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## In pursuit of Cultural Excellence- Indianness in Japan

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### Abstract

Migration of Indian Culture to Japan without any proper Indian Diasporas permeated the whole island in the 6<sup>th</sup> Century CE. Till 8<sup>th</sup> Century no historical record is seen for the immigration of Indian in Japanese mainland. But the Japanese Buddhist monks used to sail to China for learning Indian Buddhism. In this situation learning of Sanskrit language for studying the tenets of Indian Mahayana Buddhism bridged the gap of the presence of direct Indian culture in Japan. Translation of different Buddhist scriptures and texts also to some extent fill up the gap arose due to the proximity of two nations. Early Japanese Buddhists had a longing for their spiritual motherland and they tried to reach India, the then known as *Tenjiku* to the Japanese on several times. But most of their attempts were not successful.

The acquaintance between Tenshin Okakura and Rabindra Nath Tagore opened a new realm of Indo-Japanese relation. Moreover, translation of different works of Tagore by the Japanese also influenced Japanese Society. Aclaimed scholar Professor Hajime Nakamura acknowledges (in 1961) that “Without Indian influence, Japanese culture would not be what it is today”. In this present age of highly developed technology and industries, both the countries share a deep affection for each other’s views and inter-country relations what are mirrored in the current trend of professional bonding since the two countries have declared themselves as global and strategic partner.

**Key Word** Indian Diasporas, Translation of Buddhist Sutra and other Indian Literature, Tagore Boom, Global and strategic partnership of two nations.



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## **Introduction**

A vast expanse of our globe is bound by a single cultural thread of fraternity for long, and the relationship that grew among the nations has not faded away totally with the passage of time barring a few incidents of loss of contacts due to political differences in modern times. Moreover, with the inception of the idea of globalization in the present world of super modernity opens broader scope for in-depth contact among the nations. There are various sources of such contacts and understanding. Literary translation is undoubtedly one of the most effective sources of this inter-cultural contact as well as Diasporas also influence the long-standing bonding among two nations.

Among many sources and points of connectivity the literary translation plays a significant main role in removing any misunderstanding or misconception of the socio-economic or political background of an alien culture as well as to frame an idea of a culture which was unknown so far. Thus, there was tradition of translation for the migration of cultural element much before this era of Artificial Intelligence (AI). Example may be cited about East Asian countries, where the texts, based on philosophy, religious ideas and teachings in India and China were translated in different Asian languages, including the Japanese language and such texts became a part and parcel of the life and culture of those receiving countries.

Moreover, the process of colonization as well as Diasporas of a different country also has immense impact in the migration of culture which is clearly evident in the social behavior and cultural pattern of other country.

## **Migration of Buddhist Culture in Japan and Indian Diasporas**

Settling of scattered colonies outside one's own country by the people of a particular country is commonly describes as Diasporas. It also be mentioned that the characteristic that some new social customs and manners developed through a process of mixing of culture and assimilation with the local culture of the countries and that of the carried by the foreign-born immigrants settled in pre-modern times is very well recognized within the term Diasporas itself.

Though India and Japan share a rich heritage of cultural exchanges since Buddhism was introduced in Japan in 6<sup>th</sup> Century CE, without any permanent migration of Indians to Japan following particular pattern. Neither Japanese migration to Indian soil was noticed in that era. It was the Indian culture more precisely, the Buddhist culture which was migrated, without having



to bring in large numbers of Indians. Nevertheless, strangely enough, Indian cultural elements rapidly permeated the Japanese social life from as early as the sixth century CE. Thus, once again it is to be noted that Indian culture migrated without the existence of actual Indian Diasporas in Japan. And till 19<sup>th</sup> Century Japan's contact with India had been of indirect nature but it is undeniable that the popularization of Buddhist concept and philosophy worked as a catalyst for strengthening Indo-Japanese relationship.

The advent of Buddhism created a vibrant community of monks in Japan. As a result, Buddhist education spread and a large intellectual class came into existence. As a result, the field of Buddhist education expanded and a large intellectual class emerged. Since China and Korea were considered to be the pivotal for the spread of Buddhism, these two countries, especially China, attracted Japanese Buddhist monks. They made perilous journey to China by sea voyage. But their aim was only to learn the tenants of Indian Buddhism, which prevailed in China during that age. They faced lots of troubles and calamities on the sea voyage. But when they returned home, they brought back with them a huge number of books and manuscripts on Buddhism.

