

Sarasvati

INDIA & JAPAN 03

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September 2026



Rukmini Vijayakumar, a Bangalore-based dancer active worldwide. I witnessed a close-up performance of *The Goddess* by her dance company. Based on the Indian classical dance style of Bharatanatyam, this group dance explores the theme of the sacred feminine, expressing both the grace of Goddess Durga and the fierce energy of Goddess Kali. The moment Rukmini transforms into Goddess Kali — her eyes wide open and tongue extended — is truly divine and intensely powerful. It was a display of overwhelming beauty.



The Arrival of India's Festival Season

Gods, Buddha, Japan, and India

神と仏と、日本とインド

- ❖ *Sarasvati* is the Hindu goddess of knowledge, music, and the arts, and is the origin of the Japanese deity *Benzaiten*.
- ❖ The *Muses* are nine goddesses in Greek mythology who preside over the arts, literature, and sciences; they are the root of the words “music” and “museum.”

Gods, Buddha, Japan, and India

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**From the Editor 9月に思うこと****Knowing India, Knowing Japan:
A Journey of Faith**

For about 20 years, I have conducted seminars on Indian culture, history, and business for Japanese expats and residents. Many initially struggle with India's stark cultural differences. Even as someone who moved here by choice, I frequently felt overwhelmed, frustrated, and exhausted when things did not go as planned.

Punctuality is a core Japanese value, making schedule delays highly stressful. To ease this, I always advise Japanese people to plan schedules and budgets assuming only three to four effective working days per week. Allocating extra manpower is also vital; cutting labor costs using Japanese efficiency standards will inevitably lead to operational failure. In India, many things are valued above work: religious festivals, caring for sick family members, weddings, or even watching the Cricket World Cup. While living in this country, we must understand the Indian "normal" and strengthen our own inner core to remain unfazed. Embracing this culture and enjoying its uniqueness makes daily life vastly richer.

September has arrived, marking the start of India's festive season. In this multi-religious country where Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Zoroastrianism coexist, numerous major festivals are held between now and the year-end. Combined with the wedding season, I tell Japanese expats to expect only two to three actual working days a week during this period. It may sound exaggerated, but it is wiser to prioritize tasks and plan with this mindset. Forcing Japanese standards only increases stress and lowers efficiency. When my innate Japanese impatience resurfaces, I constantly remind myself of the proverbs: "Haste makes waste" and "More haste, less speed."

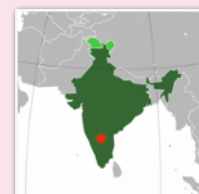
While I used to focus on explaining India to Japanese people, my work after the COVID-19 pandemic has shifted towards explaining Japan to Indians through lectures and exhibitions. Interest in Japanese culture, traditions, food, and tourism has surged, boosted by the direct flight from Bengaluru to Narita. In fact, while the number of Indian visitors to Japan was around 176,000 for the entire year of 2019, it has already surpassed 210,000 in just the first half of 2026. This sudden demand made me realize how much I needed to relearn about my own country. Having lived abroad for 30 years, I had little interest in Japanese traditional culture during my youth. Thus, aligned with the theme of this inaugural issue, "Return to Roots," I have recently begun exploring my homeland anew.

I have spent recent years researching, writing and lecturing on Japanese history, arts, and culture, alongside organizing kimono and craft exhibitions. Through this process, I discovered that the presence of both Shinto gods and Buddhist deities lies at the root of every connection between Japan and India. When asked about the difference between Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples, simply labeling them does not capture our complex, deep history. Indian friends visiting Japan often ask: "Why are deities of Hindu origin enshrined in Japanese temples?" "Why is Sanskrit carved on stones?" "Is Hinduism practiced in Japan?" These questions forced me to confront my own ignorance about Japanese history.

In this issue, I have condensed the fascinating insights that surprised and inspired me during my own studies. Even while editing, discovering new facts was a truly stimulating experience. I am confident this guide will serve as a meaningful bridge for mutual understanding between Japan and India. I hope you enjoy exploring the deep spiritual connections that unite our two nations.

The Magazine Connecting My Two Homes, Bengaluru and Fukuoka"

I launched **Sarasvati** in July 2026 as a monthly magazine to promote mutual understanding between Japan and India. With a special wish to connect my hometown of Fukuoka, Kyushu, and my second home, Bangalore (Bengaluru), I actively feature information on these two regions.



Ganesh Chaturthi: The Celebration of the Elephant-Headed God

The Beloved Deity, Lord Ganesha

Lord Ganesha, the elephant-headed Hindu deity, has several legends surrounding his birth. According to one myth, Goddess Parvati created a boy from her own body and breathed life into him. One day, while guarding her bath, the boy blocked the path of her husband, Lord Shiva, not knowing who he was. Enraged, Shiva cut off the boy's head. Seeing Parvati's intense grief, Shiva ordered his followers to bring the head of the first animal found sleeping facing north. They returned with an elephant's head, which Shiva attached to the body, reviving him as Ganesha.

Ganesha rides a tiny mouse, loves sweets, and possesses features with deep philosophical meanings. His elephant head symbolizes supreme intellect, his large ears represent deep listening, and his sharp eyes signify seeing the essence of things. His large belly reflects a generosity vast enough to swallow the universe, while riding the mouse — a symbol of worldly desires — shows the inner strength to control them. The items in his four hands also carry distinct significance. The lotus signifies purity, the sweets represent the rewards of good deeds, and the axe and rope symbolize cutting off negative attachments. Among these, my personal favorite is the broken tusk in his right hand. Ganesha is said to have transcribed the epic *Mahabharata* dictated by the sage Vyasa. When his pen broke, he broke off his own tusk to continue writing without interruption.

