



**Saroj Kumar Chaudhuri: HINDU GODS AND GODDESSES IN JAPAN,**

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**Reviewed by Alice Kraemerová.**

*Covering a long distance from the place of its origin, Buddhism entered Japan and brought with it Hindu gods and goddesses. Stories about their miracles were incorporated into popular literature, and some of them became an integral part of the Buddhist-Shintō pantheon and have remained there until today.*

Historical and philosophical essays on religion in Japan offer an abundance of data and views on the respective roles of Shintō, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism and perhaps also on the marginal role played by Christianity (especially as far as its influence on art is concerned) both before the closing of the country at the beginning of 17<sup>th</sup> century and after its opening during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, books about art concentrate mainly on two categories: Shintō and Buddhist art. Taoist immortals and the origin of deities used are mentioned only as side issues.

The book *Hindu Gods and Goddess Japan* strives to explain Hindu religious phenomena and their transformation in Japan. The book is functionally arranged into 23 chapters, the first one giving an overview of the adoption of Hindu divinities in Japan i.e. how Buddhism came to Japan and merged with the domestic Shintō. Buddhism was enthusiastically promoted by the ruling emperors and empresses, especially by empress Suiko and crown prince Shōtoku, and spread rapidly among the clans. Soon after, however, there arose a necessity for state control and the emperor Temmu was the first to consolidate state control over the monastic order. Buddhas and bodhisattvas were associated with Shintō deities and Hindu deities naturally became a part of life as well, having been brought to Japan along with Buddhism. These entered popular literature and were renamed or adapted to Shintō beliefs. This introductory chapter presents a very compact and understandable survey of the complicated integration processes which lasted for many centuries.

Following the introductory chapter are 22 chapters, each of them dealing with one Hindu deity and his/her transformation in the Japanese environment. Each of these chapters is divided into headings of: A. Popular Literature, B. Temple Ritual (including worship, preparation, idols, places of worship, ceremonies, homa, other information

relating to the ceremonies, and texts pertaining to the deity). References are listed at the end of each chapter and all sources are quoted including their original title as written in Japanese characters. Organization of each chapter in this fashion enables quick comparisons, easy location of information and facilitates simple navigation of the text.

Each of the twenty two chapters are devoted to one hindu deity (the only exception being the tenth chapter which deals with four heavenly kings) and describe his/her evolution in Japan. The deities discussed in the first six chapters have been incorporated into Japanese life to such degree that most Japanese are not aware of their Hindu origins. They are Vaiśravaṇa/Bishamonten, Lakṣhmī/Kichijōten, Sarasvatī/Benzaiten, Yama/Emmaō, Mahākāla/Daikoku, and Hārīti/Kishimōjin. The author outlines the transformation of these deities and how they now form an inseparable part of the Japanese pantheon. The ensuing fifteen chapters describe famous Hindu deities such as Brahmā, Prthivī, Āditja or Viṣṇu, who influenced the Japanese pantheon to some degree, but nowadays are hardly traceable without extensive study of historical records. These deities are not common nowadays; Some of them even do not possess Japanese names, yet they are present either in popular literature of past periods or are somehow reincarnated in purely Japanese phenomena. This is discussed at some length in the last chapter. It presents exceptionally interesting information about the demi-goddesses Dākinī and their parallel existence associated with Inari temples in Japan.

In evaluating each chapter, one can say that the most interesting part seems to be the latter section, called Popular Literature, as it sums up the deity's first appearance in Japan and it's following transformations in the new environment. It cites information supported by cross references to various literature and also the transfer of legends and deities through vast Asian territories reaching as far as Japan. Some figures can be traced to Tibetan Buddhism (e.g. Dākinī - a female demonic entity who accompanies gods in the Indian folk belief and becomes an inspirational power of consciousness in Tibet. In contrast, they started to be associated as demonic characters dealing in black magic in Japan during the 9<sup>th</sup> century. In India, Dākinī were associated with the jackal, but since there are no jackals in Japan, the closest approximation, the fox, a messenger of Inari, was associated with Dākinī). In this way the book brings a compact account of Hindu impact on Japanese religion at the time of its development. The book represents a fascinating contribution and is an important reference for those who study these particular conglomerates of Japanese religions and influences coming to Japan from mainland Asia.

The book does not raise questions directly, but sums up facts to encourage readers to ask questions for themselves and push them into further study of this interesting theme. Unfortunately for this kind of study, specialized training in Indian as well as Japanese philosophies is necessary. This is the reason why this book is a really unique and helpful reference book.

Museum curators represent one group of grateful readers, especially those working in museums of Asian Art and Ethnography where many artifacts documenting Hindu as well as Chinese, Tibetan, Korean and Japanese deities are stored in depositories waiting to be displayed and compared. This book provides the necessary background for ethnologists and it is indispensable for understanding the origins of the complexities in Japanese religion.

Several pages of illustrations are inserted between the chapters six and seven as well as pen and ink drawings of 24 deities, followed by a few photos of Japanese paintings, pagodas and temples.

The author concludes his book with a short dictionary of Chinese characters for Japanese expressions used in the text, i.e. names of sutras and others - deity names, place names, the names of monks, etc., which are very useful for those readers who want to continue in studying a particular phenomena mentioned in the book. The final section of the book consists of the index which sums up the names of deities and terms of the single chapters.