



The Evolution and Assimilation of Hindu Gods and Goddesses in other Cultures

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Abstract

With 330 million Gods and Goddesses, Hinduism, the world's oldest religion has a history of customs, rituals and cultures dating back to 4000 years. This research paper traces the history of Hindu Gods and Goddesses, their evolution and assimilation in other cultures and traditions such as the Romani tradition, Japanese tradition and Tibetan-Buddhist tradition. It also delves further into the differences and similarities between Indian Gods and Goddesses and their respective counterparts with regards to appearance, basic traits and customs.

Key words: Hindu Gods and Goddesses, Culture, Religion, Romani tradition, Japanese tradition, Tibetan-Buddhism, Evolution, Assimilation.

Introduction

Indians and people of other cultures have been moving or have been displaced across the world for centuries. Wars, trade, droughts, etc., could have been various reasons for such movements. As a way of living, Hinduism has existed in India for over 4000 years with its different customs and rituals being practiced to this day. Hence, being an order of life, it only makes sense for travellers and communities to adopt the values and beliefs of Hinduism. A major portion of Hinduism are the 330 million Gods and Goddesses. Each one of them have their own significance and serves different values and purposes. Different parts of India celebrate different forms of the same deity and the significance of each form changes from region to region. Interestingly, many forms of Indian Gods and Goddesses have been found in other cultures. They might have different names and physical appearance compared to their original Indian counterparts and might have changed to suit the needs and lifestyles of communities in other cultures, but their basic traits remain the same.

This genre was selected with an interest in learning more about the effects of Hinduism across the world. As Gods and Goddesses play a pivotal role in Hinduism, the researcher found it apt to study more about transformed Hindu Gods and Goddesses as it would help the researcher understand the role of these Gods and Goddesses in other cultures, their significance, similarities, and differences between the Indian and transformed Gods and Goddesses.

The Gods and Goddesses being explored in this paper are based on Hindu religious literature and interviews with people from other cultures who worship the counterparts of the Hindu Gods and Goddesses. The Gods and Goddesses being researched in this paper are the Hindu Goddess Kali, the Hindu God Shiva, Indian Goddess Saraswati, and their respective counterparts such as the Romanichal Goddess Saint Sarah, Tibetan-Buddhist God Mahakala, and the Japanese Goddess Benzaiten.

Traits of the Hindu Gods and Goddesses and their Counterparts

Kali is the Goddess of destruction and power. Despite this, she is also known for being a mother and creator which is identical to Saint Sarah's traits of being a healer, mother, protector, and creator. The Hindu God Shiva is a symbol of destruction and so is Mahakala, but both are also known for being benevolent, forgiving, and protective. Saraswati, the Hindu Goddess of learning and music, is assimilated into Benzaiten, the Japanese Goddess of learning and music. The values imparted by these Gods and Goddesses help in the growth and smooth functioning of the minds of the people and society.

Kali and Saint Sarah

The Indian Goddess of time, destruction and power, Kali, also known as Mahakali and Bhadrakali, is the ferocious form of the Hindu Goddess Adi Parashakti. Kali is the feminine form of Indian God Shiva, the God of destruction and protection. The word 'Kali' means black or dark. The word 'kali' was first mentioned in *Atharva Veda* (1200-1000 BCE) as a black tongue belonging to the Agni, the Hindu God of fire. Devi Mahatmyam, also known as Devi Saptashati or Durga Saptashati, a part of Rishi Markandeya's *Markandeya Purana*, mentions Kali extensively:

ज्वालाकरालमत्युग्रमशेषासुरसूदनम ।

त्रिशूलं पातु नो भीतेर्भद्रकालि नमोऽस्तु ते ॥

Jvālākārālam Atyugram aśeṣāsurasūdanam

Trisūlam pātu No Bhīter Bhadrakālī namo 'stu te

May the trident sharp-edged, flaming terribly, destroyer of the Asuras in the entirety, protect us from terror O Auspicious Kali, salutation be to thee (Chapter 11 Verse 26).