What is Ganesh Chaturthi?

Ganesh Chaturthi is a Hindu festival celebrating the birth of Lord Ganesha. "Chaturthi" means "fourth day" in Sanskrit, referring to the auspicious fourth day after the new moon. This year, the festivities span 12 days, from September 14th to 25th. On the first day, Ganesha idols are installed. While families decorate small clay idols at home, local communities erect grand tents called mandals to display massive statues. During my two years of splitting life between Mumbai and Bengaluru starting in 2008 due to my husband's work, I witnessed Mumbai's legendary celebrations. Walking around to admire the uniquely decorated neighborhood mandals remains a vivid, joyful memory.

However, the final day's ritual, Visarjan — where idols are immersed in water — presents a modern challenge. Unlike Japan's quiet *Shoro Nagashi* (spirit floating ritual), countless massive statues are submerged here. In Mumbai, vehicles rush toward immersion points along the Arabian Sea, triggering city-wide gridlock while shorelines overflow with singing and dancing crowds. To combat the resulting water pollution, eco-friendly Ganesha idols have surged in popularity over the past decade. Today's popular trend includes "Seed Ganeshas" — home idols made of clay and embedded with plant seeds, designed to be buried in the garden to sprout new greenery rather than being immersed in water.



My dear friends, Shruthi and Pavan, celebrating Ganesh Chaturthi.



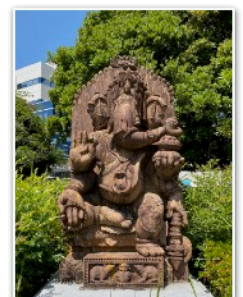
Our first time sculpting a clay Ganesha together! I captured him writing with his tusk-pen. We felt like kids again and had so much fun!



Idols prepared for Ganesh Chaturthi in the holy town of Tiruvannamalai, Tamil Nadu

Finding Lord Ganesha in Fukuoka!

You can also cross paths with Lord Ganesha in Fukuoka. (From left to right) A stone idol of Ganesha installed in 2021 at **Yoshizuka Little Asia Market** in Hakata Ward, Fukuoka City (Photo by Manaka Irie). Near the main entrance of Fukuoka Tower in Sawara Ward, a lineup of ten Indian deities, including Ganesha, stand proudly. Imported from India for display at the 1989 Asian-Pacific Exposition *Yokatopia*, these statues were generously gifted to Fukuoka City by the Indian government after the event as a permanent symbol of friendship.



Tracing Japanese Faith: The Unmistakable Influence of India

Primitive & Ancient Times

From the Dawn of Humanity to the Late 12th Century

Animism (Nature Worship): Jomon Period onward

The most primal worldview of Japanese faith, where spirits and gods (known as *kami*) are believed to dwell within all natural and inanimate objects, including mountains, rivers, stones, and forests.

Koshinto (Ancient Shinto): Yayoi Period onward

Japan's indigenous nature worship rooted in animism, dedicated to infinite deities called *Yaoyorozu no Kami* (Eight Million Gods). Without permanent shrines, people revered mountains and giant rocks as sacred dwellings.

Amaterasu (Imperial Deification of the Sun Goddess)

The ancient sun-god worship was positioned as the supreme ancestral deity (Imperial Ancestor) of the imperial family during the Yamato Court's unification of Japan, establishing the political legitimacy of imperial rule.

The Arrival of Buddhism: Asuka Period

In 538 (or 552), Buddhism was officially introduced from Baekje on the Korean Peninsula. This marked the historic encounter between Japan's nature worship and a foreign religion possessing statues and scriptures.

The Pro-and Anti-Buddhism Conflict: Asuka Period

A fierce clash erupted between the pro-Buddhism Soga clan and the anti-Buddhism Mononobe clan. Supporting the Soga, Prince Shotoku built Horyu-ji temple after their victory, honoring Buddhism in the Seventeen-Article Constitution. By also respecting traditional deities, he laid the foundation for Shinto-Buddhism syncretism.

The Compilation of Kojiki & Nihon Shoki: Early Nara Period

With *Kojiki* completed in 712 and *Nihon Shoki* in 720, the myths of the deities headed by Amaterasu were officially recorded in writing, formalizing the legitimacy of the Emperor's sovereign rule over the nation.

Chingo Kokka (Buddhist Protection of the State): Nara Period

A state policy aimed at stabilizing the nation and protecting it from disasters, plagues, and conflict through the mystical power of Buddhism. Emperor Shomu's construction of the Great Buddha at Todai-ji is a prime example.

Shinbutsu Shugo (Shinto-Buddhism Syncretism): Nara to Edo

The syncretism of Japanese gods and foreign Buddhist deities. Influenced by Buddhist temples, the structureless Koshinto began building shrines and sculpting statues. As temples entered shrine precincts, this fusion evolved into the Honji Suijaku theory, conceptually unifying the two faiths.

Medieval & Early Modern Times

Late 12th to Late 19th Century

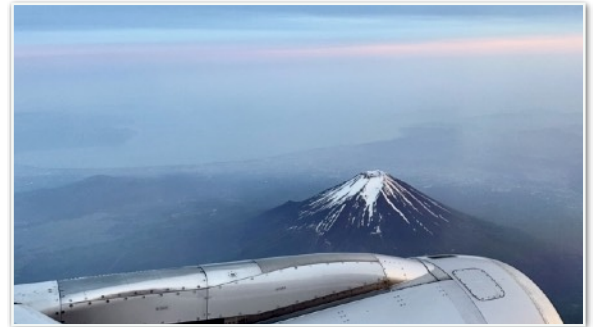
The Spread of Kamakura Buddhism & the Arrival of Christianity: Kamakura to Azuchi-Momoyama Period

Kamakura New Buddhism opened salvation to the common people. Although Christianity arrived in 1549 and spread rapidly, the Shogunate viewed it as a threat, imposing bans and strict suppression.

