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## A Study on the Iconographical similarity between the Gods and Goddesses of Hindus and Buddhists of Japan: A Case Study

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**Abstract**– The current paper illustrates the visual resemblances between the god and goddess depicted by the Hindus and Buddhists throughout Japan. Although Buddhism travelled through China and Korea to reach Japan and not directly from India, a prominent and lasting influence can still be seen on Japanese life and culture. The *Rigvedic* divinities, either atmospheric or celestial deities, were later restructured in the Brahmanical literature and reemerged as they reached Japan. Hindu gods and goddesses are still worshipped in Shingon Buddhism, and both belief systems are pretty similar. Nearly all Buddhist deities were adopted into the Japanese Buddhist pantheon within Hindu god and goddess counterparts. This paper, bearing above in mind, focuses on the similarities between the deities of two impactful religions of the world.

**Keywords** Hindu gods and goddesses in Japanese Buddhist pantheons · Folk belief and rituals in Japanese Buddhist Society · Indra, *Taishaku-Ten* · Brahma, *Bon-Ten* · Maheśvara, *Makeishura-Ten* · Ganeśa, *Sho-Ten* · Saraswatî, *Benzai-Ten* · Lakṣmî, *Kichijô-Ten* · Durga, *Juntei-Kannon/ Cundî* ·

### 1. Introduction

Both Hinduism and Buddhism are originated in India. As a result, both are influenced by tradition, ritual and beliefs. Many Hindu gods and goddesses found an entry in this process, especially into Mahayana and Esoteric Buddhism. These two developed forms of Buddhism were introduced into Japan in the sixth century A.D. During my visit to Japan, I have conducted extensive fieldwork in the monasteries of Japan, especially those of Kyoto and Nara Cities, and found that

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many gods and goddesses are housed in the Japanese pantheon, which has remarkable similarities with popular Hindu gods and goddesses. This article will justify that these similar gods and goddesses are originally adopted from Hindu Tradition, which is worshipped in Japan in an altered form. Moreover, I will explore the understandings of Japanese Buddhists that they hold for these gods and goddesses.

It is noted that the gods Brahmâ, Viṣṇu, Śiva, Indra, Agni, Yama, Varuṇa, Vâyu, Sûrya, Candra, Vaiúravaṇa or Kubera, Maheśvara, Īsâna, Mahâkâla, Gaṇeśa, Kârtikeya and goddesses Pṛithivî, Durgâ, Lakṣmi, Saraswatî and more are worshipped in Japan under quite different names. However, through a case study, I will explore only a few deities from the standpoints of religion, mythology, art and iconography. As they have changed a bit along the way to Japan, I will compare some of the most important gods and goddesses concerning the Indian and Japanese contexts.

## 2. Indra

The concept of Indra can be found in many Japanese religions, such as Buddhism. His mythology and power are similar to other Indo-European deities, such as Jupiter, Zeus, Perun, and suggest a common origin in Proto-Indo-European mythology. Mainly he is an ancient Vedic deity in Hinduism, who is adopted by religions of India that emerged later. M. Winternitz, "Indra can be designated as the actual national god of the Vedic Indians. Indra is a thoroughly war-like god. His enormous strength and combativeness are described repeatedly, and fondly the Vedic singers dwell on the battles of Indra with the demons, whom he destroys with his thunderbolt." (*A History of Indian Literature*, Vol.1, 1927:82).

Most of the religions of India mentioned him as the King of heaven. Indra<sup>1</sup> was one of the most dominant among gods during Ṛigvedic period. Indra is derived from the word 'Inda', which means storm. According to *Ṛigveda*, Aditi is Indra's mother and 'Soma' to be his father. The colour of his facial hair is golden. Vajra is considered to be his primary weapon. In *Ṛigveda*, He was said to be, "Who made firm the quivering earth, who set at rest the agitated mountains, who spread the atmospheric region wider, who held fast the heaven, He, O men, is Indra." (Shanti Banarjee, 1415: p.84)

Indra is armed with a thunderbolt riding in his chariot with strong will and power, as seen in the painting and sculptures in *Ṛigveda*. He is also seen riding a white

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<sup>1</sup> Indra's father is Dyaus according to some passages, Tvāṣṭri according to others. Agni is his twin-brother, most often conjoined as a dual divinity. The Maruts are his principal and constant allies, the epithet marutvant being peculiar. Majumdar, R.C. *The History and Culture of the Indian People, The Vedic Age*, Vol.1, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Mumbai, 2010, p.373

elephant known as Airavata. His thunderbolt is called vajra, which he uses with the bow and arrow and carries a hook or a conch. He has a third eye which is placed horizontally on his forehead.

In *Rigveda*, he is the deity of the heavens, lightning, thunder, storms, rains, river flows, and war. However, in the later period, his position declined, and he is placed after Brahmâ, Viṣṇu and Śiva. He is no longer worshipped in modern Hinduism but plays an essential mythological role and is considered a guardian of direction. Unlike in Brahmanical Texts, Indra is perceived as inferior in Buddhist mythology. In Buddhism, he is subservient to Buddha and follows his teaching sincerely. He was once a ruler who lacked wisdom and perfection until he met Buddha and converted to Buddhism. In Post-Vedic texts, *Râmâyana*, *Mahâbhârata* and *Purâṇas* state Indra to be an intoxicated, self-indulgent god for which his popularity gradually among other Hindu deities and became less insignificant in comparison.

Indra is mainly known as Taishaku-ten and worshipped as a guardian god in Japan. He is also known in Japan by many other names, such as Shakudaikanin, Makaba, Basaba, Kausika and Sengan. In Japan, he is visually standing on a lotus flower in the sky (koku). Images of Indra with different styles are found in Japanese monasteries. I found an image of Indra (Taishaku-ten) at Toji-ji Temple of Kyoto City during my visit to Japan. The image is 105 cm long and made of wood. He has two arms and a single head and rides a two-tusked white elephant. His right-hand holds a Vajra, and his left-hand holds his waist. His legs are cross-legged when he sits on an elephant with the right leg bent horizontally at the knee, and the foot is resting on the elephant while the left leg is hanging down. A crown-like decoration is also placed on his head to amplify the beauty. A third eye also exists placed vertically on its forehead.

