

## **India-Japan Cultural syncretism reflected in Japanese Pantheon of deities**

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“India is culturally, Mother of Japan. For centuries it has, in her own characteristic way, been exercising her influence on the thought and culture of Japan. ....without Indian influence, Japanese culture would not be what it is today. As most Japanese profess the Buddhist faith, needless to say, they have generally been influenced by Indian ideas to a great extent.” [1]

Hajime Nakamura

“It is very important for the Japanese to know that in the bottom of Japanese culture, Indian culture is very firmly imprinted.”[2]

Yasukuni Enoki, Former Ambassador of Japan to India

It is pertinent to know how closely Indian culture is embedded in the Japanese past and present and a bright example of such deeper linkages is Japanese temples containing the statues of various deities. Numerous major and minor deities, ubiquitously present in Japanese temples, have their origin in the ancient Indian pantheon of gods and goddesses, but since these deities were introduced to Japan via China with Chinese names, Japanese people, in most of the cases, are unaware of their origins.

There are well-theorized claims that establish the introduction of Indian culture to Japan even before the formal introduction of Buddhism from Korea in 552 CE. According to the Book of Liang, which was written in 635, five Buddhist monks from the Gandhara region of India traveled to Japan during the Kofun period (250-538 CE) in 467 CE. [3] After the arrival of Buddhism, Aryadhamma, a Buddhist monk from Rajgriha (Bihar, India) seems to have entered Japan via China in 645 CE,[4] much before Bodhisena’s arrival at Naniwa (Osaka).

In addition to teaching the Sanskrit language, Āryadharma introduced various rituals including Gion rituals, which became the origin of the Gion festival, one of the greatest festivals of Kyoto. He also initiated the ancient rituals of Konpira, which motivated the foundation of Konpira-miya shrine/Kotohira Shrine, the most famous Shinto shrine in Kagawa prefecture, on the entire island of Shikoku and one of the most popular pilgrimages in Japan. Konpira is the Japanese version of the Sanskrit word ‘Kumbhīra’[5] and the Pali word ‘Kumbhila’[6], similarly as the ‘Bārāmon’ term is used for Brahmin,

specifically for Bodhisena. As the meaning of Kumbhira/Kumbhila is the crocodile, this shrine too was originally dedicated to Konpira Daigongen, a Japanese version of the Hindu crocodile deity Kumbhira of the Ganges river. Crocodile is the vehicle of the river Ganga and the river Narmada. It is also the vehicle (vahana) of Varuna. It is associated with Kamadeva, the god of love too. His consort carries the crocodile with her wherever they go.

The earliest most celebrated Indian to visit Japan was Bodhisena, a Buddhist monk from South Indian city Madurai who arrived there in 736 CE. He was appointed to teach Sanskrit at a college in Nara and there he taught Indian legends from Indian Mythology. He also taught the Siddham script of Sanskrit and contributed to the development of Kegan Buddhism in Japan. There is a theory that Bodhisena devised the Katakana syllabary, a Japanese phonetic alphabet, along with Kibi no Makibi (or Kibi Daijin).

Bodhisena was also one of the eminent personalities to conduct the installation ceremony of the Dai Butsu (large Lord Buddha statue) at Todaiji Temple in 752 CE by performing the eye-opening ceremony for the giant bronze statue of Mahāvairochana Buddha at the Emperor's request. The painting of the half-closed eyes of that magnificent statue was said to have been done by him. It has been said that Bodhisena contributed not only to the field of education, religion and art, but he also influenced the style of Japanese life. [7]

However, the credit of introducing the entire pantheon of Hindu gods and goddesses to Japan may be given to Buddhist master Kukai with much reliability. Kukai (774-835 CE), also known as Kōbō-Daishi (弘法大師, Great Master of the Propagation of Dharma), the founder of Shingon (Esoteric, a form of Vajrayāna) Buddhism in Japan, is said to have met an Indian Buddhist monk Prajñā, who was educated at Nālandā University of India in Chāng'ān, where he studied Sanskrit and esoteric Buddhist scriptures.[8] Vajrayana Buddhism originally spread from India to China through Indian traveling monks such as Vajrabodhi and Amoghavajra. While studying Tangmi/Esoteric Buddhism in China, Kukai learned Sanskrit from Prajñā and brought the Sanskrit language and its Siddham script back to Japan. By that time, various Hindu gods and goddesses were already a part of religious and ritualistic practices of Vajrayana Buddhism, therefore, he also introduced Hindu gods and goddesses to the Japanese pantheon.