The Terauke System & the Rise of Worldly Faith: Edo Period

To suppress Christianity and control the populace, the *Terauke* system integrated Buddhism into state administration. As society stabilized, people embraced faith seeking worldly benefits, sparking massive travel booms like the Ise Pilgrimage and *Fujiko* Mt. Fuji climbs.

As the common saying goes, Japanese people are “born to Shinto shrines, married in Christian churches, and buried in Buddhist temples.” Unlike India and many other countries where religion dictates devotion to a specific scripture or a single God, Japan's spiritual landscape is entirely different. Intrigued by this uniqueness, I decided to trace the history to find the reasons — and unveiled a fascinating side of Japan I had never realized before.



In ancient times, the violently erupting Mt. Fuji was worshiped from afar as a fearsome yet sacred peak. As eruptions subsided around the 11th century, it transformed into a sanctuary for mountain asceticism, where practitioners immersed themselves in nature to attain enlightenment. Photo captured during a flight from Narita to Fukuoka in 2024. It was truly breathtaking.



This *ukiyo-e* print by Utagawa Kunisada depicts the famous myth of the Sun Goddess, *Amaterasu*. When she hid in a heavenly cave, the world was plunged into darkness. The print captures the dramatic moment that light returned to the world as the *Yaoyorozu no Kami* (Eight Million Gods = countless deities) gathered to perform a joyful dance, prompting her to peek outside. (Image: Utagawa Kunisada, “*Iwato Kagura no Kigen*” 1844/ Wikimedia Commons)



In 736, *Bodhisena*, a monk from South India, arrived in Japan at Dazaifu, Fukuoka. In 752, he played a monumental role as the officiating master for the eye-opening ceremony of the Great Buddha at *Todai-ji Temple* on behalf of the retired *Emperor Shomu*. (Left: The “*Shisei Gomei*” portrait depicting *Emperor Shomu* in the center and *Bodhisena* at the back right / Wikimedia Commons. Right: The Great Buddha at *Todai-ji*, captured by my husband during his journey to Nara in 2026)

Separation: Anti-Buddhism, State Shinto, and the Postwar Era

The Modern Era

Late 19th to Early 20th Century

Shinbutsu Bunri (Shinto-Buddhism Separation): Early Meiji

The Meiji government forcibly dismantled centuries of syncretism of Shinto and Buddhism. To build a centralized nation capable of rivaling Western powers, the state sought to nationalize Shinto as the source of imperial authority, legally severing it from Buddhism.

Haibutsu Kishaku (Anti-Buddhist Movement): Early Meiji

Triggered by the separation decree, this violent anti-Buddhist movement swept Japan. Erupting from long-standing resentment against privileged temples under the *Terauke* (temple registration) system, mobs destroyed and burned countless temples, statues, and scriptures, causing a major cultural tragedy.

Kokka Shinto (State Shinto): Mid-Meiji Period to 1945

To secure treaty revisions with Western powers, the government constitutionally guaranteed “freedom of religion.” Meanwhile, it bypassed this by declaring Shinto a non-religious civic virtue, forcing state-managed shrine attendance on all citizens as a political tool for wartime mobilization.

The Contemporary Era

1945 to Present

Separation of Religion and State: 1945 onward

In December 1945, the GHQ’s “Shinto Directive” completely dismantled the State Shinto system. The principle of separating religion and state was enshrined in the Postwar Constitution, banning state favoritism or forced faith, and turning shrines into private religious corporations independent of the government.

The Boom of New Religions: Postwar to High-Growth Era

Amid the collapse of wartime values and massive migration to major cities during the high-growth era, new religions expanded explosively by absorbing the loneliness and anxiety of rural workers moving to urban areas. Emphasizing tight-knit communities and worldly happiness, they deeply influenced postwar society and politics.

The Rise of New Spiritual Trends & the Aum Shinrikyo Incident: Late Showa to Early Heisei Period

Behind the material wealth of the bubble economy, new spiritual movements centered on meditation gained traction among youth seeking mental fulfillment. However, one faction, *Aum Shinrikyo*, radicalized and committed the 1995 Tokyo subway sarin attack. This tragedy deeply traumatized society, accelerated the decline of new religions, and triggered lasting public distrust toward religion in general.

Freedom of Religion and the Present: 21st Century to Present

While institutional religion faces persistent wariness heightened by recent social controversies, contemporary Japanese people still maintain a flexible, lighthearted approach to faith, visiting shrines on milestones and celebrating Christmas. Attraction to sacred sites as “power spots” remains vibrant. Though distant from rigid doctrines, reverence for *Yaoyorozu no Kami* and ancestral gratitude are seamlessly woven into cultural habits. Yet, in today’s accelerating era of individualism, finding a moral compass or a true anchor for the heart remains a quiet challenge.