A magnificent image of Taishaku-ten can also be found in the Jingo-ji in Kyoto, where he was drawn on silk in colours. He stood on a round pedestal with beautiful robes around him and Vajra in the right hand. He wears a necklace and a tiara like an ornament on his head to look magnificent. There are three eyes, two half-open and the third vertically on the forehead. A halo is seen behind his head, with its edges impersonating flames of fire emerging from the halo.

There are various other images of Taishaku-ten that can be found in Japan. A noteworthy one includes the image preserved in the Saidai-ji temple at Nara where He is painted in silk, riding on a giant white elephant, and he is seen accompanied by two attendants looking relatively small beside Taishaku-ten.

Another image of Taishaku-ten can be seen in a different *mandala* where he is the central deity with other attendants surrounding him. It was created in the ninth century on wood with colours later preserved in the thermo-ji temple, Nara

Prefecture. In that image, Taishaku-ten seems to be relatively large than the surrounding attendants, where he sits with a rich dress and a crown on his head, and he does not have any mount in there. A three coloured halo can be noticed behind his head, reflecting a divine sense overall to the image. So, Hindu God Indra is very similar to Japanese God Taishaku-ten, where He plays a significant role in Japanese Buddhist Society.

### 3. Brahmâ

Brahmâ, also known as Svayambhû, is a popular deity of Hinduism. According to the *Śatapatha Brahmana*, “Brahmâ (neuter) is said to have existed alone in the beginning and to have been the creator of the gods and the source of all things. Prajâpati originated from Brahmâ who is self-existent (Prajâpatir-Brahmaṇah, Brahmâsvayambhû)” (Jitendra Nath Banerjee, 1956:511). The first notion of Brahmâ was developed slowly and was seen earliest in the first verse of *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* “Brahmâ was the first of the gods, who was the creator of the universe and the preserver of the world (Brahmâ devânnam Prathama sambabhûva viśvasya kartâbhûvanasya goptâ).” (Jitendra Nath Banerjee, 1956:511)

Brahmâ is one of the three gods alongside Viṣṇu and Śiva that make the Brahmanical Triad. Mixed myths can be observed regarding Brahma in the Puraṇas. Although he is mainly portrayed as one of the greatest with vast remarks, he is subservient to Viṣṇu and Śiva. The great Sarasvatî is the wife of Brahmâ, who is said to be “the embodiment of his power, the instrument of creation and the energy that drives his actions” (David R. Kinsley, 1986:57).

Brahmâ is portrayed as a powerful deity with one or four faces and four arms, holding an alms bowl, prayer beads (akshamalâ), a kamaṇḍalu and a sacred book. He also has a third eye on his forehead, and the four heads are said to be the sources of the four Vedas. He is often shown in a white beard to give him the sage-like or all-knowing experience. His appearance is usually red or pink, with a posture of seating or standing on a lotus throne (Brahmâ kamaṇḍalukaraścaturmukhah paṅkajâsanasthaúca.) His mount is a goose or peacock.

Brahmâ is very devotedly worshipped in India, where Brahmâ Temple is a noteworthy temple to offer one’s prayer to Him. He is also worshipped in places dedicated to Trimurti. Other famous temple includes Chebrolu in Andhra Pradesh, Chaturmukha Brahmâ temple in Bangalore, Karnataka and Goa. Magnificent depictions are also there at Mangalwedha, from the district of Maharashtra and in Sopara near Mumbai. Another temple is Kheteshwar Brahmâ Tirtha in Rajasthan, Thripaya Trimurti Temple and Mithrananthapuram Trimurti Temple in Tamil Nadu, Khedbrahma in Gujarat. Over time, the concept of Brahmâ was also



incorporated in Buddhism, and after Indra, he is referred to frequently in early Buddhism (Theravada Buddhism). In Tripitaka, a term called Brahma Vihara is found, which refer to the idea of rebirth in the heaven of Brahmâ through the exercise of meditational process. From *Ituvuttaka*, it is known that Gautama Buddha, in his previous birth, was Brahmâ. Though Bhramâ occupied a revered position in Buddhism, he is subordinate to Buddha. It is said that Buddha preached Dharma at the request of Brahmâ for the benefit of all beings. Gandhara reliefs, “the earliest known Buddhist sculptures, represent Brahmâ and Indra as Buddha’s attendants. Moreover, in one of these sculptures, Brahmâ is seen as fanning the Buddha with a two-armed *camara* or fly-brush. Indra and Brahmâ are also attributed to a similar position.” (Dwijendra Nath Bakshi, 1979: 47)

Brahmâ is called Bon-ten or Bomma-ten in Japan, a celebrated deity in the Japanese pantheon. Japanese iconography represents him with two arms and a standing posture. He is seen to hold diverse objects in his many images. A fly-brush (camera) and a mirror in both hands are everyday things. Brahmâ or Bon-ten is found in renowned monasteries of Japan.

Below I would like to mention some memorable images of Bon-ten seen by me in the monasteries of Japan.

A very well made sculpture of Bon-ten is found in the Akishino-dera monastery of Nara City, where he is dressed wonderfully and sits on a carved lotus, and his expressions are given a bit gloomy in work. Here he is placed as one of the attendants of the Bhaisajyaguru Buddha, called Yakushi Nyorai in Japan.

