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## Anesaki Masaharu's Intellectual Journey in India

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### Abstract

*In the 19th century, Japan emerged from a long period of isolation and entered an era of enlightenment and modernization. During this transformative period, Japan began adopting and integrating Western epistemologies and knowledge systems. The Japanese government-initiated programs to send students abroad to study modern systems and cultures, providing a significant opportunity for intellectual scholars to contribute to Japan's modernization. Among these scholars was Anesaki Masaharu (1871–1949), a pioneering figure in religious studies at Tokyo Imperial University. Born in Kyoto and raised in a household rooted in Buddhist traditions, Anesaki played intellectual role in establishing and developing comparative religious studies in Japan. Between 1900 and 1903, Anesaki undertook his first journey to the West, documenting his experiences in the travelogue Teiunshuu. During 1902–1903, he stayed in India, exploring significant sacred sites such as Bodh Gaya, Varanasi (Benares), and Madras. His journey had a dual purpose: first, to identify and analyse the intersections of meaning between Eastern and Western traditions; and second, to bring knowledge of Japanese religious traditions to Western audience. This article will focus on Anesaki's journey to India, examining his encounters with India's rich spiritual traditions. It will explore how his experiences influenced his academic works and philosophical thinking, showing the lasting impact of his time in India on the development of comparative religious studies in Japan.*

**Keywords:** Anesaki Masaharu, Intellectual Journey, observation, Buddha's sacred places, seeking spiritual tradition.



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## Introduction

Throughout history, India-Japan relations have been characterized by mutual respect, warmth, and cooperation, with no significant disputes, ideological, cultural or territorial, between the two nations. These ties date back to the 16th century, during the Portuguese colonial period in India and gained momentum in the Meiji era (1868-1912) when Japan embraced modernization and began direct political exchanges with India. The relationship flourished through cultural and intellectual collaborations. Exemplified by between Japanese thinker Okakura Tenshin (1863-1913) and Indian luminaries like Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941). During this era, Anesaki Masaharu (1871-1949), a pioneer in religious studies in Japan, travelled to India (1902–1903) to explore its sacred sites and spiritual traditions, deepening the cultural and philosophical connections between the two nations.

Anesaki Masaharu was a pioneering figure in the development of religious studies in Japan, playing a key role in establishing it as a formal academic discipline at the Imperial University of Tokyo. As the first president of the Japanese Association for Religious Studies, he facilitated the institutionalization of the study of religion in Japan. His academic work focused on understanding the religious dimensions of Japanese society and promoting dialogue between Japan and the world. Beyond academia, Anesaki held significant political roles, including as a member of the House of Peers and the Investigative Committee for Religious Institutions, where he influenced policies on religion and education. He also contributed to international peace efforts, participating in organizations like the International Committee on Intellectual Cooperation. Anesaki was involved in moral and religious movements such as the Prince Shōtoku Worship Association, seeking to integrate traditional Japanese values with modernization. His career reflects a commitment to fostering intellectual exchange, both within Japan and globally, and using religion and culture as tools for social progress and international cooperation.

As a universalist scholar Anesaki contributed as significant figure to the study of Indian religions, particularly Buddhism. Some works, including *Indo Shukyoshi* 印度宗教史 (1897), *A Study of the History of Indic Religion* (1898), and *Bukyō Seiten Shiron* 仏教聖典史論 (“Historical Discussion of Buddhist Scriptures”, 1899), laid the foundation for the comparative study of religion in Japan. Through several works Anesaki explored the origins, development, and transmission of Indian



religious traditions, providing important insights into Buddhism and Hinduism. His *Shukyogaku Gairon* 宗教學概論 (“*An Introduction to the Study of Religion*”,1900) further advanced the academic study of religion by promoting a comparative approach that examined different religious systems in their historical and cultural contexts.

Anesaki’s contributions were crucial in bridging the intellectual divide between the East and the West. By focusing on Indian religious traditions, he highlighted the deep connections between Buddhism in India and Japan, fostering cross-cultural dialogue. His works introduced Western audiences to Eastern spirituality and encouraged mutual respect and understanding across cultures. Anesaki’s emphasis on comparative religion and his promotion of intellectual cooperation also had a lasting impact on Japan’s modernization, positioning Japanese religious traditions within global discourse. Through his scholarship, Anesaki played a key role in shaping the field of religious studies in Japan and fostering cross-cultural exchange.

