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Hikotaro Furuta*

Abstract

Despite the geographical distance, India and Japan have close cultural relations for a long time. The cultural relations between these two countries had started since early days. If there was no Indian influence, Japanese culture would not have been like what is today. Most of the Japanese people have been influenced by Indian thoughts through Buddhism to a great extent. Buddhism has penetrated into many aspects of daily life of Japan. This paper talks about various aspects of Indian influence on Buddhist culture in Japan.

1. Introduction of Buddhism in Japan

Buddhism was introduced in Japan in the sixth century AD (538 AD). Prince Shotoku (574-621 AD) who was a regent to the female Emperor Suiko and a sincere Buddhist gave the first imperial patronage to Buddhism and initiated the cultural exchange with China. Japan had close cultural contact with Korea and introduced Chinese culture and Buddhism through that country. Before the introduction of Buddhism, the people of Japan had practiced Shinto since the ancient time. The word 'Shinto' means 'the way of gods' and it is concerned with the worship of the imperial and family ancestors as well as with nature-worship and society. It had neither any official scripture, nor any moral code or any idealistic philosophy. However, Shinto believes in 'living communion' of men with gods or spirits, animals and trees, rocks and streams. It stands for a harmonious cooperation between Man and the rest of the Nature. In Japan, Shinto was at that time their religion, or rather their way of life. The only concern was with ritual purity. Kami or Gods were felt to be everywhere and were worshipped and prayed to as beneficent forces. Shinto still remains in the Japanese people today.

When the great cultural wave came from China through Korea to Japan, it could not sweep away Shinto. Shinto lived on all through the centuries despite changes in the political organizations due to the immense influences of Chinese Confucianism. The Japanese people soon developed the concept of Gods of Shinto that were simply the local manifestation of

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universal Buddhist principles and deities. The two religions became institutionally intertwined. Shinto focused on adapting to life in this world and on a simple merging of man into the natural environment around him. On the other hand, Buddhism was concerned with the relation of the individual soul to the limitless cosmos and the afterlife, stressing their escape from the endless cycle of painful existences through enlightenment or salvation. In Japan there were three levels of understanding: the idea of Buddhism was concerned about the other world, and the concept of Shinto was towards nature in daily life, and Confucianism dealt with political systems and ethical concepts of the society. The Japanese people felt no sense of conflict between these different religions and philosophies. Each has its own position and its own power in their way of life.

The introduction of Buddhism brought about a radical change in the minds of Japanese people who got a new message of compassion and salvation. With this developed a new idealistic philosophy viewed with awe, a new type of worshipping of the decorated images of the Buddha with artistic demonstration in ceremonies and elaborated performance of rituals. In that century (6th AD), the image-making was started and many Buddhist relics and statues were created that resulted in the construction of many temples of Japan after Buddhist monks, artisans and other immigrants came from Korea.

Though this first spread of Indian culture in Japan may be indirect, Buddhist teachings and philosophy gave a great impact on Japanese life and culture.

2. Indian Influence on Japanese Culture

After having introduced Buddhism, a large number of Buddhist Sanskrit words were introduced into Japanese language. Most of them can be looked for in the former Sanskrit words that retained their original forms. Some of the proper nouns have completely lost the original meaning of Sanskrit but only retains the sound. The Buddhist Sanskrit words still have a significance of existence and occupy a great portion of the lifestyle and thought in Japanese culture. For example, the words which are still remaining are as follows: Butsuda or Buddha, Bosatsu or Bodhisattva, Amida or Amitabha, Bonten or Brahman, Miroku or Maitreya, Monju or Manjusri, Yasya or Yaksa, Ashura or Asura, Daruma or Dharma, Naraku or Naraka, Namu or Namas, Shaba or Saha, Danna or Dana, Kesa or Kasaya, Sotobha or Stupa, etc. According to the '*Nihonshoki*' which is the oldest history book of Japan, there are a large number of words which were adopted into Japanese words not only Buddhist terms but also the words which are usually used in their daily life, such as Kawara (roofing tile) or kapala, Hachi (pot) or patra, Hata(flag) or pata, Biwa or Vina, etc.

Although they did not know Sanskrit, they were familiar with the Indian Siddham letters, which was called "sittan" in Japan. In Japanese temples and cemeteries many tablets written in Siddham letters can be found.

Japanese letters (Hiragana and Katakana) were constructed on the basis of Chinese characters. However, there is a great difference between them. The Chinese letters are ideographic but Japanese letters are phonetic like the Indian letters. The Japanese letters were arranged in the same order as that of Sanskrit.