Kali is often characterized as a dark woman with blue or black skin. She has multiple arms, is partially or completely naked, has earrings that are small embryos and has her tongue lolling out. She holds a Trishul (trident), Vajra (lightning), Khara (sword) and a decapitated head in her hands. Despite being known as the Goddess of war, rage, time, and power, she is also known as the mother of all Goddesses and is also known for change and creation. The annual festival of Kali is known as Kali Puja is celebrated every year. It is mostly held in cremation grounds. Hindus also conduct a procession for Goddess Kali during this festival to immerse her in various water bodies.

Saint Sarah is the Goddess of the Romani people. She is also known as the Black Mother, Saint Sara, Sara-la-Kali, Sara Kali, and The Black Madonna among other names. The Romani or Romanichal are a travelling community that has its origins in Rajasthan, a northern state in India. It is believed that around 8-10 century, the Doma community, i.e., the scheduled caste and scheduled tribes' community, migrated to other northern states and then migrated to the Byzantine Empire. This migration could have occurred due to the constant attacks of Mahmud of Ghazni. Mahmud of Ghazni was the ruler of Afghanistan from 971-1030 AD and is infamous for his reputation of being a plunderer of wealth. The attacks of Ghazni is said to have initiated the move of the Romani community to Byzantine Empire, the Eastern European Empire. The Romani people worship Saint Sarah who is trusted to be another version of the Hindu Goddess Kali. It is believed that Goddess Kali was taken by the Roma people to the places they migrated. Although Saint Sarah is considered as a counterpart of Kali, she is no longer a Hindu Goddess but a venerated Christian saint. She is also considered as a patroness of Christianity and as a combination of the three Hindu Goddesses Saraswati, Lakshmi, and Kali. The Indian author Ashwin Sanghi, in his book *The Rozabal Line*, states that, "Having been a priestess who worshipped the sacred feminine, it was quite obvious that she would name her daughters after the three manifestations of the sacred feminine, Lakshmi, Saraswati and Kali. The name La Sara Kali is not the name of one daughter but the collective name of three daughters" (376).

Saint Sarah is portrayed as a dark woman just like Kali, but her demeanour matches that of the Virgin Mary than the aggressive Kali. She wears a calm expression and is covered in various layers of clothing unlike the partially or completely naked Kali who is known for adorning the expression of fury. The word 'Sara' is another name for Goddess Kali. The word 'Sara' means to embody everything, and Rishi Markandeya's Devi Mahatmyam mentions this extensively:

दुर्गायै दुर्गपारायै सारायै सर्वकारिण्यै।

ख्यात्यै तथैव कृष्णायै धूम्रायै सततं नमः

Durgāyai Durgapārāyai sārāyai sarvakāriṇyai

khyātyai tathaiva kṛṣṇāyai dhūmrāyai satatam namaḥ

To Durga who folds us across difficulties, to the essence, to the doer of all,

To the discriminating knowledge, to the dark one, to the smoky one our constant salutations (Chapter 5 Verse 12).

In the Romani community, Saint Sarah is the Goddess of protection, fertility, faith, and good fortune. At Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer, France, the place of veneration of Saint Sarah, the ceremony of Saint Sarah is conducted in a similar fashion to that of Kali Puja or Durga Puja. This includes praying with flowers, a procession and immersion of the deity in a water body. Many Romani people are also the followers of Shaktism, a Hindu tradition, despite being Christians. Shaktism focuses on Durga and Kali among other Hindu Goddesses, and this proves that Saint Sarah is a version of Goddess Kali who evolved and assimilated into the European-Christian culture to meet the needs of the Romani community who settled there.