Triggered by the early Meiji separation decree, the violent anti-Buddhist movement swept the nation. This woodblock print vividly captures the turmoil, depicting high piles of Buddhist scriptures and ritual implements confiscated from temples being burned. It stands as a stark record of an era when countless temples were dismantled and priceless statues were destroyed. (Image: Yokogawa Shuto, “*Kaika no Iriguchi*” / National Diet Library Digital Collections)



The Satsuma Domain (Kagoshima) executed the most ruthless anti-Buddhist campaign, abolishing every single temple within its borders. Depicted are the headless *Nio* statues at the former Enrin-ji site in Hioki City. (Image: Digi-Raku)



Tsurugaoka Hachimangu shrine in Kamakura, photographed by Felice Beato in 1868. This grand hybrid complex was completely dismantled in 1870 under the separation wave. (Image: Felice Beato, Wellcome Collection / CC BY 4.0)



An 1878 woodblock print depicting the Western-attired Meiji Emperor and Empress, flanked by legendary past emperors and ancient Shinto deities. Designed to visually teach an illiterate populace that the Emperor inherited a divine lineage, it functioned as a political poster promoting the new government’s Shinto-centered nation-building. (Image: Yōshū Chikanobu, “*Honchō Haishin Kikō Kagami*” / Collection of Tamagawa University Educational Museum)

Indian Deities in the Heart of Japan

Between the 6th and 9th centuries, numerous Indian deities originating from Hinduism arrived in Japan. Mostly embraced as guardians of Buddhism, they are revered under the Buddhist celestial hierarchy known as *Tenbu* (heavenly beings). Here, I introduce nine prominent deities woven into the heart of Japanese tradition.



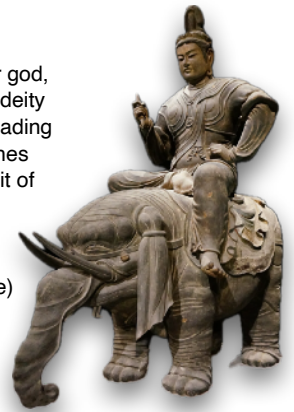
Bonten / Brahma

Originating from Brahma, the supreme creator god of the universe, *Bonten* is the absolute personification of cosmic principles. In Buddhism, he played a crucial role by urging *Shakyamuni* to share his teachings upon attaining enlightenment, sparking the global spread of the faith. (Photo: The wooden statue of *Bonten* in the Golden Hall of Toshodai-ji Temple)



Daijizaiten / Shiva

Originating from Lord Shiva, the supreme deity of creation and destruction, *Daijizaiten* is known in Sanskrit as *Maheśvara*. Inheriting Shiva's attributes, Buddhism reveres him as the supreme ruler of the entire cosmos. Due to his transcendent, absolute power, he was named *Daijizaiten* (The Deva of Great Freedom). He is depicted with three eyes and eight arms, riding a white bull and grasping a trident. (Photo: From the iconographic manual "Zuzoshō")



Bishamonten / Kubera

Originating from Kubera, the god of wealth and treasures, *Bishamonten* is a powerful warrior deity who serves as one of the Four Heavenly Kings and Japan's Seven Lucky Gods. Depicted as a fierce commander clad in armor, he brings victory, financial fortune, and family safety. (Photo courtesy of Kanzeon-ji Temple, Dazaifu City, Fukuoka)



Kankiten / Ganesha

Adopted from Ganesha, *Kankiten* is a guardian deity affectionately called "*Shoten-sama*." Often depicted as *Soshin* (a unique dual-bodied icon where a male and female deity embrace), this dual deity commands fervent devotion for powerful worldly benefits. Due to their immense spiritual energy, these statues are typically kept hidden from public view as Secret Buddhas. (Photo: From the iconographic manual "Zuzoshō")



Kisshoten / Lakshmi

Originating from Lakshmi, the goddess of beauty and prosperity, *Kisshoten* is revered as the daughter of *Kishibojin* and the wife of *Bishamonten*. Depicted as a noble heavenly maiden holding a wish-fulfilling jewel, she is sometimes added to traditional pantheons as one of the "Eight Lucky Gods." (Photo courtesy of Kanzeon-ji Temple, Dazaifu City, Fukuoka)



Daikokuten / Mahakala

Originating from Mahakala (the Great Black Lord, symbolizing Emptiness), an epithet of Lord Shiva, *Daikokuten* is one of Japan's Seven Lucky Gods. Initially a fierce warrior deity, he became revered as a god of wealth in China. In Japan, he syncretized with the Shinto deity *Okuninushi* due to their similar-sounding names, eventually transforming into a smiling god of food and fortune. (Right Photo: Courtesy of Kanzeon-ji Temple, Dazaifu City, Fukuoka. Left Photo: My personal Hakata doll.)

Bato Kannon / Hayagriva

Originating from Hayagriva (the horse-necked one), an avatar of the supreme Hindu god Vishnu, this deity is believed to consume all human desires and evils. In Japan, he is widely worshiped as a guardian for safe travel and the protection of livestock. (Photo courtesy of Kanzeon-ji Temple, Dazaifu City, Fukuoka)



Benzaiten / Sarasvati

Originating from Sarasvati, the Hindu goddess personifying a sacred river, *Benzaiten* governs music, wisdom, and speech. While originally written with the character for "talent" in Japan, she was later written with the character for "wealth" as she syncretized with a fortune deity. I intentionally use the original spelling, talent. (Photo: My personal Hakata doll.)



Shichifukujin / The Seven Lucky Gods

The *Shichifukujin* represent a unique Japanese belief system fully established by the 17th century. This distinct group comprises seven deities from three different religious backgrounds — Shinto, Hinduism, and Taoism — all riding together on a single *Takarabune* (Treasure Ship) that brings fortune from beyond the sea. Notably, three of the seven are directly rooted in Hinduism: *Daikokuten* (Mahakala), *Bishamonten* (Kubera), and *Benzaiten* (Sarasvati). Today, they remain widely beloved across Japan, sailing together as all-encompassing guardians of prosperity and good fortune. (Photo: The Seven Lucky Gods painted by Master Yoshinobu Omura)

Miyajima's *Shamoji*: The Hidden Origin of Benzaiten's *Biwa*



(From left to right) Miyajima *Shamoji*: An auspicious souvenir loved since the 18th century, symbolizing the “scooping up of happiness.” / Grand Torii Gate: My husband standing before the sacred floating gate of Itsukushima Shrine. / Najima Benzaiten: A massive Miyajima *Shamoji* dedicated to the deity. Kashii-gu Benzaiten: A Benzaiten statue holding a *Biwa* lute that perfectly mirrors the shape of a *Shamoji*.