The Image of Bon-ten goes back to the eighth century where it is kept in safe hands in the Main Hall of the Toshodai-ji temple in Nara. In this monastery, he is accompanied by Indra as an attendant of the Vairocana Buddha, Birushana Butsu in Japan. A unique wooden piece of Bon-ten is found in the Lecture Hall of the To-ji temple of Kyoto, which has four heads and four arms sitting on four geese. His eyes look down in his refined face. The visibility of all the four heads from the front stands out in this beautiful carving. Two heads are placed beside the principal head, slightly slanting towards the left and right sides, while the other head, the fourth one, is placed over the head of the principal one, thereby enabling the full view from the front. The principal head holds a third eye vertical on the foreheads with the other with only two eyes.

Another mind-blowing painting of Bon-ten is found in the Jingo-ji temple in Kyoto. There he has four heads and forearms. The Upper right arm holds the stalk of a full-bloom lotus flower, and the lower one holds a long trident. The upper left hands appear to hold a longish pot and the other a mudra. A third eye is placed vertically on the principal head, and other heads only have two eyes. He is

standing on a pedestal wearing various ornaments, flowering garments and halos. The above description suggests that the Japanese iconographical form of Bon-ten has remarkable similarities with the Indian textual reference of Brahmâ.

#### 4. Maheśvara

Maheśvara is a celebrated Hindu god who is also known as Śiva. He is one of the principal deities of Hinduism and the supreme god in Shaivism. The term 'Maheśvara' consists of Mahâ and Īsvara, meaning 'great' and 'lord' respectively. According to Sanskrit Dictionary, the word Śiva means "auspicious, propitious, gracious, benign, kind, benevolent, friendly" (M.M. William, 1899: 1074-1076). A mighty god is also considered part of the Hindu trinity-Trimurtia long side Brahmâ and Viṣṇu. Brahmâ is considered to be the creator whereas Viṣṇu is known to be the maintainer or preserver and Śiva the destroyer or transformer. Maheśvara is one of many names of Śiva and can be found in *Īvapurâṇa* (1.20). There are other eight names of Śiva which are Hara, Maheśvara, Sulapani, Pinâki, Ūiva, Paūupati, Shambhu and Mahâdeva which are commonly used for the rituals of bringing the clay, kneading, installation, invocation, ceremonial ablution, worship, craving the forbearance and formal farewell. Rudra is an atmospheric deity with great power in the Vedic literature and is also mentioned in the *Rigveda*.<sup>2</sup> Later in the Vedic period, Epics and Purâṇas, Rudra is one of Śiva's top names. N.K. Bhattasali points out<sup>3</sup> many features that make Maheśvara unique, which includes his beautiful crescent moon, the third eye on his forehead, serpent around his neck, the holy river Gaṅgâ flowing from his matted hair, the trident and the drum (damaru) as his weapon, blue throat (Nillakantha), seated upon a tiger skin like Yoga or meditating pose, Nandi (bull) his mount. Thus he is widely known to be a Pan-Hindu deity in the Indian subcontinent.

The statue of Maheśvara was found in Japan as Makeishura-ten, and he is also recognized as Daijizai-ten and Śiva-shin. Makeishura-ten was worshipped as a guardian god by the Esoteric Buddhists. Many images of him can be found all over Japan, with him having two, four, eight and eighteen arms. Makeishura-ten is often depicted as riding on a cow (bull).

<sup>2</sup> Rigveda states that deity Rudra has two natures, one wild and cruel (Rudra) and another kind and tranquil (Śiva). Kramrisch, Stella. *The Presence of Śiva*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, 1992, p.15

<sup>3</sup> Of the twelve Adityas, Visnu gradually came into prominence. The Rudras compounded themselves into a single figure of impetuous qualifications under the name of Śiva. Bhattasali, NaliniKanta. *Iconography of Buddhist and Brahmanical Sculptures in the Dacca Museum*, Rai S.N. BhadraBahadur, Honorary Secretary, Dacca Museum Committee, Dacca, 1929, p.76

Beautiful pieces of Makeishura-ten can be found all over Japan. Such a place is the outer hall of the *Taizo-kai Mandala* temple, where it is placed in the southwest corner. It can also be seen at the left outer portion of the *Genzu Mandala temple* (Dwijendra Nath Bakshi, 1979:73). On the other side, in the *Sanzu Mandala* temple, he is depicted to have a red body with his right palm holding a mudra folding the middle finger.

There is a description of many kinds of images in the iconography book in Japan. Makeishura-ten has three eyes and eighteen arms, decorated with crown and ornaments to present his divine form. A dragon should also be attached to his body. In many Japanese Buddhist texts, a dragon is called 'Ryu', which correlates with Maheśvara, who often has one round his neck. According to the Japanese convention, the seed-syllable, i.e. Bija mantra of Makeishura-ten, is 'Ma' (Dwijendra Nath Bakshi, *ibid*: 74). The iconographical description above suggests that Maheśvara is worshipping the Japanese pantheon as Makeishura-ten, a guardian god.

## 5. Gaṇeśa

Gaṇeśa is a celebrated deity in the Hindu pantheon for his exceptional physiognomy and power. He is said to have two characters, one as a Vighnakarta (creator of obstacles) and the other as a Vighnaharta (remover of obstacles). His rituals are noteworthy, and he is given the epithet *Arapūjya* for he is worshipped first among all the other gods and goddesses. "Nearly all Hindus practise the worship of Ganapati without reference to any particular sect at the beginning of any religious ceremony and on special occasions" (R.G.Bhandarkar, 1965:150). In *Brahmavaivarta-purāna* it states, "position of Gaṇeśa is above all the gods. *ŪivaPurānas* says that Gaṇeśa is offered prayer before the pūjā of other highest gods. Various other Brahmanic literature also held his position at the highest quarter. He is also regarded as the remover of all obstacles in Brahmanic literature such as *LingaPurāna*, *ŪivaPurānas*." (Amulya Charan Vidyabhusan, 1963: 99)

Gaṇeśa has eight synonyms as prior to an early Sanskrit lexicon. They are Vināyaka, Vighnarāja (equivalent to Vighneśa), Dvaimatura (one who has two mothers), Ganadhīpa (equivalent to Gaṇapati and Gaṇeśa), Ekadanta (one who has one tusk), Heramba, Lambodara (one who has a pot belly or, literally, one who has a hanging belly) and Gajānana (gajānana) having the face of an elephant." (Yuvraj Krishan, 1999:6)