Buddha and iconography of Mahayana Buddhism may be generally categorized into four groups, namely 'Nyorai-bu' (the group of Tathāgata-s or Buddha-s), 'Bosatsu-bu' (the group of Bodhisattva-s), 'Myōō-bu' (the group of the Five Wisdom Kings i.e. Vidyārājā-s) and 'Ten-bu' (the group of protector-deities of Buddhist order). Ten-bu (deva in Sanskrit) means heavenly deities of Buddhism. The origin of most of them is found in the deities of the Vedic religion (the earliest form of Hinduism) of ancient India. But once these Vedic deities were incorporated into Buddhism, they became protectors of Buddhist order (Dharma in Sanskrit) and were given both Buddhist and Shintō attributes. In the hierarchy, this group of deities stands at fourth rank after the groups of Nyorai, Bosatsu, and Myōō respectively.

The deities of Ten-bu, although benefiting from exceptional longevity, nevertheless are submitted to the cycle of rebirths, and remain outside of the world of enlightenment and Nirvāṇa. They aim to reach Nirvana eventually, however, and therefore endeavour to help Buddhism and its devotees. According to Buddhist cosmology, adopted from Indian cosmology, the deities live in the Three Worlds and are positioned hierarchically according to their position with respect to the cosmic axis of Mount Sumeru. High above the mountain resides Brahma (Bonten), on the summit reside the Thirty-Three Gods with Indra (Taishakuten) as their king, at half-height reside the God-Kings of the Orient, and at the bottom inferior deities. Most of the deities of Ten-bu are of Indian origin.

The genesis of Bichūten (毘紐天) (Skt. Vishnu), Fudō Myōō (Skt. Acalanātha), Umahi (烏摩妃) (Skt. Uma), Rago (羅睺) (Skt. Rahu), Kinnarao (Skt. Kinnara), Shagara Ryuo (Skt. Sāgara), Naraenten (那羅延天) (Skt. Nārāyana), Makeishurao (Skt. Maheshwara), Karurao (Skt. Garuda), Ashurao (Skt. Asura), Hibakarao (Skt. Vibhākara), Basu Sennin (Skt. Vasu/Vashishtha), Magoragao (Skt. Mahoraga) and many other divine/celestial beings of Japanese pantheon can be found in the Indian tradition. One may find that some of the deities no longer being popularly worshipped in India, like Varuna, Indra, Brahmā, Yama, Kāmadeva, etc., are worshipped in Japan being an integral part of Ten-bu.

In Japanese mythology, the Seven Lucky Gods or Seven Gods of Fortune (Shichifukujin) are believed to grant good luck. It is known that four out of these seven deities have their direct origins in ancient gods of India: Benzaiten/Benten (Sarasvati), Bishamonten/Tamonten (Vaiśravaṇa or Kubera), Daikokuten (Mahākāla/Shiva), and Kichijōten/Kisshōten/ Kisshoutenno/Kudokuten (Lakshmi). In some places, Fukurokuju, which originated in China, is mentioned as the seventh lucky god at the place of Kichijōten. Along with Benzaitenno/Sarasvati and Kisshoutenno/Laxmi, the Hindu goddess Mahākālī is nipponized as the Japanese goddess Daikokutenno, completing the nipponization of the three Hindu Tridevi goddesses, . Similarly, Kāngiten inherits many names and characteristics from the Hindu god Ganesha. He is known as Bināyaka-ten, derived from the epithet Vināyaka; Gaṇabachi and Gaṇapati (Gaṇapati is a popular epithet of Ganesha) . Like Ganesha, Bināyaka is the remover of obstacles, but when propitiated, he bestows material fortunes, prosperity, success, and health. Besides, Bināyaka is said to be the destroyer of evil nature, solving disputes, and leading people towards moral ways.

