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JAPAN

Syllables for gods

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Sanskrit was the basis for the formation of the Japanese alphabet “Kana”, and many words in the Japanese language are from Sanskrit. Text & photographs by BENOY K. BEHL

In many ways, Japan has preserved ancient Indian traditions, even when they may have changed in India. The 6th century Siddham script is preserved in Japan though it is not used in India. The “Beejaksharas” (seed syllables) of Sanskrit in this script are regarded as holy and are given great importance. Each deity has a Beejakshara, and these are venerated by the people even though most of them cannot read them. In fact, Beejaksharas are found in almost all Japanese homes. The Siddham script is also found at Japanese tombs, to respect the souls of the dead.

Many words in the Japanese language are from Sanskrit. Sanskrit was also the basis for the formation of the Japanese alphabet “Kana”.

In supermarkets, a major brand of milk products is branded “Sujata”. The company personnel are taught the story of Sujata, who gave sweet rice milk to the Buddha when he broke his period of austerity before he gained Enlightenment.

In the words of Yasukuni Enoki, former Ambassador of Japan: “More than 80 per cent of Japanese gods are originally Indian. Most of the Japanese don’t know this because these gods reached Japan with Chinese names.”

There are deep meanings in Japanese practices, which take us back to early developments of philosophy in India. In many ways, the philosophic understanding is most well preserved in Japan. Japan has not had the breakdown of cultural norms that India suffered when a colonial education system was created. Therefore, most Indians learnt about their own culture from the Western point of view. The dominant and admired language was English, and it remains so to this day. Obviously, all books and education in schools and universities in India are rooted in the English vision.

I did the research for and took most of the photographs used in this feature in spring 2015 with the support of a Japan Foundation Fellowship. I am deeply grateful for this valuable support.

I have also made a film for the Ministry of External Affairs on the subject of “Hindu Deities Worshiped in Japan”. My partner Sujata Chatterji is the assistant director of the film.

Benoy K Behl is a film-maker, art historian and photographer who is known for his tireless and prolific output over the past 36 years. He has taken over 46,000 photographs of Asian monuments and art heritage and made 132 documentaries on art and cultural history. His exhibitions have been warmly received in 54 countries around the world, and he holds the record, in the Limca Book Records, for being the most travelled photographer.

*The vastness of Behl’s documentation presents a wide and new perspective in understanding the art and culture of India and of Asia. He has been invited to lecture by most of the important universities and museums around the world that have departments of Asian art. His landmark book *The Ajanta Caves* is published by Thames & Hudson, London, and Harry N. Abrams, New York. It is in its fifth print run.*

This is the second part of a three-part feature.