In November 2012, my husband and I stayed overnight on Miyajima in Hiroshima, a sacred island revered since ancient times. Out of deep awe for nature, *Itsukushima Shrine* and its grand *Torii* gate were built directly on the shallows, transforming their scenery with the ebb and flow of the tides. At twilight, we took a ropeway down, marveling at the breathtaking views of the UNESCO World Heritage *Misen Primeval Forest* and the Seto Inland Sea. At night, during low tide, we walked right up to the base of the majestic *Torii* gate, mesmerized by its mystical presence, before celebrating our journey with Miyajima beer, local oysters, and conger eel dishes.

The next morning, while strolling down the main street, a colossal wooden rice scoop (*Shamoji*) caught my eye. It was then I first learned that Miyajima is the birthplace of the *Shamoji*. Invented during the 18th century by a

Buddhist monk named *Seishin* to save impoverished islanders, the scoop's unique shape was inspired by a divine dream. Goddess Benzaiten appeared holding her sacred *Biwa* (lute), sparking the idea to model the scoop after her instrument. Seishin taught islanders woodworking skills using sacred trees, inspiring a thriving local industry of cherry, horse chestnut, mulberry, and zelkova woods.

Goddess *Benzaiten* originates from Sarasvati, the Hindu deity who plays the *Veena*. That sacred Indian instrument transformed into the Japanese *Biwa*, which ultimately shaped the very utensil used to serve Japan's staple food, rice. It is a profound testament to the deep, intertwined bond between Japan and India. Before leaving the island, under a gentle drizzle, I visited Benzaiten's shrine to offer my quiet prayers.

The Cosmic Messenger: Lord *Michizane* and the Divine Bull

While Shinto shrines traditionally enshrine natural deities, some dedicate themselves to historical figures. The primary example is *Tenmangu* Shrines, dedicated to *Sugawara no Michizane*, a brilliant 9th century scholar and statesman. Headed by *Dazaifu Tenmangu* in Fukuoka — built directly over his grave — there are approximately 12,000 such shrines across Japan. Revered today as the god of learning, *Michizane*'s deification stems from a tragic exile fueled by political jealousy, leading to his death in heartbroken isolation.

Following his death, Kyoto suffered continuous plagues, droughts, and fatal lightning strikes that killed his political rivals. Fearing that *Michizane*'s wrathful spirit had

transformed into a thunder god seeking vengeance, the imperial court erected a shrine to pacify his soul, marking the origin of *Tenmangu*.

Throughout *Tenmangu* grounds, visitors will find statues of a reclining ox. Among various legends, one prominent theory traces this tradition back to India. When *Michizane* was deified, he was granted the supreme title of *Tenman Daijizaitenjin*. As established earlier, *Daijizaiten* originates from Lord Shiva, the supreme Hindu deity who rides the sacred bull, Nandi. Hence, it is believed that the ox came to be revered as the divine messenger within *Tenmangu* shrines, mirroring the ancient relationship between Shiva and Nandi.



Tracing Buddha's Footsteps: Discovering Japan Within India



(From left) With resident monk Rev. Reon Nakano (Yutenji) at Indosan Nipponji Temple, Bodh Gaya / The "Great Buddha Statue" erected by *Daijokyo* of Japan in 1989. / The Mahabodhi Temple (Photo: Rohit Sharma / CC BY-SA 4.0) / The Tara Devi Temple of Bhutan

A Sacred Family Bond with Rajgir

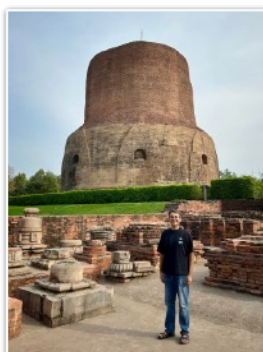
In March 2026, marking my 21st year in India, I had the opportunity to journey through the sacred Buddhist sites of North India. Flying from Bangalore to Patna, Bihar, my first stop was the ruins of Nalanda University. Flourishing from the 5th to the late 12th century, it stands as one of the world's oldest universities where diverse disciplines like Buddhism, medicine, and mathematics were taught, famously attracting scholars like Xuanzang from China.

Next, I moved to Rajgir, the ancient city where the Buddha once preached. Here, I visited Nipponzan Myohoji Temple, a *Nichiren* Buddhist temple deeply connected to my paternal grandmother. Meeting with Reverend Okonogi was a precious moment as I shared old photographs of my grandmother with the temple's founder, Nichidatsu Fujii. The following morning, I climbed Vulture Peak, where the Buddha delivered the Lotus Sutra, to chant the Heart Sutra and meditate at the summit. After paying respects at the temple's Peace Pagoda and visiting Venuvana (Bamboo Grove), I bid farewell to Rajgir.

Bodh Gaya: A Miniature of the Buddhist World

Next, I visited Bodh Gaya. Famous for the Mahabodhi Temple on the exact spot where Shakyamuni Buddha attained enlightenment, this sacred land is home to over 60 Buddhist temples and monasteries. In 1956, during the 2,500th Buddha Jayanti, Prime Minister Nehru called for international cooperation to make Bodh Gaya a global hub for peace and religious harmony.

Although Prime Minister Nehru requested Japan, the government could not respond due to the separation of religion and state under the post-war Constitution. Regretting this, Rev. *Gyoin Hashimoto* of Yakushiji Temple and others crossed sectarian lines, uniting the public to build Indosan Nipponji Temple in 1973. The moment I stepped into the main hall, built in a traditional Japanese wooden style, I was enveloped in a nostalgic sense of peace. Thailand, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Nepal, Bhutan, Tibet, Myanmar, Vietnam, Taiwan, China, South Korea, and Japan. With the prayers of so many nations gathered in one place, Bodh Gaya felt like a sacred exposition of the Buddhist world.