### Background

Anesaki was born on July 25, 1871, in Kyoto, Japan, as the eldest son of Masamori Anesaki, a renowned Buddhist artist patronized by the Bukkoji temple.<sup>1</sup> Anesaki's early education was shaped by the Buddhist environment of his household, particularly through his grandmother's daily devotion to Buddha. He attended Toyosono Primary School, finishing at the top of his class in 1883, and later joined Ryukajuku 劉家塾, where he studied Confucian classics. At eleven, he also enrolled in an English school founded by Kinza Hirai 平井金三 (1859-1916), who was a Buddhist social worker and where Anesaki learned English as well as Western texts such as *The History of England (1754–1761)* by David Hume (1711-1776) and *Education (1861)* by Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), laying the foundation for his future academic pursuits.<sup>2</sup>

Anesaki attended the Third High School in Osaka, later transferring to the Imperial University in Tokyo in 1893, where he studied philosophy under influential scholars like Inoue Tetsujiro (1855-1944) and Raphael von Koeber (1840-1923).<sup>3</sup> Anesaki was part of a group of intellectuals who

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<sup>1</sup> Anesaki, Masaharu,(1951). *我が生涯*,pp-202.

<sup>2</sup> Yoshinaga, 2005, pp- 125.

<sup>3</sup> Anesaki, Masaharu,(1951). *我が生涯*,pp-12.



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actively engaged with both Western and Eastern philosophical ideas, a dual approach that greatly influenced his later contributions to the field of comparative religion.

As we know, it is essential to recognize that Anesaki was not the first to teach religion at Tokyo Imperial University. In fact, Tetsujiro Inoue had initiated a course on "Comparative Religion and Eastern Philosophy" in 1891, focusing on various religions such as Buddhism, Confucianism, and Shinto, and engaging them comparatively with what were considered more developed religions. Inoue's perspective, however, was that religion was a concept for the ignorant, one that should ultimately evolve into a form of national morality. He advocated for the restoration of virtues like devotion, loyalty, and piety to strengthen the national polity (kokutai).<sup>4</sup>

By 1897, Inoue concluded his course, and the following year, he passed the responsibility to Anesaki, who began his own course titled "Introduction to Religious Studies." It is likely that Inoue had high expectations for Anesaki, given that he arranged for Anesaki to marry his niece, Inoue Masu. However, Anesaki's approach to religious studies diverged significantly from Inoue's. Unlike Inoue, Anesaki considered Shinto, including shrine worship, as a legitimate religion and an expression of spiritual belief, recognizing a universal religious consciousness among all peoples.<sup>5</sup>

Anesaki's views on religion, particularly his defense of Shinto as a religion, often brought him into conflict with Inoue and other politicians who sought to present Shinto as non-religious and prioritize it above other faiths. This conflict became more pronounced as religious freedoms in Japan came under increasing regulation.<sup>6</sup> Anesaki's role as a member of the Investigative Committee on Religious Affairs (Shukyo Seido Chosakai) in 1926 and 1929 further highlighted his opposition to government policies that sought to enforce shrine worship as a civic duty. Anesaki consistently challenged the nationalistic agenda of the committee's chairman, Hiranuma Ki'ichiro, questioning whether shrine worship could truly be considered non-religious and warning that promoting it as such might infringe on religious freedom in Japan.

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<sup>4</sup> Funayama 1956; pp-3. Yamada 1972; pp 235-249.

<sup>5</sup> Inoue Tetsujiro 1930; pp-14.

<sup>6</sup> **Akazawa 1985; pp-3.**



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## Historical Context

The early 20th century was a period of rich intellectual dialogue between Japan and India, driven by their shared pursuit of cultural renewal and resistance to Western domination. Japan, having modernized rapidly after the Meiji Restoration, became a symbol for other Asian nations seeking ways to modernize while preserving their cultural identity. For India, still under British colonial rule, Japan's success demonstrated that an Asian country could resist Western imperialism and maintain its traditions.<sup>7</sup> Anesaki Masaharu's intellectual journey unfolded within this growing Indo-Japanese connection. These exchanges were far more than academic; they carried profound cultural and philosophical significance as both nations grappled with questions of identity, spirituality, and freedom.

Buddhism provided a strong foundation for the intellectual ties between Japan and India. With its roots in India and significant development in Japan, Buddhism was a natural bridge for dialogue. Japanese scholars sought to reconnect with the Indian origins of Buddhism, while Indian intellectuals admired how Japan had preserved and adapted Buddhist traditions. Anesaki's focus on comparative religion and his exploration of Indian spirituality positioned him as a key contributor to this exchange.