Kali



Saint Sara

From the above-mentioned details collected through reading Hindu religious texts and an interview with Cathy Woolsey, a regular pilgrim to the festival of Saint Sarah held at Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer, France, the similarities and differences between Goddess Kali and Saint Sarah are:

SIMILARITIES	DIFFERENCES
The word 'Kali' and 'Sara' means darkness and embodiment of everything.	Despite having Hindu origin, Saint Sarah is not worshipped in the traditional Hindu manner.
The names 'Kali' and 'Sara' are mentioned in the Hindu religious texts Devimahatmyam/ Durgasaptashati extensively.	Goddess Kali is a Hindu Goddess while Saint Sarah is a venerated Christian who is also considered to have relation to the three Marys of Christianity.
Saint Sarah is known as the Goddess of creation among the Romanichal travellers while Goddess Kali wears embryos as earrings indicating the creation of new beings and beginnings.	Goddess Kali is mostly portrayed as an aggressive Goddess who wears the expression of fury while Saint Sarah wears a calm expression very similar to the expression of the Virgin Mary.

Both Goddess Kali and Saint Sarah are portrayed as black women.	Kali is often represented as a black woman who is partially or completely nude while Saint Sarah is heavily covered in various fabrics.
The festivals of Kali Puja and Veneration of Saint Sarah are similar with regards to procession and immersion of the deity in water bodies.	The festival of Saint Sarah also includes Christian customs such as lighting a candle and her place of worship is a Church unlike the traditional Hindu temples.

Shiva and Mahakala

Shiva, the Indian God of destruction is known as the supreme being in Hinduism. He is one among the Hindu Trinity which includes Brahma and Vishnu. Shiva is also known in Hinduism as Rudra, Hara, Mahadeva, Maheshwara, Neelakanta, Trilokanatha, etc. He is famous for being benevolent, kind, gracious, a dancer and a yogi. There is archaeological evidence that prove the existence of Shiva or other forms of Shiva dating 10,000 BCE in forms of rock paintings. Archaeologists also discovered the famous Pashupati seal at Mohenjo Daro, the site of Indus Valley civilization where the figure of Pashupati is sitting in a yogi-position. Shiva is mentioned in hymns in the *Rig Veda* by Veda Vyasa with reference to his name Rudra:

गाथपतिं मेधपतिं रुद्रं जलाषभेषजम् ।

तच्छंयोः सुम्नमीमहे

Ghāthapatim medhapatim rudram jalāṣabheṣajam

tacchamyoh sumnamīmahe

To Rudra Lord of sacrifice, of hymns and balmy medicines,

We pray for joy and health and strength (Hymn 43 Verse 4).

According to *Rig Veda*, Rudra, the Rig Vedic counterpart of Shiva has two natures. One is cruel (Rudra) and the other is kind (Shiva). God Shiva is also the supreme yogi, the Lord of all other yogis who teaches yoga and silence of one's innermost self to other sages. Hence, he is known as a Mahayogi, one who is a celibate. He is also known for his marriage with Goddess Parvati and has two sons with her, Ganesha and Kartikeya, who are also famous Gods in Hinduism. Shaivism is one of the four important sects of Hinduism. It is followed by people who believe that Shiva is the supreme being. The other sects of Hinduism are Vaishnavism, Shaktism, and the Smarta tradition. These three sects also include Shiva in a broad manner. Followers of Shaivism are called Shaivites. The *Shaiva Puranas*, "Shiva Purana" and "Linga Purana" explore the various facets of Shiva as the ultimate being. Shiva has many forms like Nataraja, Dakshinamurthy, Tripurantaka, Kalyanasundara, and Pancanana. In India, Shiva is also identified with the Lingam. The Shiva Lingam is a symbol of Shiva himself and it represents the union of the masculine and feminine, which is a direct representation of one of Shiva's forms, Ardhanarishvara, where Shiva's body is half-male and half-female. Physically, Shiva is said to have matted hair, a blue throat, three eyes, is smeared in ashes and has a snake around his neck. He also has a crescent moon in his hair and the Hindu Goddess Ganga resides in his hair.

The main festival of Shiva is Shivaratri, which is celebrated annually during February-March. Shivaratri is celebrated as a sign on overcoming darkness and destruction of negativity.