(From left) Ruins of Nalanda University / The Peace Pagoda of Nipponzan Myohoji in Rajgir / Dhamekh Stupa in Sarnath, located about 10 km of Varanasi / Sarnath Archaeological Museum: The "First Sermon Buddha Statue", depicting Shakyamuni Buddha preaching his first sermon to five disciples after attaining enlightenment; and the "Lion Capital of Ashoka" discovered in Sarnath, which is adopted as the National Emblem of India.

Fukuoka with an Indian Flair—Buddhist Sacred Sites



(From left) Sarnath Buddha and Ashoka Pillar donated from India / A columbarium housing sacred Buddha relics / Grand Kannon & Peace Pagoda: The 62m Kannon statue and the Peace Pagoda columbarium.

Exploring India within Fukuoka

Over the past few years, as my mother grows older, I have been returning to my hometown of Fukuoka twice a year. During my month-long stay this spring, I visited several India-related locations and attended local events. In particular, it was an honor to visit the newly opened Consulate General of India in Fukuoka, established in April 2025, and meet Consul General Ramkumar from Tamil Nadu. He is actively working to strengthen ties between Kyushu and India through economics, advanced technology, high-level talent, and cultural exchange. During our meeting, I was surprised to hear that he planned to visit Nipponzan Myohoji Temple on Mt. Hanaoka in Kumamoto City. Coincidentally, I had already planned to visit there, as my grandmother had a deep connection. Grateful for this serendipity, I adjusted my plans to join the Consul General and his delegation.

Two days before returning to India, I attended “Namaste Fukuoka,” an annual festival. Last year, I ran a booth for Muse Creation to sell handicrafts, but this year I just dropped by to enjoy the performances and food stalls. While there, an acquaintance showed me a photo of Naritasan Temple in Kurume City, leaving me in shock. Right next to a giant white Kannon statue stood a building remarkably like the Mahabodhi Temple in Bodh Gaya — which I had visited just last month! Knowing I had to see it for myself, I headed there on the final day of my trip.

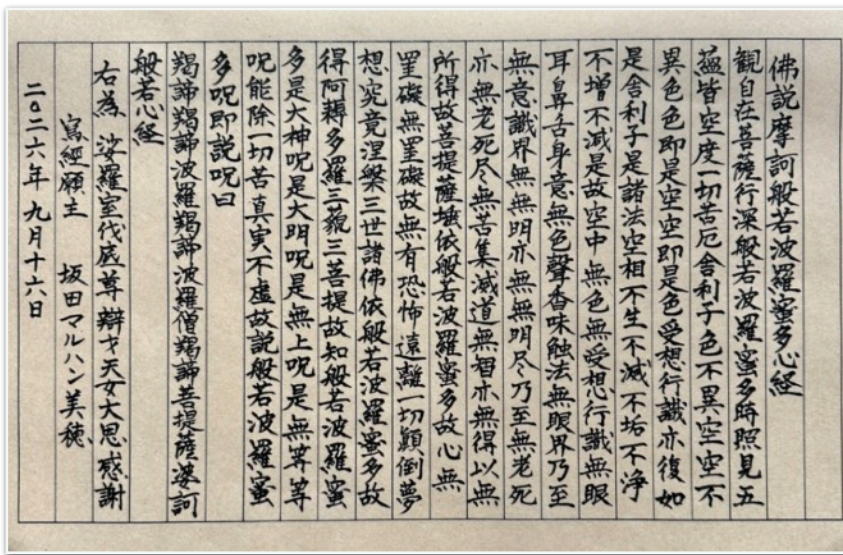
Bodh Gaya Replicated in Kurume, Fukuoka

At *Naritasan* Kurume Temple, a miniature world of Indian Buddhism unfolded before me. The Peace Pagoda was built in 1997 with official permission from the Mahabodhi Temple in Bodh Gaya. The stone materials and approximately 300 surrounding Buddha statues were shipped directly from India, and it houses sacred Buddha relics gifted from Myanmar. Furthermore, a descendant tree of the Bodhi tree under which Buddha attained enlightenment was donated by Sri Lanka. This gathering of the essence of India’s Buddhist sacred sites was driven by the vow of the temple’s first female chief priest, Rev. Myofuku Kaneko. Inside the giant white Kannon statue, a spiral staircase leads through floors adorned with rare exhibits beautifully expressing the Buddhist worldview. I was deeply moved, marvelling at the connection that brought these sacred bonds together here.



(From left) With Consul General Ramkumar in Fukuoka / The Peace Pagoda of Nipponzan Myohoji (Hanaoka-yama, Kumamoto) / The 2025 festival scene of “Namaste Fukuoka”, now celebrating its 10th anniversary / Giving a lecture on Indo-Japanese textile exchange history to fashion design students with a hands-on sari-draping experience at my alma mater, Fukuoka Prefectural Kashii High School.

Heart Sutra: Buddhist Wisdom Condensed in 262 Characters



I practice *Shakyo* — the copying of Buddhist sutras — to find inner peace, offer prayers, and show gratitude. The process itself also brings the benefits of meditation.

In the 7th century, Xuanzang — the historic Tang-dynasty monk who inspired *The Journey to the West* — spent 17 years retrieving vast Sanskrit scriptures from India. His translation work culminated in the 600-volume Great Perfection of Wisdom Sutra. Heart Sutra distills the essence of this massive theology into just 262 characters. Heart Sutra is structured as Avalokiteshvara (the Bodhisattva of Compassion) teaching his disciple Shariputra the truth of Sunyata (Emptiness). It reveals that all phenomena lack a fixed reality and constantly change, guiding us to release attachments to live in true peace. The text concludes with a phonetically transliterated Sanskrit mantra.

