of God and dances with great devotion. He is known as SANNŌ (SANNO, SANNOU) GONGEN 山王 権現 さんおう ごんげん (monkey king) in Japan.

Fig 10. Lord Hanuman



(Image source: <https://sanatanadham.blogspot.com/2017/01/japan-phoenix-of-bharata.html>)

Lord Yama

Fig 11. Lord Yama transforms into Ema



(Image source: <https://sanatanadham.blogspot.com/2017/01/japan-phoenix-of-bharata.html>)

Yama, the lord of death became ‘**Ema**’ for the Japanese. There is a saying in Japan; “ If you lie lord Ema will pull out your tongue.” Yama is popular as a judge of human actions after death. He gives rewards or punishments according to the karmas of men. He has been and still is popular among the masses. Famous Japanese epics like the Heike Monogatari recount his stories. In the year 1172 Yama's messenger delivered a letter to a monk to report to Yama's office. The monk gives a vivid description of the palace of Yama. During the Edo period, there were a number of Yama shrines in Edo. The toto Saijiki of 1832 describes the ceremonies in thirty-one shrines of Yama in the Edo area.

Lord Kuber

Fig 12. Lord Kuber transforms into Monten



(Image Source: <http://www.art-and-archaeology.com/timelines/japan/heian.html>)

Vaishravana Kuber, the god of wealth and prosperity is named Bisha Monten, and is the god of fortune in Japan.

Makara

Fig 13. Lord Makara



(Image source: <https://www.mygodpictures.com/category/lord-varuna/>)

At the Kotohira shrine on the island of Shikoku, sailors worship a god called **Kompera**, which is a corruption of the Sanskrit word for crocodile, Kumbhira. During the Vedic times when Indra was the God of heaven, Varuna (the Vedic water god) became the God of the seas and rode on makara, which was called “the water monster vehicle”. Makara has been depicted typically as half mammal and half fish

Symbols Significant To Japanese-Hinduism

The Mandala



Fig 14. Mandala (Image source: <https://sanatanadham.blogspot.com/2017/01/japan-phoenix-of-bharata.html>)

The Taizōkai Mandala (Womb World) is associated with the ultimate principle (ri 理) and the Kongōkai Mandala (Diamond World) is with mind or intelligence (chi). Even today, in many Japanese Shingon and Tendai temples, two large mandalas are typically mounted on wooden screens at right angles to the axis of the image platform. The mandala on the east side is the Kongōkai Mandala, and the mandala on the west side is the Taizōkai Mandala. The Kongōkai Mandala represents the cosmic or transcendental Buddha (aka Dainichi Nyora and complete wisdom), while the Taizōkai mandala represents the world of physical phenomenon and ultimate principle. The Sai-in Mandalas of Toji Temple are based on the mandala iconography brought back by Enchin, and they differ slightly from the Genzu iconography. Mandalas considered to be from the Tendai lineage, such as the Shitennoji Mandala and the Taisanji Mandala, are clearly from a non-Genzu lineage.

The Swastika Symbol

The Kyōji 卍 (Skt. = Svastikah) became one of the most frequently used symbols in early Buddhism. Unfortunately, many centuries later it was misappropriated by Nazi Germany and called the Swastika. The German term Swastika comes from the Sanskrit word Svastikah, the latter meaning “to be fortunate.” The word stem SVASTI can be divided into SU (SV), meaning “good

or well,” and ASTI (ASTIKAH), meaning “is” or “being.” In modern India, the word means “auspicious.” In Japan, it represents the “possession of all virtues” and is used as a symbol of early Buddhist faith which was stolen by Buddhists from Indian doctrines. This marking, when duplicated, turning one clockwise and the other counterclockwise combines to form the Japanese character for FIELD 田, which symbolizes the “robe of the formless field of merit” – a robe that is still sewn and worn by Japanese clergy even today.



Fig 15. Swastik (Image source: <https://sanatanadham.blogspot.com/2017/01/japan-phoenix-of-bharata.html>)

Conclusion

The enduring imprint of India on Japanese culture is a testament to centuries of spiritual, artistic, and linguistic exchange that transcended geographic boundaries. From the introduction of Buddhism and Sanskrit by monks like Bodhisena to the seamless integration of Hindu deities through doctrines like *honji suijaku*, Japan absorbed, adapted, and localized Indic philosophies to shape a uniquely syncretic cultural identity. Sutras such as the *Suvarnabhāsottama-sūtra* and *Mahāvairocana-sūtra* not only conveyed spiritual wisdom but also served as conduits for Indian cosmological and ritual elements to enter Japanese religious life. The aesthetic incorporation of figures like Benzaiten, Bishamonten, and Kichijoten further underscores the creative and devotional resonance these traditions found in Japan. Ultimately, this shared cultural inheritance reflects a deep respect and intellectual curiosity that fostered a vibrant interregional dialogue—

one that continues to inform contemporary understandings of pan-Asian heritage. India's legacy in Japan is not just one of transmission, but of transformation and synthesis, illuminating the richness of interconnected civilizations. Charles Eliot emphasizes that Japanese Buddhism evolved not only through the absorption of Indian doctrines but also through the localization of these ideas into a distinctly Japanese spiritual framework. This dual movement of reception and reinterpretation characterizes much of Japan's religious development (Eliot, 1962).

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