Vināyaka, another very particular name of Gaṇeśa, can be seen used widely in both the Purānas and in the Buddhist Tantras. The name signifies the unique creation or birth of Gaṇeśa. "We are told that Pārvatī or Umā created him out of the dirt of her body – without the help of her consort Ūiva. That is why he is called

‘Vinâyaka’ (=, i.e. without nayaka, i.e. ‘sire’ or father).”(Dwijendra Nath Bakshi, 1979: 91)

Gaṇeśa is unique in its looks as it has an elephant’s head with a softly curling trunk and around the human body. He got big ears alongside his big belly. He has one or both his tusks broken off, sometimes seen holding it. He has four arms, each carrying its attributes and commonly represented objects, i.e. a shell, discus, mace, water-lily. He has his hair done atop his head and wears pearls and serpents as ornaments with bells indicating him to be a dancer. He is either seen riding a mouse or rat or being around a mouse.

Many myths can be found relating to the origin of Gaṇeśa in India as given in various Purāṇas and other religious texts. Many of them can be found in the *Mahābhārata*, the *Yājñavalkya Smṛti*, the *Śiva Purāṇa*, the *Skanda Purāṇa*, the *Brahmavaivarta-purāṇa*, the *Matsya Purāṇa*. However, it would not be possible to bring out all of them in this article but could undoubtedly put forward the noteworthy ones. In the *Brahmavaivarta-Purāṇa*, it is stated that “Gaṇeśa was Kṛiṣṇa himself originally in the human form. Śani, the god of the planet, went to him while a child. In consequence, the head of the child separated and went away to Goloka. The elephant Airavata had then a son in the forest. His head was removed and fixed on the child’s body.” (T.A. Gopinatha Rao, 1914:45-46) Mythical accounts regarding the origin of Gaṇeśa are narrated by T.A. Gopinatha Rao.<sup>4</sup>

In Japanese Buddhism, Gaṇeśais known as Sho-ten, also entered Japan through China and was worshipped as the ‘Remover of Obstacles’ in Japan. Gaṇeśa is commonly recognized as Daishokangi-ten, abbreviated as Kangi-ten, Shō-ten, Ganabachi, Binayaka-ten in Japan.

There are two forms of Gaṇeśa or Shō-ten in Japan; the single elephant-headed form is called Binayaka (Sanskrit, Vinâyaka) and the twin with two elephant heads is called Shō-ten or Kangi-ten. One of the standard features found in Japanese representations is a laughing mood or holding a radish in a jolly state. He was often represented standing, with from two to six arms. “The female Vinayaka may wear a small crown, and the male may wear a small cintamani on his head.” (Alice Getty, 1971: 82) The twin form of Binayaka is prevalent in China and Japan and is highly noticeable as its concept cannot be seen in India. Now we discuss various Japanese images of temples.

<sup>4</sup> Gaṇeśa, who is the same as Viṅhnesvara, is considered to have been born solely to Ūiiva, solely to Pārvaṭī, and to both Ūiiva and Pārvaṭī, and is also held to be Kṛiṣṇa in another form. He is identified with the Parabrahman and with Brahmanaspati or Brihaspati elsewhere. Gopinatha Rao T. A., *Elements of Hindu Iconography*, Vol. 1, Part. 1, The Law Printing House, Madras, 1914, p.46

Binayaka has described an entity to have ahead of an elephant and a body of a human being. He grips a radish in his right hand and a trident in his left hand. He is worn bangles, a necklace, precious brocades all over his body. He sits with his feet folded, legs crossed. His right tusk is broken, and the nose (trunk) turns outwards. His body is reddish yellow. He wore gorgeous garments and a crown decorated with various jewels.

In Japan, “during the worship of Shô-ten, no one can see his image except the priest through whom the pûjâ is performed, and the deity is never exposed to the view of the ordinary devotees.” (DwijendraNathBakshi, *ibid*: 103) Alice Getty added a mysterious aspect of Ganesa in Japan, stating it “to be visualized as having one body with four arms and four legs.” (Alice Getty, *ibid*: 84)

Shô-ten or Gaṇeśa were worshipped in 243 temples in Japan either as a single image or a double-bodied image to gain fortune. The biggest temple of Shô-ten can be found in Osaka, where numerous people offer their prayers in the temple. Hence, it can be seen that Gaṇeśa in India and Japan are very similar, with them both having elephant-head and a body of a human being holding radish, swords in their four arms and their tusks broken off. Therefore, it could be concluded that the Japanese were inspired by the Hindu deities and worshipped in their temples. From what goes above, it can be concluded that God Gaṇeśa has a remarkable iconographical similarity with that of Shô-ten of Japan.

Now I shall describe some important Goddesses. Many goddesses of Hindu have significant similarities with the Japanese goddess, but I will highlight only noteworthy ones.

## 6. Saraswatî

Saraswatî is widely known as a Hindu Goddess of knowledge, music, wisdom, art and learning. She is a part of the trinity (Tridevi) of Saraswatî, Lakṣmî and Pârvatî. All the three forms have the trinity of Brahmâ, Viṣṇu and Śiva in the creation, maintenance and destruction of the Universe. Saraswatî is diversely known as Mahâsveta, Vâni, Viṇâpâni, Vâgdevi, Bhâratî, Vâgiúvarî. By the time of the Brahmana in the later mythology, “Saraswatî is identified with Vac, ‘speech’ and in post-Vedic mythology she became the goddess of eloquence and wisdom invoked as a muse and regarded as either the wife or daughter of Brahmâ” (Alicia Matsunaga, 1969:256). *Matsya Purana* gives authority for the belief that “one goddess only is intended, though several names call her: Brahmâ next formed from his immaculate substance a female, who is celebrated under the names of Satarupâ, Sâvitri, Saraswatî, Gayatrî and Brahmanî.” (W.J Wilkins, 1900: 110-111)