Heart Sutra (Liberal translation by Thich Nhat Hanh)

Avalokiteshvara
while practicing deeply with
the Insight that Brings Us to the Other Shore,
suddenly discovered that
all of the five Skandhas are equally empty,
and with this realisation
he overcame all Ill-being.

“Listen Sariputra,
this Body itself is Emptiness
and Emptiness itself is this Body.
This Body is not other than Emptiness
and Emptiness is not other than this Body.
The same is true of Feelings,
Perceptions, Mental Formations,
and Consciousness.

“Listen Sariputra,
all phenomena bear the mark of Emptiness;
their true nature is the nature of
no Birth no Death,
no Being no Non-being,
no Defilement no Purity,
no Increasing no Decreasing.

“That is why in Emptiness,
Body, Feelings, Perceptions,
Mental Formations and Consciousness
are not separate self entities.

The Eighteen Realms of Phenomena
which are the six Sense Organs,
the six Sense Objects,
and the six Consciousnesses
are also not separate self entities.

The translated Heart Sutra published in 2014 by the world-renowned Vietnamese Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh. Rather than interpreting “Emptiness” as nothingness, he defined it as interconnectedness — the concept of “Interbeing.” We exist through the countless support of nature and others; no single element can be missing from who we are. Recognizing this reality liberates us from loneliness and the fear of death, guiding us to live fully in the present moment.

The Twelve Links of Interdependent Arising
and their Extinction
are also not separate self entities.
Ill-being, the Causes of Ill-being,
the End of Ill-being, the Path,
insight and attainment,
are also not separate self entities.

Whoever can see this
no longer needs anything to attain.

Bodhisattvas who practice
the Insight that Brings Us to the Other Shore
see no more obstacles in their mind,
and because there
are no more obstacles in their mind,
they can overcome all fear,
destroy all wrong perceptions
and realize Perfect Nirvana.

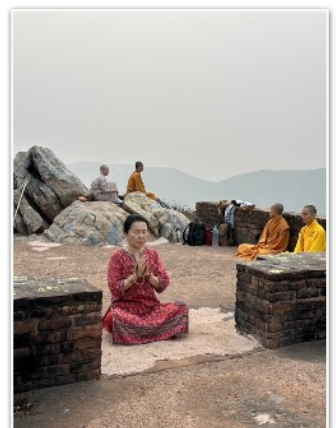
“All Buddhas in the past, present and future
by practicing
the Insight that Brings Us to the Other Shore
are all capable of attaining
Authentic and Perfect Enlightenment.

“Therefore Sariputra,
it should be known that
the Insight that Brings Us to the Other Shore
is a Great Mantra,
the most illuminating mantra,
the highest mantra,
a mantra beyond compare,
the True Wisdom that has the power
to put an end to all kinds of suffering.
Therefore let us proclaim
a mantra to praise
the Insight that Brings Us to the Other Shore.

*Gate, Gate, Paragate,
Parasamgate, Bodhi Svaha!*

*Gate, Gate, Paragate,
Parasamgate, Bodhi Svaha!*

*Gate, Gate, Paragate,
Parasamgate, Bodhi Svaha!*



Climbing Vulture Peak in Rajgir in March 2026 / Chanting the *Heart Sutra* at the very spot where the Buddha sat.

Singapore 1989: Little India and the Endless Summer



My Second Assignment Abroad - Singapore

After returning from my first assignment in Taiwan, an even more grueling workload awaited me. On a cold morning in early 1989, amidst endless editing work, I learned of Emperor Showa's passing. The Heisei era began the next day, but my routine remained unchanged. Bubble-era Japan was at its peak, swept up in an unnatural euphoria. Glamorous young women lined the streets with perfectly styled long hair, contoured dresses, and luxury handbags. Dressed in cheap clothes I bought during my college days in Yamaguchi from Uniqlo—a brand founded in that prefecture — and utterly exhausted, world trends felt like a distant drumbeat.

Immediately after the Taiwan guidebook was finished, without a moment to catch my breath, I was ordered to cover Singapore and Malaysia. No matter how busy I was, I was thrilled to go abroad. Singapore's colonial history under the British Empire began in 1819 with the arrival of Thomas Stamford Raffles. During World War II, British rule ended in 1942 when the Japanese military occupied the island, renaming it *Syonan-to*. The iconic Raffles Hotel was requisitioned as *Syonan Ryokan* to house Japanese army officers until Japan's defeat in 1945, which returned the nation to British rule before its full independence in 1965.

In Singapore, our four-member team—a senior male editor, two external photographers, and myself—split into two pairs to cover attractions, restaurants, hotels, and shops from dawn to dusk. The statute of limitations must have passed by now, so I will write this: when distributing the assignments, my senior male colleague took almost all the popular and famous restaurants for himself, leaving the remnants for me. Even now, over 35 years later, if I open that guidebook, his words come rushing back with frustrating clarity: “Chili crab is seriously delicious” “Fish head curry is the absolute best!” “Paper chicken is exquisite!” “That chicken rice was outstanding!” It makes me realize that culinary resentments truly linger forever.