Both nations also shared an emphasis on spirituality as a response to the growing materialism of the West. Indian great figures like Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) and Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) highlighted the spiritual heritage of the East as a source of wisdom and renewal, which resonated with Japanese thinkers like Anesaki. This mutual appreciation of spirituality deepened the respect between the two nations and fostered cultural collaboration. Anti-colonial sentiments further united these intellectual efforts. Japan's victory in the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905) was celebrated in India as proof that an Asian nation could challenge Western powers. Meanwhile, Japanese intellectuals supported India's fight for independence, seeing it as part of a larger Asian resurrection. Anesaki's engagement with Indian thought reflected this shared belief in the power of spiritual and intellectual collaboration to rebuild and redefine Asian identities.

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<sup>7</sup> Subhajit Chatterjee and Ankana Bag 2023;” *From Buddha to Bose: exploring 19th-20th century India-Japan relations*”, pp-13.



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## Anesaki's Journey to India

As a religious scholar, Anesaki Masaharu approached his studies with a conscious effort to transcend religious fundamentalism. His decision to focus on religious studies was far from random and was shaped by significant influences in his life. During his childhood, his grandmother played a crucial role in fostering his spiritual curiosity. Later, a pivotal moment in his academic journey came when he met senior literary scholar Mikise Goichiro (1866–1920). Mikise advised Anesaki to focus on the study of living religions rather than ancient Indian traditions. This advice proved transformative, directing Anesaki toward a dynamic and comparative approach that deeply influenced his contributions to the field of religious studies.<sup>8</sup>

In 1898, Anesaki began to teach religious studies at Tokyo imperial university. He dealt with questions of religions from a standpoint which transcended sectarianism striving to become a specialist his work upon the theory and practice. In 1900, he was asked for and given permission by of Education to study in Germany. The Comments of well-wishers near to him were recorded in the Tokyo imperial university Journal of philosophy as follows;

“Today, when religion has at last drawn the attention of the people, those who taint the theory and practice of religion with their own views are not few. Even rarer still are those who base their research upon a fairness unaffected by the bias of sect or sub-sect. For these merits, Mr Anesaki has been specially chosen.” (Anonym. 1900).<sup>9</sup>

Anesaki traveling to England in October 1902. Then back to France, Switzerland and Italy. He left the Europe in November of 1902, traveling by *Rubattino* steamship to India, where he stayed from December 1902 to April 1903. It was Anesaki's first journey to west. His purpose was as student of religion, this field of religious studies was still rising in Japan at that time. Though he was an adherent pure land Buddhist, but he was very well-versed in western traditions. Particularly Christianity. His focus in his early career was two-fold. First, on comparative religion, finding intersections of meaning between eastern and western tradition and second, on bringing a knowledge of Japanese religious Tradition to west. This dual purpose shaped his intellectual

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<sup>8</sup> Anesaki, Masaharu,(1951). *我が生涯*,pp-60.

<sup>9</sup> Jun'ichi isomae 2014; pp- 31



journey, and his time in India provided a significant opportunity to engage with the diverse religious and cultural landscape of the subcontinent.

#### Intellectual Contributions and Observation places in India

- Bombay (Mumbai) – Early Impressions and First Encounter with India

Anesaki's journey began in Bombay in 15<sup>th</sup> December (now Mumbai), a bustling port city and the economic hub of colonial India. During his time in Bombay, he reflected his deep engagement with India's landscapes, weather, and spiritual life. He describes the humid, rainy weather that gave way to pleasant days. He is invited by Mr. Matsuo (, a representative of the Yokohama Specie Bank, to his seaside home. Anesaki vividly describes walking along the coast under a moonlit sky, witnessing the full-moon festival and worshippers at local shrines. The scene, with palm trees silhouetted against the moonlight, conveys a dream-like atmosphere and highlights Anesaki's personal and spiritual resonance with India.

- Poona

On December 20, Anesaki arrived in Poona, appreciating the peaceful surroundings and pleasant winter weather. He described the setting sun, the shrine of Parvati, and flying white birds, which reflected his admiration for India's natural beauty. He also began collaborating with Mr. Woods, a scholar referred by Professor Paul Deussen, and together they studied Sanskrit texts. This academic partnership marked Anesaki's immersion in local religious and intellectual traditions.

In his December 21 entry, Anesaki compared life in Poona to his experiences in Japan, noting the pleasant weather and the raucous music from nearby villages, which reminded him of Tokyo's autumn festival. He observed local life, including soldiers on camels, reflecting his awareness of the cultural and military aspects of colonial India.