Saraswatī was initially the name of an ancient river filled up by the sands of Rajputana on the banks in the present. It was where the Vedic Aryans primarily settled after they migrated to India. Saraswatī was a celebrated river embodied as a goddess. Later during the Puranicage, “she was sanctified as the goddess of learning. She is also represented as the goddess of eloquence and wisdom and the wife of Brahmā or Viṣṇu. The Buddhists borrowed this Hindu goddess, incorporated her bodily into their pantheon in the Tantric age when she was equally popular with the Hindus and the Buddhists, and modified her form in various ways. In Buddhism, she is known, according to *Sādhanmâlâ*, as Mahāsaraswatī, Vajravînâ, VajraSâradâ and Arya Saraswatī. Saraswatī is the consort of Mañjusri. “The Buddhist Saraswatī may have one face with two arms, or three faces and six arms as her worship is widely prevalent among the Buddhists owing to the belief that like Mañjusri and Prajñapâramitâ, she confers wisdom, learning, intelligence, memory a comparatively large number of Sadhanas is assigned to her in the *Sādhanmâlâ*.” (Benoytosh Bhattacharyya, 2013:413) However, different kinds of Saraswatī can be seen in Buddhist mythology.

We discuss a few typical images of Hindu Saraswatī in different places and periods where she came in different forms. These forms are seen to have four, eight or ten arms during the dancing poses. Other images include Saraswatī with two arms and sitting erect in the virasana posture. Sculpture during the medieval period shows that “four-armed goddess seated in lalitâkṣepa on a double-pedalled lotus, playing on a Vînâ with her two front hands and holding a rosary and a manuscript in her back right and left hands respectively. A tiny swan (hamsa, the usual vehicle of the goddess in these mediaeval sculptures) is carved in the extreme left corner of the pedestal, which is decorated with lotus coils usually found in these 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup>-century sculptures.” (Jitendra Nath Banerjee, 1956:379) The Goddess is also seen to have various vehicles such as peacock, lion and ram, that She rides in various Indian sculptures and paintings (J.L. Shastri et al. 1954:133). However, a wide variety of Her sculptures are seen throughout the years by the Hindu sculptors of India and are known by different descriptions of the forms of the goddess through the texts.<sup>5</sup>

In Japan, Saraswatī is worshipped in the name of Benzai-ten. She is recognized for the concept of her control of all kinds of flow, viz. the flow of love, music,

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<sup>5</sup> Some other texts describe Saraswatī as usually Visnudharmottar, Amsumadbhedagama, Purvakaranagama, Rupamandanaas four-armed, white coloured, dressed in white garments and decked with many ornaments, holding in her four hands any four of the following objects: manuscript (Pustaka), white lotus (pundarika), rosary, musical instrument (Vina), water-vessel (kamandalu). Banerjee, Jitendra Nath, *The Development of Hindu Iconography*, University of Calcutta, 1956, p. 377.

wealth, fortune, beauty, happiness, eloquence, wisdom, victory and also the flow of children. She is known to be a fulfiller of all desires. However, not much is known about how she became the goddess of all kinds of flow. It is said to have very much related to the famous Indian River Saraswatî. Different names in Japan are also known as Saraswatî. She is called there as Benzai-ten, Ben-ten, Benten-Sama, Benzamini, Myôon-ten (goddess with fine voice), Daiben, Dai-Benzaiten (goddess of great intelligence), Daibentenno, Bion-ten (goddess with beautiful voice), Ku-doku, Tennio (goddess of meritorious works), Mio-on Ten-nio (goddess of beautiful voice). (Cf. DwijendraNath Bakshi, 1979:109).

Saraswatî is known to be the consort of Brahmâ. This concept is retained in Japan, for sometimes Benzai-ten or Saraswatî is also regarded there as the wife of Bon-ten or Brahmâ. She is generally imagined as an exquisitely beautiful lady, or in other words, she is the ideal of feminine beauty. She is also the goddess of music, eloquence, fortune, wealth, progeny, the flow of rivers. However, Benzai-ten is seen to have a hostile approach in Japan. In EnoshimaJinja of Kanagawa Prefecture of Japan, I have seen an image of Ben-ten in a war-like disposition. She has a sword in her hand; a serpent and a tortoise appear at her feet, while two Deva Kings stand on either side. In India, where Hinduism is the religion of the majority, there is not much about the fierce side of Saraswatî, unlike in Japan, where quite interesting concepts are seen.

Benzai-ten is mainly worshipped in Japan's five prominent holy places, viz. Chikubushima island in Omi (Shiga Prefecture), Kinkazan in Rikuzen (Myagi Prefecture), Miyajima island in Aki (Hiroshima Prefecture), Amonogawa in Yamato (Nara Prefecture) and Enoshimaisland in Sagami (Kanagawa Prefecture). Miyajima and Enoshima changed into Shinto Shrines in the Meiji Period. "Benzai-ten became one of the Seven Gods of Fortune, and her character was slightly altered by folk belief. Here she was believed to be a very jealous deity, as the white snakes sometimes portrayed around her neck appeared to symbolize" (Alicia Matsunaga, 1969:257) Benzai-ten is respected in every family as an auspicious housegoddess. Her image is placed near the entrance door to bless wealth or fortune under its shelter. Her image is also preserved in almost all the shops in Japan along with the image of 'Daruma'.<sup>6</sup>

Since ancient times Benzai-ten has been considered a very powerful and spreader of happiness in Japan. She is said to have several hands and attributes. She is often depicted with eight hands and sometimes two or others with four or six hands. Benzai-ten holds in her eight hands bow, sword, axe, string, arrow, halberd, long

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<sup>6</sup> 'Daruma' is a word borrowed from the Sanskrit word 'Dharma' meaning law or morality code, and is often used with the word Bodaidaruma, 'Bodhidharma'.

pestle and iron wheel (cakra) eight weapons befitting a goddess of war. Two armed Benzai-ten holds a Biwa (Vînâ) or lute in her left hand and plays it with her right hand.