There are stories and history about the constant effort of Japanese Buddhist adherents to visit India, their spiritual motherland. But they failed due to proximity and various adversities. Japanese Buddhism primarily follows the Mahayana school of Buddhism. Mahayana scriptures were originally produced in Sanskrit. These texts travelled to China from India. To be acquainted with the original text, written and followed in India, Japanese have had a prolonged studies of Sanskrit and Chinese in order to get acquainted directly with the philosophy and teachings of Buddhism. Hajime Nakamura, an eminent historian mentioned in his book 'Japan and Indian Asia' that "the oldest Indian manuscripts are to be found in Japan and belong to the first half of the 6<sup>th</sup> Century." It is needless to mention in this paper that Japan owes from India civilization and culture, which was permeated by Chinese and Korean flavor.

In such circumstances, copying of the Sanskrit *Sutra* became a household ritual faithfully followed in Japanese society. Since the seed-syllables (Mantras) were written in Sanskrit and expressed in *Devanagari* letters, there arose a sense of deep veneration for *Devanagari* letters and Sanskrit language. This exemplifies another notable example of a new social order created by Indian culture in Japan was the reverence towards Sanskrit language. It was Sanskrit that bridged the gap left with limited opportunities of migration of Indian priests and common people. Sanskrit became a favourite subject of learning.



Ancient Japan wholeheartedly accepted the culture that was migrated from China through Korea. In case of language also Japan imported the Chinese script through Korean peninsula. They started using Chinese scripts to write their existing spoken language, keeping the pronunciation of both China and Japan for one script. Later, depending on the difficulties of using Chinese script in their everyday life, some phonetic letters were introduced. But then also writing in Chinese Script (or *Kanbun*) was considered to be more sophisticated. Official works were mainly written in this *Kanbun*. One aspired to be a bureaucrat had to master *Kanbun*. Newly introduced phonetic scripts (or Kana) were used for writing personal letters and diaries. Here one point may be mentioned as reference that, *Genji Monogatari*, the first longest Novel of Japan, written in the 11<sup>th</sup> Century CE and also considered to be the first Novel of Asia was written in Kana by a court lady called *Murasaki no Shikibu*. With this novel Japan might start its actual literary activities.

But much before the writing of *Genji Monogatari* three important Indian Buddhist Sutras (e.g. Saddharma Pundarika Sutra or Lotus Sutra or *Hokke Kyo* (in Japanese) , *Vimalakirtinirdesha* Sutra or *Yuima Kyo* (in Japanese) and *Srimaladevi Singhanad* Sutra or *Shoman Gyou* (in Japanese) translated by Prince *Umayado* or *Shotoku Taishi* had an abiding influence in Japanese Society in 6<sup>th</sup> Century CE. *Lankavatara* Sutra or *Ryoga-kyo* contains the essential teaching of Zen Buddhism. Besides these texts there are many more Indian Buddhist texts, which influenced Japanese Social life to a great extent. Moreover, the literary works which worked as a pathfinder to assimilate these two age-old civilizations of Asia are the translation of Buddhist scriptures and *Jataka* stories into Japanese by monks and scholars. Those stories had also an abiding influence on Japan. These texts or *sutras* were translated either directly from their Indian counterpart or some of the texts, which were migrated to China before-hand, then re-migrated to Japan and translated from its Chinese version.

Buddhist *Jataka* not only influenced the realm of Japanese history of literature but also the sphere of art history of Japan was also influenced by the *Jataka* stories. One of the earliest literary works of Japan, *Taketori Monogatari* was written in early 10<sup>th</sup> century and it embodies the idea of Buddhist philosophies. The materials are taken from various Buddhist works such as the *Jataka* Tales. Even the story line of *Genji Monogatari* (mentioned above), which primarily depicts the social, aesthetic and cultural life of the then Japan is intersected with Buddhist rituals and prayers of every kind.