Mahakala is the counterpart of the Hindu God Shiva in Tibetan Buddhism. He is known as the guardian deity in Tibet and is considered as the great black one and protector. Although Buddhism originated in India around 2,500 years ago, Tibetan Buddhism is different from the Buddhism that Gautama Buddha preached and practised. It includes the teachings of Buddha but has also incorporated its own beliefs and practises. Tibetan Buddhism is also known as Lamaism and broadly follows Tantric Buddhism. It also includes shamanism, animism, and Mahayana Buddhism. Buddhism first entered Tibet after Songtsen Gampo, a Tibetan ruler, had Sanskrit Buddhist literature translated into Tibetan. His successor made it the official religion of Tibet and he invited Indian Buddhist scholars to enrich Tibet's new religion, culture, and literature with their knowledge.

Mahakala, like the Hindu God Shiva, is known for being the God of time, power, and destruction. He is also the God of deceit or maya. There are various forms of Mahakala in Tibetan Buddhism. Most of the variations in his forms are brought by the increase in his arms. His forms are known to have two arms, four arms and six arms. All the forms are protectors of various lineages of Tibetan Buddhism such as Karma Kagyu, Drikung Kagyu, Shangpa Kagyu, etc. He was once the protector of dharma but now, he is the protector of households in Tibet.

Just like the Hindu God Shiva, Mahakala is also blue in colour. He adorns skulls and destroys negative energy. He also appears in different colours such as red, black, and white and each of these colours have their own meanings. Although Mahakala’s face emits fury, he brings happiness and peace to the followers of Tibetan Buddhism.



Shiva



Mahakala

Based on an interview with Tenzin Dase Julie Kelly, a Tibetan scholar and professor, and Hindu religious texts, the similarities and differences between God Shiva and God Mahakala are:

SIMILARITIES	DIFFERENCES
Both Shiva and Mahakala are Gods of power, protection and destruction.	While Shiva is predominantly known as the destroyer, Mahakala is known to be a protector.
God Shiva and God Mahakala wear the expression of fury.	God Shiva is famous for being the destructor of evil while God Mahakala is the protector of monks and wisdom of Tibetan-Buddhism.
Both the Gods are represented to have a body that is either blue or black in colour.	Mahakala is also portrayed as a God who is white and red.
Both the Gods possess three eyes.	Shiva is said to have two or four arms while Mahakala is said to have two, four or six arms.
	In Hinduism, Nandi (bull) is famously known as Shiva’s pet/ vehicle while in Tibetan-Buddhism a cow/crow is the pet of Mahakala.

Saraswati and Benzaiten

Saraswati is a Hindu Goddess who is famous for being the symbol of art and learning. She is one of the Tridevis in Hinduism and is also known as Sharada, Savithri, Bharati, Brahmi and Padmakshi to name a few. She is also a River Goddess. She personifies the Sarasvati River mentioned in *Rig Veda* which has given

her the name 'the best of mothers, of rivers and of goddesses'. The Sanskrit text *Brahmanda Purana* by Ramananda describes the birth of Saraswati.

Brahmā got ready for creation, and while in meditation sattvaguṇa (sublime quality) began swelling up in his mind wherefrom a girl was born. Brahmā asked her who she was. She answered: "I am born from you. You fix for me a seat and duties." Then Brahmā told her that her name was Sarasvatī and ordained that she should stay on the tip of everybody's tongue. You dance especially on the tongues of learned people. You should also exist on earth in the form of a river, and assuming a third form you should live in me too." Sarasvatī agreed to this (Chapter 43).

She is mentioned widely in *Rig Veda*, *Brahmanda Purana*, *Skanda Purana*, *Matsya Purana* and other holy scriptures. She is known as the Goddess of music, creativity, fertility, motherliness, and piety. She is often dressed in white sitting on a lotus. She has 4 arms and is seen holding a book, a rosary, a water pot and a veena (a musical instrument). A swan or goose is often seen at her feet, and it symbolises moksha and spiritual perfection. A peacock is also seen sitting at her feet. The peacock represents celebration of dance, colour, splendour, and enlightenment. Saraswati Puja or Vasant Panchami is the festival of Goddess Saraswati, and it is celebrated at different periods of time across India. This festival also practises of immersing the idol into water after conducting an immolation and is celebrated with respect to the process of learning.