Now I will discuss some critical images of temples in different periods. Benzai-ten is preserved in the Hokke-do of the Todai-ji temple in Nara. This image shows her in esoteric form with eight arms. She holds a bow, an arrow, a sword, a spear, an axe, a lasso, a vajra and a wheel of the law. It was made of clay during the latter half of the eighth century. The known form of Benzai-ten with two hands began from the middle of the Kamakura period (1185A.D– 1333A.D). Naked images of Her also started to emerge during this period. Her famous images include playing an instrument with her arms in unattired form. She is believed to be the goddess of music. This image was initially placed in the hall of dance and music of the TsurugaokaHachiman-gu, a famous Shinto shrine of Kamakura. Now it is preserved in the Kamakura Museum and displayed with attires.

Eight-armed Benzai-ten can be seen in the EnoshimaJinja.According to the temple authorities, it was constructed during the early Kamakura period. The goddess is seated on a lotus. She holds in her hand's various attributes, such as a sword, arrows, a crescent stick, a rope, a wheel, a pomegranate, a spear-like object. Her body is seen to be of the colour green and reddish tinge. After the Muromachi period (1336A.D-1573A.D), the image of Benzai-te in sitting posture with eight arms seemed to be worshipped by the Shingon sect. There are various representations of the eight-armed Benzai-ten existing from the Muromachi period. He is also seen within the compound of To-ji temple in Kyoto, sitting in a shrine. He is considered one of the three deities called 'San-Ten' with the other deities named Daikoku-ten(Mahâkâla) and Bishamon-ten(Kubera). Benzai-ten is in the middle and standing on a lotus on the altar. Her body is white, and she wears blue garments. Daikoku-ten is on her left, and Bishamon-ten is on her right. Her eight arms hold different implements, including sword, spear, vajra, bow and arrow.

Benten is the most important deity in the Kane-ji temple at Ueno in Tokyo. The image of Ben-ten in the Kane-ji is curved of wood and is given eight arms. It is dated around the seventeenth century. It is given a sitting pose with beautiful decorations surrounding it. She possesses various weapons such as an arrow, sword, axe, rope, bow, and iron links. She is believed to bestow blessings regarding averting disaster, gaining peace, happiness, wealth, prosperity, wisdom and knowledge. The Nison-do or "Hall of Two Saints" is a part of the komyo-ji temple near the sea of Kamakura.An extraordinary image of Benten lies in there, who is worshipped as a Goddess of Music and Fine Arts.The temple was constructed around 1243 A.D.



Benzai-ten became a very admired goddess in Japan, and admiration was so vibrant that many forged Tantric Sutras in her favour. There are believed to be seven gods that are said to control the welfare of human beings, with Benzai-ten being one of them as bevvies by the Japanese. The belief of the seven gods originated from China during the Muromachi period.

So, it can be deduced that goddess Saraswatî has remarkable iconographical and conceptual similarities with the Japanese goddess Benzai-ten.

## 7. Lakṣmî

Lakṣmî is one of the most popular and widely adored goddesses of the Hindu pantheon. She is worshipped very devotedly all over India. “She is said to be the goddess of wealth, love, prosperity, fortune and the embodiment of beauty. When a man is growing rich, it is said that Lakṣmî has come to dwell with him; whilst those in adversity are spoken of as ‘forsaken of Lakṣmî.’ In pictures, she is painted like a lady of bright golden colour, seated on a lotus with two arms” (W. J. Wilkins, 1900:132). Various names of Lakṣmî are founding Hindu traditions, such as Padmâ, Kamalâ, Kamalikâ, Padmapriyâ, Padmamukhî, Viṣṇupriyâ, Nandikâ, Haripriyâ, Shreeyâ, Puṇimâ, and so forth. She has four hands, each signifying the goals of human life; Dharma (moral life), artha (pursuit of wealth), Kama (emotional fulfilment) and moksha (pursuit of self-knowledge). She is believed to be a guide towards one’s success. According to Hinduism, human beings have eight goals: spiritual enlightenment, food, knowledge, resources, progeny, abundance, patience and success. As a result, there is believed to have eight Lakṣmî which are AadiLakṣmî, DhaanyaLakṣmî, VidyâLakṣmî, DhanaLakṣmî, SantaanaLakṣmî, GajaLakṣmî, DhairyaLakṣmî and VijayaLakṣmî. She is very welcomed as a household –goddess but is very popular among other places. The goddess Lakṣmî can be found among Jains and Buddhists too.

Sri-Lakṣmî is often referred to in Buddhist texts. In Buddhism, Alicia Matsunaga says, “the deity gained popularity from the time of the foundation of Mahâyâna and has continued to be widely venerated as the female goddess relating to virtue and merit up to the modern times. The *Daikisshotennyobon* describes her virtues, and from earliest times in Japanese Buddhism, she was regarded as the principal image whenever this sutra was enshrined.” (Alicia Matsunaga, 1969:254)

Lakṣmî or very commonly Sri, is the wife of Viṣṇu (Nârâyaṇa), one of the principal deities of Hinduism and under various names appears in this relation in his various incarnations. Although in some myths, she also appears as the wife of Dharma and mother of the Kama, the god of love. “As the lord of the worlds, the gods, Janarddana descends amongst humankind in various shapes; so does his

coadjutor Sri. Thus, when Hari was born a dwarf, the son of Aditi, Lakṣmî appeared from the lotus as the Padma, or Kamala; when he was born as Rama (Parasurama) of the race of Bhrigu, she was Dharani; when he was Raghava (Ramachandra), she was Sita; and when he was Krishna, she was Rukmini.” (W. J. Wilkins, 1900:127-128)

Lakṣmî, in her usual poses, can be seen sitting or standing on a lotus and typically carrying a lotus in one or two hands. The lotus is said to have a symbolic meaning in Hinduism and other Indian tradition.”It symbolizes knowledge, self-realization and liberation in Vedic context, and represent reality, consciousness and karma (work) in the TantraSâhasrara context” (A. Parthasarathy, 1983:91-92). The lotus is always perceived as purity regardless of where it grows, channelling through the message that good continuously blooms even in the evil surrounding. There are usually two other animals beside her in the photos; an elephant or an owl. The elephant is known as Gaja-Lakṣmî, and it was shown as a symbol of work, activity and strength, as well as water, rain and fertility for abundant prosperity.