After such a note, I would like to discuss to what direction cultural and philosophical assimilations take place just after a seed has been sown through exchanges. How subsequently the ideas take root in the psyche of the Japanese masses, in the structures and ranges of their



imaginations and linking of ideas in modern times also. In this point of discussion, it may be cited that, much-before to those writings and translations, a mere doll of an Indian Buddhist monk had a tremendous influence on Japanese social-psyche. That is known as Daruma Doll. *Daruma* Dolls are designed after the figure of one Indian Buddhist priest *Bodhidharma*. This doll is considered to be the symbol of wish fulfilling. It is considered to be a talisman of good luck to the Japanese. Bodhidharma, who was the originator of Ch'an Buddhism in China, which later on flourished in Japan as a Zen School of Buddhism, influenced the common Japanese populace. There are different stories regarding this Brahmin-Buddhist priest of India. It is believed that due to austere meditation for nine long years the lower part of the body of Bodhidharma became paralysed and he could not move. Moreover, he himself cut his eyelids, so that he did not fell asleep during his practice of meditation. Based on these two stories the Darum Dolls are crafted without leg and without eye-lids. Meagre historical evidences concerning Bodhidharma, paradoxically is offset by countless legends about this sage. As a result, he is deified. Though it is difficult to trace the process that how this Indian saint became so powerful and attained the reverence like a god among the common Japanese population, but the influence of Daruma on common Japanese psyche even in this modern society is undeniable.

### **Longing for Spiritual Motherland – Early Japanese Buddhists and India**

Although many Indian monks went to China and not to Japan, it is historically recorded that only one Indian monk, *Bodhisena* reached Japan in 736 CE. from China. Bodhisena arrived with his *Champa* disciple *But-tetsu*. In 752 *Bodhisena* received the highest honour from the then Japanese Emperor *Shomu* as well as from the Japanese Buddhist polity, being selected by the emperor himself to perform the grand service during the *Kaigen* rite or the eye-opening ceremony of the Great Buddha of the *Todaiji*, Nara. This incident goes on to show that Indian Buddhist monks as well as the reverence towards the Indian culture by the Japanese reached its peak during that remote age of the 8<sup>th</sup> Century CE.

Gradually, belief towards Buddhism and also the number of followers of Buddhism increased a lot in Japanese Society. In the 9<sup>th</sup> Century Japan's princely Imperial Priest, *Shinnyo Hoshinno* (C. 799-865 CE), who was the son of Emperor *Heijo*, gave up his position of Crown Prince and entered in a monastery in the *Todai-ji* temple and became monk. In 861 he left the *Dazaiji* Shrine of Fukuoka,



Kyushu with a few of his associates and went to China and attempted pilgrimage to India for studying Buddhist philosophy. But he could not reach India. According to popular legend on his way through Laos he died from an attack by tiger. But however, he may be considered as the first Japanese Buddhist monk who attempted to visit *Tenjiku*, the name by which India was known to the Japanese during that time. After *Hoshinno*, mention may be made of Eisai (1141-1215 CE) and *Myoe* or *Koben* (1173-1232 CE).

*Eisai* was basically the founder of Zen school of Buddhism in Japan, the concept of which was brought to Japan by Bodhidharma in long past in 6<sup>th</sup> Century CE. Eisai went to China twice for learning Buddhism and from China he tried to visit India. But he could not accomplish his desire. At the same time of Eisai another Buddhist monk *Myoe* or *Koban*, who was priest of *Kegon* schools of Japanese Buddhism planned a visit to their spiritual motherland. *Myoe* is also well known for keeping a journal of his dreams for over 40 years which continues to be studied by common Buddhist's adherents and Buddhist scholars and for his efforts to revive monastic discipline. In his "Journals on the Distance to the Great Tang and India" *Myoe* mentions his plan for visiting India, the land for the origin of Buddhism. But finally, he cancelled his planning for some personal feelings.

After *Myoe* no other Japanese Buddhist monk probably tried to visit India for a long time. Again, during Edo period (1603-1868) situation was changed. Some books like the "History of the Indian Collection" (Indo Zoshū) by *Hirata Atsutane* (1776–1843) opposed the traditional view of the world and argued that Buddhism is nothing but merely a part of Indian Custom. In spite of all these controversies Buddhist priests had an interest in India as source of the Buddhist World view. Many Japanese Buddhists priests and monks were aspiring to visit India, most of which were not materialised.

As a passing reference, mention may be made here about one Japanese traveller to the Indian subcontinent, *Tenjiku Tokubei* (1612–1692) and his travelogue "*Tenjiku Tokai Monogatari*" or "Story of Sea Travels to India" on his adventures in foreign countries, which became very popular in Japan. *Tokubei* returned Japan after his voyage to South and South-East Asia with great wealth and numerous stories to tell. Upon his return to Japan, and after the introduction of the Seclusion policy (*Sakoku*) by the then ruling power of Japan, *Tokubei* wrote that travelogue which was undoubtedly a good source of information to the Japanese about India or *Tenjiku*.