By December 29, Anesaki, accompanied by Woods, visited the Bhaja Caves in Karli, significant Buddhist rock-cut temples. His fascination with the caves' preservation and historical context highlighted his academic focus on Buddhism. The visit emphasized his goal to study the intersection of Eastern and Western traditions. His careful travel preparations, including hiring a



porter and planning for the climate, demonstrated his thoughtful approach to exploring India's spiritual heartlands.

- Benaras (Varanasi) – Sacred Hindu Practices and Philosophical Insights

Benares, or Varanasi, is presented as a city of deep spiritual importance but also one filled with contrasts and challenges. Anesaki arrived in Benares in January 1903, acknowledges the city's role as the center of Hinduism, with over 5,000 temples and thousands of pilgrims who visit every year. However, his description of the city also highlights its unkempt streets, the presence of beggars and superstitions, and the overwhelming sights of human and animal suffering—particularly along the Ganges River, where corpses are cremated and bodies float by. Anesaki seems conflicted, torn between the spiritual grandeur of the city and the grim realities of its condition.

He also notes that, despite these unpleasant realities, Benares holds a historical and spiritual significance, particularly for Buddhism, as it was the site of the Buddha's first sermon. His visit to Sarnath, where King Ashoka erected a pillar to commemorate the Buddha's teachings, deepens his connection to the place, providing a poignant link between his studies and the Buddha's legacy. This experience seems to evoke a sense of nostalgia and spiritual connection, even as he criticizes the state of contemporary Indian asceticism and the neglect of Buddhist heritage.

- Ayodhya: The Ancient City

In 3<sup>rd</sup> March, Anesaki visits Ayodhya, one of the most important historical and religious cities in India. He marvels at the remnants of its past, including the temple dedicated to Rama and the ancient stupa built by Ashoka to mark the Buddha's residence for six years. The city's deep connection to both Hindu and Buddhist traditions offer Anesaki a unique vantage point, where two distinct religious histories overlap. Anesaki's visit to the hilltop temple and his reflection on the Buddhist lecture hall turned Muslim cemetery further highlights the layers of history embedded in the land.

The contrast between the thriving religious heritage of Ayodhya and the changes wrought by time—such as the conversion of Buddhist sites to Muslim spaces—reflects the complex and often painful evolution of religious and cultural identities in India. The extensive ruins and the vastness



of the Sarayu River bring Anesaki closer to the idea of the deep historical roots of Buddhism and the way those roots have withered in the face of changing political and social forces.

- Calcutta (Kolkata) – Cultural Intersection and Religious Diversity

After Benaras, Anesaki visited Calcutta (now Kolkata) in March 15, where he encountered the intellectual and cultural dynamism of colonial India. As the capital of British India, Calcutta was a hub of religious diversity and intellectual exchange. In the city, Anesaki would have observed the interactions between different religious communities, including Hindus, Muslims, and Christians, within the context of British colonial rule. The cosmopolitan atmosphere of Calcutta exposed Anesaki to a variety of religious practices and philosophical discourses, which would have shaped his understanding of the role of religion in the colonial context. His time in Calcutta contributed significantly to his later work in comparative religion, where he explored the intersection of Eastern and Western religious traditions.

- Cuttack – Buddhist and Ancient Historical Sites

In Cuttack, located in Odisha, Anesaki visited the ancient Buddhist site of Dhauli, home to the famous Ashoka Rock Edicts. These edicts, commemorating Emperor Ashoka's conversion to Buddhism, had a significant impact on his thinking about Buddhism and its spread across India. The site allowed Anesaki to study Buddhist inscriptions and reflect on the moral teachings of Ashoka that later influenced the development of Buddhist philosophy. His visit to Dhauli enriched his understanding of the intersection between Buddhism and Indian society, particularly the moral and philosophical contributions of Ashoka.

- Bezawada and Madras: Journey to the South

As Anesaki continues his journey south, he encounters a blend of Buddhist ruins and Hindu shrines. In Bezawada, he visits Buddhist ruins that have long since disappeared, leaving behind only a shrine to the goddess Durga. The dramatic view of the Godavari River plain from the top of the mountain adds to the picturesque nature of the region, but the ruins' erosion into the present day highlights the dynamic shifts in India's religious landscape over time.



Upon reaching Madras, Anesaki enjoys the coastal town's pleasant atmosphere, particularly the evening walks along the shore, where he finds the tropical foliage and abundant water refreshing. He also visits the local museum, immersing himself in the history and culture of the region, though he remains undecided about which ruins to visit next.