On the other hand, an owl represents the patient striving to observe, see and discover knowledge, mainly when surrounded by darkness. Its perseverance towards greed of knowledge and wealth through the struggles of day-blindness is what stands it out in there. Consequently, Lakṣmî can often be seen with golden attire reflecting prosperity with an owner on her vehicle throughout the Indian subcontinent. David R. Kinsley states:

Lakṣmî’s auspicious nature and her reputation for granting fertility, luck, wealth and well-being seem to attract devotees in every Indian village. All of India’s backcountry is the dominion of Lakṣmî, the goddess of the lotus... She accompanies every mile travelled through central India, every visit to a temple... Her likenesses are omnipresent on the walls and pillars, lintels and niches of sanctuaries, regardless of the deity of their specific dedication. ... Lakṣmî is worshipped throughout the year in a variety festival, and she is the constant object of rates, ‘religious vows’ employing which devotees ask her for a blessing in return for undertaking some act of devotion or piety on her behalf (David R. Kinsley, 1988:32-33).

In Japan, Lakṣmî is known as Kichijô-ten, a very popular goddess of Japanese society. She is believed to bestow money and other material benefits and is called the goddess of wealth. Her other names include Kichijô-ten, Kichishô-ten or Kishhō-ten. She is also referred to as Makashiri or Mahâ-Ūrî. It is said that ‘Kichijô-ten’s image was the first image of a female deity in Japan and was made in the Nara Period (645-794 A.D). In fact, ”it was in the Nara period that the images of female divinities, e.g. Kichijô-ten (Lakṣmî), Benzai-ten (Saraswatî) and Kishimojin (Hârîti) came into use” (Dwijendra Nath Bakshi, 1979:129). The

belief of Kichijō-ten was spread far-right after her elegant image was first made, which immediately overwhelmed the Buddhist monks. In Japan, she is seen with two arms and holds in her right hand a lotus flower, while her left-hand holds a precious stone. She is with longish eyes and a tranquil face. She is decorated with a necklace and bracelet.

Kichijō-ten is among the Buddhist divine entities described in the Taisho collection (descriptions of various images). She is said to face the Buddha on the plain ground before Senju Kannon or the Thousand-armed Avalokiteśvara. She is presented as a goddess wearing ceremonial robes and a large lotus containing several other flowers on her hands. Moreover, it is seen that the first finger of her right-hand palm points towards her heart.

A famous representation of Kichijō-ten can be seen in the Yakushi-ji temple of Nara Prefecture, which is from the Nara Period. The picture is in five colours on fine hemp cloth. The round face is painted beautifully, with her movements slightly towards the left side. Such an attractive image of Kichijō-ten can also be found in Kofuku-ji Museum in Nara. She is depicted as sitting in a Zushi, i.e. a miniature shrine. She has a white body and wears a crown complementing beautifully with the dress. Another beautiful image of Kichijō-ten can be seen in the Hozan-ji temple in Nara prefecture. She is acknowledged as Kichijō-ten, i.e. Lakṣmī with lotus flower. She stands on a pedestal wearing a crown, necklace and gorgeous garments. A lotus flower stalk is seen on her left hand and the right representing mudra.

Honourable mentions of the sculptures of Kichijō-ten would be the one preserved in a Zushi or miniature shrine in the Hon-do (main hall) of the Joruri-ji temple of Kyoto. The Japanese cypress wood is made of that stands on a lotus pedestal. An excellent piece of Kichijō-ten (mahārī) can be seen in Kyoto by the Koryu-ji, carved out from a single piece of wood during the Early Heian Period (ninth century). She is seen standing in her white body, wearing a red garment.

A remarkable image of Kichijō-ten from the Heian Period (794-1185 A.D.) can be found in the Golden Hall of the Horyu-ji temple. It is constructed with wood and is about 120cm which stands on a three-terraced round pedestal. A necklace and a crown can be seen on the figure. Attention to the small details on the figure, i.e. the fifteen straight spokes coming out of her crown on the left, right and upward directions and her mesmerizing eyes and expressive eyebrows with detailed designs on the dress, makes it look very lively.

Other representations of the deity can be found in several other temples in Japan, including Onjo-ji in Shiga where she is seen in the standing posture, Daigo-ji in Kyoto, Tamon-ji and Tasshin-ji in Hyogo; Taima-dera in Nara; Anyo-ji in

Okayama; Zentsu-ji at Kagawa. Therefore, the iconographical and abstract forms of goddess Lakṣmî and Japanese goddess Kichijô-ten are very similar.

## 8. Durgâ

DurgâDevî is a principal and a prevalent goddess of Hindus. She is a multifaceted goddess with various names, identities and faces. The word Durgâmeans impassable, inaccessible, impregnable. It resembles the word 'Durg', which means fortress, which is usually difficult to access, attain or pass. For example, 'Durg' is the name of an Asura who had become invincible to gods, and Durgâ is the goddess who interposes and defeats him.