During Meiji Period (1868-1912) the trend towards foreign contact got a new dimension. Meiji Government selected some scholars and students to travel abroad to study various fields. As well as many foreigner teachers and instructors were hired to teach their respective field at Japan and many Japanese students studied under their guidance. Buddhist studies were also not an exception. But surprisingly there were very few Japanese scholars who wanted to visit India to study Buddhism. Because they thought Buddhism was disappeared from India. Instead, many Japanese Buddhist students-scholars went to Europe to study Buddhism under scholars like Max Muller and others.

Mention may be made of scholars like *Nanjo Bunyu* and *Takakusu Junjiro*. Both of them studied at Europe. *Nanjo Bunyu* visited India 1887 via Sri Lanka. To discuss about these two Buddhist Scholars a very brief discussion about Tokyo University may be mentioned. Tokyo University was established in 1877 (10<sup>th</sup> year of Meiji Era). Initially it was a university to train the government officials. Two years later, i.e. in 1879 Kato Hiroyuki, a Professor and head of the department of Literature of that University invited one Buddhist monk-scholar *Hara Tanzan* and started a course on Lectures on Buddhist Works as an optional course in the department of literature. In fact, *Tanzan* himself considered this course as “an experiment in Indian philosophy”. One of the well-known scholars from this department was *Murakami Sensho*, a devout Buddhist.

Over the ages, Indian Buddhist priests, pilgrims and philosophers continued to visit Japan and Japanese Buddhist devotees and sages visited India. The interchange of ideas and thought among each other further consolidated this age-old cultural relation. And it is needless to say that with the passage of time, Buddhism became a basic way of life for the people of Japan while maintaining their indigenous belief as it is. This strong tie through Buddhism is still prevalent which are reflected in many literary works also.

Zen Buddhism of Japan, which was originated in India as Dhyana Buddhism and found its way up to Japan through China by a Buddhist monk Bodhidharma kept a long-standing influence on Japanese Literary and Cultural World. *Oe Kenzaburo*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Nobel laureate of Literature from Japan depicts in his Noble lecture about the influence of Zen Buddhism on *Yasunari Kawabata*, the 1<sup>st</sup> Nobel laureate in Literature from Japan. *Kenzaburo* said that in his Noble speech Kawabata expressed his deep reliance and believe on Zen Buddhism. *Kenzaburo* spoke “Even as a twentieth-century writer Kawabata depicts his state of mind in terms of the poems written by medieval Zen monks. Most of these poems are concerned with the linguistic impossibility of telling truth. According to such poems words are confined



*within their closed shells. The readers cannot expect that words will ever come out of these poems and get through to us. One can never understand or feel sympathetic towards these Zen poems except by giving oneself up and willingly penetrating into the closed shells of those words.*" Kenzaburo also said "On the one hand Kawabata identifies himself as belonging essentially to the tradition of Zen philosophy and aesthetic sensibilities pervading the classical literature of the Orient. Yet on the other hand he goes out of his way to differentiate emptiness as an attribute of his works from the nihilism of the West." Thus, Japanese literatures in modern 20<sup>th</sup> Century also have had the influence from Indian ideas and philosophy.

### **A new phase of Inter-Cultural Relation between India and Japan**

The cultural osmosis between India and Japan, which was founded and strengthened by the Buddhist priests and bonzes took assuming a new shape and form after the re-consolidation of India-Japan fraternity since the acquaintance of Tenshin Okakura and Tagore in 1902. Indo-Japanese relations assumed a new content and value, somewhat different from that which had developed during the contacts through Buddhism. Subsequently, owing to the visit of Rabindranath Tagore to Japan and visits of some dignitaries from Japan to India, many Japanese scholars, being fascinated by the Indian heritage and culture, started their studies on Indian literature and culture. Thus, the studying of language also became necessary for them. Similarly, Indian scholars and others interested and started studying Japanese language and culture. The initiation of study of Japanese language and culture started in 1954 through the introduction of a faculty for study of Japanese Culture and Buddhism along with the learning of Japanese language at Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan. In Kolkata, the study of Japanese language started in 1956 at the Consulate General of Japan in Kolkata.