Benzaiten, also known as Benten, is a Buddhist-Japanese Goddess. She is the Japanese counterpart of the Hindu Goddess Saraswati. She is known as the Goddess of fortune, wisdom, wealth, and water. It is believed that Benzaiten became a part of the Japanese tradition through Chinese Buddhist literature, especially Mahayana Buddhism. In Buddhism, Manjushri, a Bodhisattva of wisdom is complemented by Saraswati as a source of his wisdom. Saraswati is also his consort in Buddhism. In Tantric Buddhism, Saraswati is a meditational deity and the Goddess of wisdom, poetry, and literature. Later, the various versions of Buddhist Saraswati were assimilated into Japanese tradition. The worship of Benzaiten began around 6-8 century. Benzaiten is also an evolved combination of other Hindu Goddesses such as Goddess Lakshmi and Goddess Durga, and the Japanese God Ugajin. She is characterized as a woman who is holding a biwa (a musical instrument like Veena), a sword and a wish-granting jewel.

Benzaiten is also the only female Goddess among the Shinto Gods. Shinto Gods are the Seven Lucky Gods of Japan, and each God has their own significance. Shinto Gods are spirits that take the form of nature. Hence, it is apt for Benzaiten to be present among other Shinto Gods as she is the Goddess of water. The Minarukane Festival held every year for Benzaiten is celebrated as the Japanese believe it is the luckiest day when it comes to finances.



Saraswati



Benzaiten

Based on photographs, Tibetan-Buddhist theology and Hindu religious texts, the similarities and differences between Goddess Saraswati and Goddess Benzaiten are:

SIMILARITIES	DIFFERENCES
Goddess Saraswati and Benzaiten are both the Goddesses of water.	Saraswati is a Hindu Goddess while Benzaiten is a Buddhist-Japanese Goddess.
Both the Goddesses carry a musical instrument. Goddess Saraswati carries a Veena while Goddess Benzaiten carries a Biwa.	Goddess Saraswati is seen with a swan/goose and a peacock at her feet. Goddess Benzaiten is usually surrounded by dragons and snakes.
Both Saraswati and Benzaiten have multiple arms. They are portrayed as Goddesses who have both four and eight arms.	The shrines of Goddess Saraswati are generally inside temples while the shrines of Benzaiten are usually near water bodies.
Apart from musical instruments, both the goddesses carry various artifacts.	The artifacts that both the Goddesses carry are different. Benzaiten also carries a sword which Goddess Saraswati does not.
Both Saraswati and Benzaiten are Goddesses of learning and wisdom.	Benzaiten is also the Japanese Goddess of wealth and good luck while in Hinduism, similar traits are held by Goddess Lakshmi, another form of Goddess Saraswati.

It is important to have rules and constraints when it comes to following a religion or culture. The above-mentioned Gods and Goddesses perform the exact actions which helps in the smooth functioning of the society. These Gods and Goddesses are also the driving force behind the operation of the society. Women are expected to be motherly, intelligent, and a creator like Saint Sarah and Saraswati. Women are also said to have the face of Kali, the destroyer of evil. Another important idea that is tied to being a woman is that women are good with finances that is seen in relation to the Japanese Goddess Benzaiten who is the Goddess of wealth. Men who are predominantly considered to be the head of the household and protectors of the family are given similar roles to that of the Indian God Shiva and his Tibetan-Buddhist counterpart Mahakala. This proves the existence of similar cultural beliefs. Hence, it is logical to believe that these cultural similarities might have arisen due to the evolution and assimilation of Hindu Gods and Goddesses in other cultures.

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