The figure of Durgâ, the mother goddess, was well established with her different forms in Brahmanical religion from the very dawn period of Epic and Purânicliterature. Her qualities, greatness has been shown at first in Devî-sûkta and Râtri-sûkta of *Ṛigveda*, and then in *Atharva-Veda* and *Taittîriya Aranyaka*. *Durgâstotras* (hymns to Durga) of the *Mahâbhârata* gives us an account of the developed concept of Durgâ. The most important representation of the goddess is described in the *Mârkaṇḍeya-Purâna*. One of her earliest forms according to this Purâna is the Mahiṣâsuramardini form which is still prevalent in the Indian subcontinent. Various goddess features can be noticed in the representations around the Indian subcontinent from the early periods. One is from Ellora, where she is described as having eight arms, riding on her lion-mount and on the move to kill the demon Mahiṣâsura.

Durgâ is a symbol of all divine forces. She is almighty as the embodiment of power, intellect, faith, nourishment, desirous of success and patience. Although we worship her many forms such as Bhavânî, Pârvatî, Umâ, Gourî, Jagadhâtrî, Kâtayanî, she is considered to be only one. The goddess Durgâ is also Triyambake (the three-eyed goddess). Her left eye signifies desire, represented by the moon, the right eye representing action, denoted by the sun and her upper-middle eye stands for knowledge, indicated by fire. Durgâ is portrayed in the Hindu pantheon riding on a lion or tiger. She is often depicted to have four, eight, ten or eighteen arms, each carrying a weapon, often defeating Mahiṣâsura. She holds a conch shell, bow and arrows, thunderbolt, lotus, Sudarshan-Chakra, the sword, the trident, Empty (blessings and forgiveness), Club (surrender and devotion) in her ten hands. Durgâ is a golden-coloured woman with a gentle and beautiful countenance.

The images of Lakṣmî, Saraswatî, Gaṇeúa and Kârtikeya who are Her children who are worshipped with Durga. The Hindu god Śiva is also known to be DevîDurgâ's husband. The image of Durgâ with the whole group with her in the centre is often referred to as chaal-chitra (iconographical representation of the

family members of Durgâ). The goddess on a lion is known as her Vâhan. The favourite tableau is of her stabbing Mahiṣâsura, the demon. It represents the victory of the goddess, Durga, over the demons. The *Devîmâhâtmya* states that Durgâ is the universe.<sup>7</sup>

Durga took ten forms to defeat the two giants, Sumbha and Nisumbha. In *Mârkaṇḍeya Purâna* depicts these incarnations in subsequent order: “1) As Durga, she received the message of the giants; 2) As Dasabhujâ (the ten-armed), she slew a part of their army; 3) As Singhavâhinî (seated on a lion), she fought with Raktavijâ; 4) As Mahiṣâsura. (destroyer of a buffalo) she slew Sumbha in the form of a buffalo; 5) As Jagaddhâtri (the mother of the world) she overcomes the army of the giants; 6) As kâli (the black woman), she slew Raktavijâ; 7) As Muktakesi (with flowing hair) she overcame another of the armies of the giants; 8) As Târa (the saviour) she slew Sumbha in his proper shape; 9) As Chinnamustaka (the headless) she killed Nisumbha; 10) As Jagadgaurî (the golden-coloured lady renowned through the world) she received the praises and thanks of the gods” (W. J. Wilkins, 1900:301- 302).

Durgâ is Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, widely known as Juntei Kannon or Cundî, considered the mother Buddha of the many Buddhas in Japan. Juntei is mainly worshipped for wisdom, marital harmony, birth conception, longer lifespan and sometimes rain. A famous story can be heard from the founder of Daigoji, Shobo (832-909), whose propitiation led to the birth of two emperors. The prayers for a good marriage and childbirth provide a feminine nature, and so does the name ‘Butsumo’. Although Juntei is female, the sculptures and paintings prove otherwise. In Japan, Juntei is considered one of the six Kannon (Roku Kannon), although many do not approve of her position as she is believed to be greater than that. Alicia Matsunaga states that “Hindu deity Durgâ might have been a prototype for the bodhisattva in the role of motherhood” (Alicia Matsunaga, 1969: 129). Juntei is usually shown with her yellowish-white body with three eyes and eighteen arms. The eighteen arms have their uniqueness such as Root Mudra, Precious Banner, fearless Mudra, Lotus flower, Sword of wisdom, Empowerment vase, Jewelled Headdress, Vajra, Fruit, Eight Spoke Wheel, Axe, Dharma Shell, Vajra Hook, Rosary, Vajra and Dragons, Wisdom Sutra and Wish-Fulfilling Pearl. Her magnificent garments are decorated with flowers. She wears a white garment below the lion. The body’s upper portion is clad in a fragile ‘heavenly garment’.

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<sup>7</sup> Durgâ, in effect, protects herself in her aspect as the earth itself. As immanent in the world, Durgâ is equated with the earth. As transcendent, she is the heavenly queen who descends from time to time to maintain harmony on earth. Kinsley, David R. *Hindu Goddesses: Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition*, University of California Press, London, 1988, p.105

An embroidered girdle is tied around her waist. She is bedecked with armlets studded with seven kinds of jewels, bracelets made of white shells and rings on each finger. A third eye is placed on her forehead.

There are two images of Juntei Kannon seen by me that are highlighted. One is a wooden piece that can be appreciated in the Shin Yakushi-ji temple in Nara, made in 970 A.D. Another can be found in the Hozan-ji temple in Nara prefecture dated 1691 A.D. Therefore, the similarities between the goddess Durgâ and Japanese Juntei Kannon are pretty apparent.

## 9. Conclusion

From the above discussion, we can conclude that many Hindu gods and goddesses can be found in Japanese Buddhist pantheons, but they have been altered into their versions and traditionally worshipped for a long time. However, Japanese Buddhist's beliefs are more inclined to the material benefits and diverse favours in their daily lives than spiritual development, and they deal with worldly and materialistic problems rather than an abstract construct of only spiritual achievement. The most important aspect is that the worshipping of Hindu gods and goddesses occupied a vital position in the folk belief and rituals of the Japanese Buddhist society, which may play a potential role to respect other religions and establishing peace, tolerance and harmony in a multi-cultural society, and may offer a vital lesson where growing fundamentalism cause serious social problems.

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