Tagore's idea of pan-Asian emergence through India, which he mentioned in many of his lectures in Japan during his several visit to Japan since 1916, draw the attention of Japanese National to know about India and its people. In his earliest attempt to execute these ideas, Tagore established inter-cultural relations with various countries of Asian and the Western world through Visva-Bharati or Santiniketan, the educational institution that he founded. Many Japanese scholars, teachers and students visited Santiniketan at different times. Moreover, Bengali being the mother tongue of Tagore the 1<sup>st</sup> Asian Nobel laureate, many non-Indians tried to study Bengali language just to enjoy the flavour of Tagore's works in original. Japan and the Japanese are no exception in





this regard. Many Japanese scholars tried to translate the works of Bengal into their own language to make their country-men acquainted with India, the country of Tagore.

Among the translated works from Bengali literature or rather more specifically from Indian literature into Japanese, it is the works of Tagore, which had translated more than any other since the first publication of one poem in a magazine named *Zanboa* in 1913. The said translation by *Mashino Saburo*, much before Tagore received Noble Prize in Literature was not widely accepted or popular among Japanese readers but after a few months, when Tagore received the Nobel Prize in Literature led to greater interest and popularity of Tagore's book and interestingly enough his works started to be widely read in Japan. Gradually, a trend towards translating Tagore became popular. But most of the time those translations were not the first-hand translation from original Bengali. On the other hand, there appeared several versions of Japanese translations from Rabindranath's English poetry. It is assumed that the translations by Yamamuro Shizuka (1906-2000) was the most popular and widely read among the Japanese.

The period of Rabindranath's popularity in Japan during 1914-1915 was later referred to as the "Tagore boom." Although all those translations are Japanese translations of English translations of Vishwakabi's poems, they give Japanese society and the Japanese cultural world a good opportunity to know Rabindranath and Bengal.

But it is noteworthy that, despite the "Tagore boom", no professional writer or poet in Japan was enthusiastic about the translation of Tagore's literature.

At that time Tagore's philosophy was more widely discussed than his literature. A Japanese philosopher named Kimura Taiken elaborately discussed and spoke about the influence of Brahmo Samaj, Upanishads, Buddhism and Indian philosophy on Rabindranath's life. Several other Japanese literary critics like Tanaka Odo, Kato Chōchō were also prominent in this regard.

In this connection name of Jinnosuke Sano, the first Japanese teacher in Santiniketan should also be mentioned. Sano stayed at Santiniketan for almost three years from 1905 to 1908. But he left India in 1917. During his stay in India, he studied Bengali and translated a few works into Japanese directly from its Bengali original work. Most noteworthy among those translations is the Japanese translation of Tagore's famous novel '*Gora*'. Sano was fortunate enough to take advice and discuss with Tagore himself during his process of the translation work.

Next, we may discuss about the phase after the World War II. During that time there was a trend towards the translation of Tagore's literature. One of the notable works in this phase is the



translation full Gitanjali by Watanabe Shoko in 1961. The specialty of this work is that Watanabe not only translated the original Bengali poems of Gitanjali but also translated the English translation of Gitanjali into Japanese and published the two language translations together in one volume. Watanabe himself opined in this context that, if one pays attention to the style of poetry, it is easily noticed that all 157 poems of the original Gitanjali were written in various fixed verse forms and had been meant for singing, whereas all 103 poems of English Gitanjali are prose poems.

Moreover a few works of translations by the guidance of Prof. Kazuo Azuma are noteworthy. A group of Japanese scholars have completed the translation of the full volume of *Rabindra Rachnavali* into Japanese. The work was started in the year 1973 and it took about 20 years to complete the work and finally completed and published.

Thus, a continuous process of inter-linking between these two civilizations as well as the search by the Japanese adherents about the Indian element for the development of their socio-cultural sphere are evident since the inception of Buddhist culture till the modern time of technological development.

### **Conclusion**

As a concluding remark I would like to say that, India and Japan peep through a common spiritual and intellectual perspective that penetrates deep into their psychic sphere since long past. In the initial stage, the extent of an indirect yet a great and abiding influence of India on Japan even though the Indian Diasporas physically remained almost absent in Japan was noticed. Prof. Basil Hall Chamberlain observed in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries that “Japan may be said to owe everything from India.” and the question of Indian influence on Japan is “vast and somewhat obscure” and no proper assessment was attempted. As for the Indian cultural influence, internationally acclaimed scholar Professor Hajime Nakamura acknowledges (in 1961) that “Without Indian influence, Japanese culture would not be what it is today”. In this present age of highly developed technology and industries, both the countries share a deep affection for each other’s views and inter-country relations what are mirrored in the current trend of professional bonding since the two countries have declared themselves as global and strategic partner.

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