Experiencing India in a Small but Diverse Nation

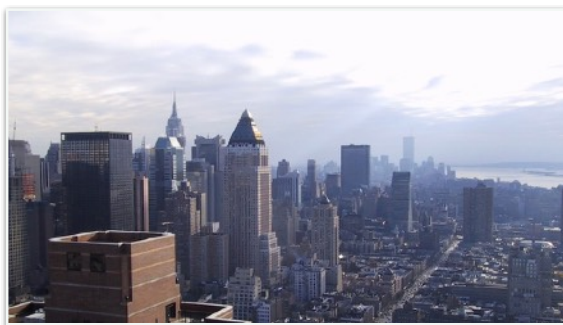
Singapore brimmed with a diversity unimaginable for an Asian country. While colonial white architecture echoed British rule, the city seamlessly integrated a fragrant Chinatown, a spicy Little India, and an Arab Street resonating with Quranic melodies. Visiting the Hindu Sri Mariamman Temple, its colorful exterior brought joy rather than strict solemnity. Back then, weathered buildings heightened this exoticism, making strolls here far more delightful than walking through the air-conditioned, perfume-scented malls of Orchard Road.

The sheer variety of world cuisines — from European and Russian to Indian, Vietnamese, and Peranakan — testified to this tiny nation's immense diversity. The bustle of hawker centers thrilled my heart, and the pungent aroma of seasonal durians remains vivid. What captivated me most was high tea, a British relic. While relaxing over cakes and snacks between lunch and dinner is common now, the concept of afternoon tea or a filling high tea was barely known in Japan back then.

For travelers then, the Tiffin Room, a tradition since the late 19th century, was legendary for its authentic Indian curry buffet and high tea. I longed to visit, but during our 1989 assignment, the Raffles Hotel was unfortunately closed for major renovations. Instead, we covered high tea at the Goodwood Park Hotel. Yet, the task ended with photography only — a torturous sight for a hungry editor. I left the hotel filled with deep regret.

Finally, I must recount an unforgettable encounter at Suntory, a renowned high-end Japanese restaurant. As sunbeams pierced the dining room and staff vacuumed the carpets, I interviewed the manager dressed in a sharp black suit. Afterward, I casually remarked, “Working overseas must be incredibly challenging.” The manager grew quiet and began to share his story. When first stationed here, he was constantly frustrated by local staff who were lax with time and slow to work, scolding them often. One day, a Malay manager gently reasoned with him: “You expats only work in this heat for a few years, rushing to get results, before leaving. But we spend our entire lives in this endless summer. We cannot afford to rush through our days.” Those words “endless summer” struck him like a lightning bolt. He realized he had been forcing his own cultural values onto a foreign land, changing his management style entirely. This episode was deeply engraved into my 23-year-old mind. Even now, whenever I feel overwhelmed by complaints, I recall this story to remind myself: I am being allowed to live and work in a foreign country.

Echoes of 911: Finding My Path Through a Turbulent World



Twenty-five years ago on September 11, terrorist attacks struck America. Even after celebrating our wedding in India in July, we continued our long-distance marriage. We traveled between my base in New York and his in Arlington, Virginia, a suburb of Washington, D.C. That morning, I was in Arlington, working after seeing off my husband. Then, my father called from Japan. Perplexed by the anxiety in his voice, I turned on the television and was left speechless by the Twin Towers on the screen. Rushing to the window, I opened the blinds wide. Thick black smoke was billowing from the Pentagon!

I tried to call my husband, but couldn't reach him. Moments later, I called a friend in Manhattan's East Village. In our deep agitation, I watched through the screen while she looked with her own eyes at the World Trade Center pouring out black smoke. Suddenly, the South Tower collapsed. We could do nothing but scream. From that day onward, awake or asleep, a nightmare continued — filled with fear, anxiety, and my work left completely up in the air. Feeling I had to return to Manhattan, I boarded an Amtrak train from Union Station on the morning of September 18. The usually fully booked cars were completely empty. Eventually, we entered New Jersey, and the Empire State Building appeared. Startled, I shifted my gaze right. Where the two buildings used to stand side by side, there was nothing, save a thin wisp of smoke drifting in the air.

After returning to my Upper West Side apartment and dropping off my bags, I went out. I grabbed a late lunch at a McDonald's. Outside the window, fire trucks passed, draped in the American flag. On the opposite shops and buildings, massive flags fluttered. After eating, I walked around a bit and did some shopping. A faint, burnt odor lingered. The people were quiet; the entire city felt enveloped in an invisible haze.

Returning home, I went up to the rooftop. I loved looking out from here, surveying Manhattan spreading in all directions beneath my eyes. The skyscrapers glowing orange, reflecting the setting sun at dusk, were always exceptionally beautiful. However, from that day onward, the quality of my sentiment changed. In the distance, the Statue of Liberty stood in isolation. Around Lower Manhattan, a thin plume of white smoke drifted, as if mourning the World Trade Center, the two planes, and the lives lost. The top right photograph was taken on that day.

We had been preparing for our October wedding reception in New York, but of course, we canceled it. I spent the following days in deep reflection, pondering my past and future. After much hesitation, I chose to prioritize my life with my husband. Early in 2002, I left New York for Washington, D.C. Scaling back a career and leaving my beloved Manhattan, brought a sorrow beyond words. It was a cataclysmic event marking a great turning point in my life.

Editor's Note 編集後記

A Magazine of Lived Experiences

The August issue, themed around the war, was somewhat heavy, but it drew an incredible response from friends in both Japan and India. Some even shared their own family stories, which brought me new insights. While monthly magazines typically provide forward-looking information, *Sarasvati* aims not to get ahead of the times, but to focus on lived experiences, creating content that remains timeless.

The first half of this issue reads like a history textbook. In my own journey of learning about Indo-Japanese relations, I found that following the chronological flow of time — rather than picking up fragmented pieces — makes history much easier and more enjoyable to understand. I poured my heart into this section to share that experience with you.

September 14, 2026 On Ganesh Chaturthi
Miho Sakata Malhan



You can download current and back issues of ***Sarasvati*** in Japanese and English here.