#### The Seven Pagodas and The Theosophical Society and

By March 27, his trip to the Seven Pagodas, a site of ancient rock-carved temples and a goddess image, is an example of his deepening engagement with India's religious and architectural heritage. The place, though scorching underfoot, offers a fascinating glimpse into the island's past, where the temples carved out of boulders serve as a testament to the region's ancient craftsmanship and religious devotion. The heat, however, proves unbearable, leading him to return to the boat for respite. The journey on the canals of the Adyar River, with its tropical scenery and tranquil waters, contrasts sharply with the intense heat of the temples, providing him with a moment of peace and beauty before heading back to Madras.

By April 2, Anesaki's visit to the Theosophical Society headquarters marks a significant encounter with a group that sought to bridge Eastern and Western spiritual traditions. The meeting with the members of the Theosophical Society and the visit to their library offer him a chance to reflect on the intellectual currents of the time, especially in the context of his broader spiritual journey in India. The fireflies that light up the night on his return journey enhance the mystical atmosphere of the experience.

#### A Glimpse of Spiritual Life

Anesaki's reflections on his time with the Theosophical Society, combined with the various temples, ruins, and natural beauty he encounters, suggest a growing awareness of the intersections between Eastern and Western philosophies. His interaction with the Theosophical Society, particularly in the context of their library and the invitation to their breakfast and meetings, underscores his deepening engagement with the spiritual currents in India at the time.

- Journey to the Karli Caves and Plateau



In April, Anesaki revisited the Karli Caves, a striking example of early Buddhist architecture adorned with Greek-influenced carvings. Situated on a high plateau, the area offered cool breezes and stunning views, providing respite from the oppressive heat. He immersed himself in the landscape, making rubbings of intricate designs and reflecting on the artistic exchange between Greek and Indian cultures.

- Tiger's Leap and the Bedsa Caves

An attempt to visit the Bedsa Caves was thwarted by miscommunication with local transport. Instead, Anesaki explored Tiger's Leap, a dramatic cliff on the Deccan Plateau, marvelling at its breathtaking views and natural beauty. The precarious act of plucking a flower near the cliff's edge symbolized the balance of nature's peril and splendour. A moonlit evening at the site offered tranquillity amidst the challenges of travel.

- Coastal Journey to Colombo

Onboard the steamship *Perdana*, Anesaki journeyed along India's western and southern coasts, observing Goa's Christian heritage from a distance and the serene coastal landscapes of Mangalore, Kannur, and Alleppey. Passing Cape Comorin, he reflected on its spiritual significance in Buddhist tradition. Despite the slow pace and heat, the sea breeze and scenic views provided solace. Anesaki's April letters reveal the contrasts of his journey, heat and discomfort balanced by awe-inspiring landscapes and moments of reflection. From the ancient Karli Caves to the sacred shores of Cape Comorin, his travels highlight India's rich cultural and spiritual tapestry, seen through the lens of a keen observer seeking meaning in its history and natural beauty.

Anesaki's journey through India showcases the country's rich history, spiritual depth, and natural beauty. From the ancient carvings at the Karli Caves to the breathtaking cliffs of Tiger's Leap, he reflects on India's role as a meeting point of cultures and ideas. Despite travel challenges like heat and language barriers, he finds inspiration in the landscapes and sacred sites, such as Cape Comorin's spiritual significance.

Through vivid descriptions, Anesaki captures India's contrasts, its timeless traditions, the coexistence of religions, and the beauty of its natural and cultural heritage. His journey is both an exploration and a meditation on India's enduring spirit. (All these information has been taken from



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Anesaki's travelogue *Teiunshuu* (1911) and translator by Susanna Fessler in 2014 as *Teiunshuu wandering clouds* in English. I have followed Susanna's English translated book.)<sup>10</sup>

### Conclusion

Anesaki Masaharu's journey through India in 1903 serves as a reflection to the rich cultural and spiritual dialogue between India and Japan. His exploration of India's sacred sites and his reflections on its traditions highlighted the profound historical connections between the two nations, particularly through Buddhism. As a pioneering scholar, Anesaki's work in religious studies bridged Eastern and Western perspectives, promoting comparative approaches that enriched global understanding of religion and culture. His travels symbolized a broader intellectual and cultural exchange, rooted in mutual respect, that has characterized India-Japan relations for centuries. These ties, dating back to the 16th century, flourished during the Meiji era and continue to inspire cooperation and shared values in the modern world.

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<sup>10</sup> **Susanna Fessler, 2014. *Teiunshu: Wandering Clouds (1911)***



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