Indian legends were also introduced into Japanese literature. One of them is the legend of Rasyaringa. This legend, which is very famous in the Mahabharata and other literary works, was incorporated into the Buddhist scriptures, and transmitted into Japan. There was a saint in the drama under the name of Ikkaku Sennin or Ekasringa (unicorn) which is preserved and adopted into the famous Kabuki drama "Narukami". Other Indian legends are found in several stories of the "Konjakumonogatari" which derived from Jataka (the stories of the previous lives of the Buddha) in Pali as well as Avadana in Sanskrit.

Along with Buddhism, Indian gods were introduced into Japan. These gods started to be worshipped later in Buddhist rituals. For example, Indra, originally the god of thunder and the most popular of all gods in the Rg-veda, was adored by the Japanese people under the name of Taishakuten (literally, Emperor of Gods). Ganesha, the Indian god of wisdom, who has a head of elephant with human body, was worshipped under the name of Sho-ten (literally, Holy God) as one who gives happiness, especially in business and love affairs. In Japan the figures of two Ganeshas, male and female, embracing each other are often found. Naga, the god of serpent was worshipped by sailors, is called Ryujin in Japanese. Vaishravana (Kubera) is equivalent to Bishamonten as the god of fortune in Japan. Even in Shinto, we can find a strong Indian influence which is still remaining in the present day. The following gods are worshipped in the Shinto Shrines.

- Suiten (water-god), which is a Shinto name, is widely worshipped by the people in down-town Tokyo. It was originally Varuna (water-god in India) and introduced into Tantra Buddhism, and then adopted by Shinto.
- Benten (literally, Goddess of Speech) is equivalent to Sarasvati in India. The Benten shrines can be found in many places along the seacoast and around the ponds and lakes. In the shrine, the figure that a woman plays Biwa(Vina) is installed.
- Daikoku, a god of fortune (literally, god of great Darkness or Blackness) is a favourite god among the general people. The original name in Sanskrit is Mahakala, another name for Shiva, the mightiest god in Hinduism. The figure of Daikoku wears Japanese robe and holds a wooden hammer with a gentle smiling face in the Japanese shrines
- Kichijoten, the goddess of beauty, is equivalent to "Lakshmi."in India.

In the sixth century, Buddhism was introduced through Korea, and the new style of painting was brought in with many other new crafts. The most prominent example of early Buddhist paintings is found on the panels of the Tamamushi-no-Zushi shrine which was made in the

reign of the Female Emperor Suiko, and is still preserved in the Golden Hall of the Horyuji temple, near Nara. In the 8th Century, painting underwent new and noticeable development under the influence of the Indian chiaroscuro style, introduced from the Tang Dynasty of China. The best example of this style can be seen in the fresco of the Horyuji temple. The style closely resembles the wall paintings of the cave temples of Ajanta in India.

The court dance and music (called “Bugaku” and “Gagaku”) which were introduced into Japan in around 7th century, directly by Bodhisena, the Indian monk, and Fu-Ch’e, a Vietnamese, are preserved in their original form to this early day. The original form of musical performance is neither preserved in India at present, nor in other Asiatic countries. It is a unique cultural property found only in Japan. From the time it was first introduced into this country, the court dance and music was given careful attention and protection by the Imperial Household. This art has been preserved through centuries as a ceremonial dance which is performed on various national celebrations and for visiting foreign diplomats. The formal stage for this art is found only in the Imperial Palace.

Thus, considering such instances mentioned above, it could apparently be understood that India in her unique way has greatly influenced Japanese thought and culture that exists even today.

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Profile of Author

Hikotaro Furuta was born on 14th January, 1961 in Ehime, Japan. He completed his graduation, post-graduation in arts in 1982 and 1985 respectively. In 1988, Furuta completed his doctoral programme at the Bukkyo University in Kyoto in Japan. He was a Research Fellow of the Bukkyo University from 1988 to 1993. Later, Furuta received Ph.D. (Arts) from the Department of Pali, University of Calcutta in 1994. Presently, Furuta is a lecturer at the Department of Japanese Studies, Visva-Bharati University. He published several articles on Buddhism as well as Japanese thought and culture. His recent publication is “Rabindrasamgita Pancashta” (*A collection of Tagore’s 50 songs, Original and translation*, November, 2002). He has translated Tagore songs, which sing in Japanese as well as Bengali.

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