Benzaiten arrived in Japan during the 6th through 8th centuries, mainly via the Chinese translations of the *Suvarṇaprabhāsa Sūtra* i.e Sutra of Golden Light (金光明經), which has a section devoted to her. She is also mentioned in the *Saddharma Puṇḍarīka Sūtra*. [9] Her cult was brought to Japan from China by Buddhist Monks in the 6th or 8th centuries. In 1197, Minamoto no Yoritomo built a shrine in Kanto region in her honor, which is today called “Inokashita Benzaiten”. [10] Benzaiten is often shown holding a Biwa, just as the Hindu goddess Saraswati (from whom she is derived) is often portrayed with a musical instrument Veena in India. Two qualities of Saraswati that were transposed to the Japanese version of Benzaiten are music and wisdom.

The Jūniten (12 Deva Guardians) [11] of the Japanese pantheon originated from the Hindu guardians of the four cardinal and four intermediary directions (Jp. = Happōten

八方天). In later years, the deities of heaven and earth were added to create a grouping called the Ten Deities (Jp. = Jitten 十天), and still, later the deities of the sun and moon were added to create the Jūniten (Group of 12 Deva). These twelve generally supplant the Shitennō (Four Heavenly Deva Kings) in esoteric artwork in Japan, although they serve the same role as the Shitennō in protecting Buddhism and crushing evil demons.

These 12 gods are :

1. Bonten, 梵天 or Dai Bontenno, ruling Sky/Zenith – similar to Brahma who created the universe, with four heads for overlooking each of the four directions (although often shown with only one).
2. Taishakuten, 帝釈天, ruling East – similar to Indra, who governs all-natural forces.
3. Bishamonten, 毘沙門天, ruling North – (Sanskrit Vaisravana, who once ruled Lanka and was the step-brother of Ravana in “Ramayana”) is Kubera the ruler of wealth.
4. Katen, 火天, ruling South East – similar to Agni the fire god. Invoked in Shingon fire rituals (Agni homa ritual).
5. Enmaten / Emmaten / Emma, 焰魔天 or 炎魔天, ruling South – similar to Yama the god of death and Hell.
6. Rasetsuten / Rasatsu / Rasetsu, 羅刹天, ruling South West – similar to Nirrti or Rakshasa
7. Suiten, 水天、水神、水王, ruling West – similar to Varuna the god of water
8. Fūten / Fūjin, 風天, ruling North West – similar to Vaayu the wind god.
9. Ishanaten / Daijizaiten, 伊舍那天 (Also known as Jizai Ten 自在天), ruling North East – similar to Isana or Siva.
10. Jiten / Chiten / Kenrochijin, 地天, ruling downwards direction or Nadir – similar to Prithvi or Earth.
11. Nitten / Dai Nittenno / Nikko, 日天 – is SUN adopted into Buddhism as a protector; said to be a subject of Taishakuten.
12. Gatten / Gakko, 月天 – is Moon who appears as a Bodhisattva in Buddhism. In Japanese, Nikko = Suryaprabha (illumination of Sun) & Gakko=Chandraprabha (illumination of Moon)

Not only the Buddhist temples but also the Shinto shrines of Japan have a substantial presence of Hindu deities. Suiten-gū (水天宮) (Chuo, Tokyo) literally "Palace of the Watery Sky", or "Palace of Suiten", is a Shinto shrine dedicated to Suiten, the Japanese name of Hindu deity Varuna, the deity of the ocean. [12]Varuna is one among several Hindu deities incorporated into Shinto, introduced into Japan together with

Buddhism. There are about twenty-five other shrines of the same name in Japan.

Komainu (狛犬), often called lion-dogs in English, are statue pairs of lion-like creatures either guarding the entrance or the honden, or the inner shrine of many Japanese Shinto shrines. They can sometimes be found also at Buddhist temples, nobility residences, or even private homes. Meant to ward off evil spirits, modern komainu statues usually are almost identical, but one has the mouth open, the other closed. The two forms are called a-gyō (阿形, lit. "a" shape) and "un-gyō (吽形, lit. "un" shape) or referred to collectively as a-un.

The pattern is Buddhist in origin and has a symbolic meaning: The open mouth is pronouncing the first letter of the Sanskrit alphabet, which is pronounced "a", while the closed one is uttering the last letter, which is pronounced "um", to represent the beginning and the end of all things.[13] Together they form the sound Aum, a syllable sacred in several religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism.

