

The Joy of Beauty: Autumn in Temples of Japan

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The Indic philosophy of aesthetics underlies the tradition of art making of the many faiths which originated in India. It is believed that our experience when we respond to beauty is akin to the final bliss of salvation itself. The moment of our perception of beauty is considered to be one when the veils of *maya* or *mithya* (illusion) are lifted and we are seeing the grace which is inherent in all that there is.

Today, the Buddhist temples of Japan present the finest embodiment of this philosophic view. Here, beauty of nature and of art serve to awaken sublime peace and joy within us. Truly, a visit to the temples of Nara and Kyoto in Autumn is one of the great experiences the world has to offer.

The second-most revered deity of Buddhist Japan is Sarasvati. There are scores of shrines built to her, some of which are in Tokyo itself. In many ways, the original concept of Sarasvati and her association with the natural order and good fortune, are very well preserved in Japan. She is often visualized as a holy body of water. Saras-wati literally means “abounding in pools, lakes, or waters”. It is also the name of the great river that once flowed in India. In important Buddhist temples, such as the one at Gunma, I have seen a dozen images of Saraswati. Lakshmi, Garuda, the vehicle of Vishnu, and Vedic deities are commonly seen in the temples of Japan. An Indian can feel quite at home in these temples.

The earliest image of Saraswati was not found in a Hindu temple but in a Jaina temple at Kankali Tila, near Mathura, of around the 1st century AD. The earliest images of Lakshmi are seen in Buddhist stupa railings, at Bharhut (2nd century BC) and at Sanchi (2nd century BC and 1st century AD). Actually, there were no religious divisions in ancient India. Inscriptions show that, in practically all

families, husbands, wives and children, followed the paths of different deities. This was a philosophic view of life and deities were not gods. They were personifications of the qualities which are within us. The purpose of meditation and puja (adoration) was to awaken those qualities in us.

The transmission of Hindu deities to Japan was through two sutras: Suvarnabhassottama-sutra 'the Sutra of Golden Light' and Mahavairocana-sutra. The central role of the Suvarnabhassottama-sutra in the state ceremonies of Japan was responsible for the widespread worship of the Hindu deities Sarasvati and Sri (or Lakshmi), both in imperial and private ceremonies. Chapter seven of the Suvarnabhassottama-sutra is devoted to Sarasvati and the next chapter is dedicated to Sri.

In Japan, rituals of Sri or Lakshmi have been conducted over the centuries to ensure the peace of the realm; rain in the right season; ripening of the crops and the happiness of all people and of all sentient beings. Lakshmi was also transmitted to Japan through China. In her Chinese avatar, she is known as Kichijo. There is a suburban district of Tokyo named after her. H.E. Mr. Yasukuni Enoki, a former ambassador of Japan to India, was from this district and he said that he came from 'Lakshmi Town'.

An upper temple in the Todai-ji complex in Nara has images of almost every Vedic deity. Ganapati is known in Japan as Shoten, 'Noble God', or Kangiten. He was introduced to Japan in 806 CE as a deity in the outer circle of the Garbhadhatu-mandala. The Shotengu temple in the Asakusa area of Tokyo was built in the early ninth century. The locality is called Shoten-cho 'Ganapati Township'. In 1832 there were around a hundred shrines of Ganapati in this area.

Information about the Photographer

Benoy K Behl is a film-maker, art-historian and photographer who is known for his tireless and prolific output of work over the past 35 years. He has taken over 44,000 photographs of Asian monuments and art heritage, made over a hundred documentaries on art history and his exhibitions have been warmly received in 34 countries around the world. Behl has been invited to lecture by most of the important

universities and museums around the world, who have departments of Asian art. Behl has photographed Buddhist heritage in 19 countries/regions across Asia and in one part of Europe which has a 300-year old Buddhist heritage.