Japanese pantheon of deities is not just the object of worship but also signifies the India-Japan unbroken rich cultural interconnection in the continuum from ancient to modern times. The innumerable temples of Japan contain a plethora of stories underscoring its linkages with ancient India and deeper exploration of such connections would not only enrich the Japanese culture but also further strengthen the bilateral ties of the two great nations.

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## Chart of original Indian deities/characters and their transformation into Japanese deities

Sl. No.	Original Indian Deity/characters with their Sanskrit Names	Transformed Japanese Deity	Group of Japanese Deities under TENBU 天部
1.	Saraswati	Benzaiten/Benten, her instrument 'Biwa' is originated from 'Veena', the instrument of Saraswati	Shichifujin, 七福神, Three out of Seven Lucky Gods
2.	Vaiśravaṇa or Kubera	Bishamonten/Tamonten	
3.	Mahākālā/Shiva	Daikokuten, Daikokutennyo (大黒天女), Feminine form of Daikokuten, which is Japanese version of Indian goddess Mahākālī	

6.	Dhritarāshtra	Jikokuten (East)	Shitennō , Four Heavenly Deities & Deity of the Center
7.	Virupāksha	Kōmokuten (West)	
8.	Indra	Taishakuten (Centre)	
9.	Vaiśravaṇa	Tamonten (North)	
10.	Virudhaka	Zōchōten (South)	
11.	Brahmā	Bonten 梵天 (Ruler of Heaven)	Jūniten 十二天 or 十二大天衆 Twelve Deities, 12 Deva, 12 Celestial Beings
12.	Indra	Taishakuten, 帝釈天 (Ruler of East, Lord of Devas)	
13.	Agni, the fire god	Katen, 火天, (Ruler of South East	
14.	Yama, the god of death and Hell	Enmaten / Emmaten / Emma, 焰魔天 or 炎魔天 (Ruler of South)	
15.	Nirrti or Rakshasa	Rasetsuten / Rasatsu / Rasetsu, 羅刹天 (Ruler of South West)	
16.	Varuna, the god of water	Suiten, 水天、水神、水王, (Ruler of West), Suiten's Shinto counterpart is Suijin, who is worshipped independently.	
17.	Vāyu, the wind god	Fūten / Fūjin, 風天, (Ruler of North West	
18.	Ishān	Ishanaten / Daijizaiten, 伊舍那天, Also known as Jizai Ten 自在天 (Ruler of North East)	

19.	Prithvi	Jiten / Chiten / Kenrochijin, 地天 (Ruler of Nadir)	
20.	Surya	Nitten / Dai Nittenno / Nikko, 日天	
21.	Chandra	Gatten / Gakko, 月天	
22.	Asura	Ashura	Hachi-bushū, Eight Legions
23.	Garuda	Karura	
24.	Gandharva	Kendabba	
25.	Kinnara	Kinnara	
26.	Mahoraga	Magoraka	
27.	Nāga	Ryu	
28.	Deva	Ten	
29.	Yaksha	Yasha	
30.	Anila	Anira	Jūni Shinshō, 12 Generals of Yakushi Nyorai or Bhaiṣajyaguru
31.	Andira	Anchira	
32.	Vajra	Basara	
33.	Vikarāla	Bikara	



34.	Pajra	Haira	
35.	Indra	Indara	
36.	Kumbhira	Kubira	
37.	Mahoraga	Makora	
38.	Mihira	Mekira	
39.	Sandilya	Sanchira	
40.	Sindura	Shindara	
41.	Catura	Shitora	
43.	Lakshmi	Kichijōten/Kisshōten/ Kisshoutenno/Kudokuten	Deities worshipped independently too.
44.	Ganesha, known as Vianayaka Ganapati	Kangiten 歡喜天Kanki-ten,Shō-ten(聖天, "sacred god" or "noble god"Daishō-ten("great noble god"Daishō Kangi-ten(大聖歡喜天),Tenson(天尊, "venerable god"Kangi Jizai-ten(歡喜自在天),Shōden- sama,Vinayaka-ten, Binayaka-ten(毘那夜迦 天),Ganapatei(毘那鉢底) and Zōbi-ten(象鼻天),	
45.	Hariti	Kariteimo/ Kishimojin	
46.	Skanda	Idaten	