
India in Japanese Literature : A Case Study of Hirata Atsutane

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BACKGROUND

JAPAN adopted Buddhism in the sixth century of the Christian era, and right from the next century we come across recorded evidences of the significant role India played in the intellectual life of the Japanese people. The oldest Japanese intellectual work that has come down to us is a set of commentaries of three Buddhist *sutras* popularly known as Sankyo Gisho written in the seventh century by one of the most learned Japanese of his time, Prince Shotoku. From these commentaries we learn that he was familiar with the places, persons and events associated with the Shakyamuni. All the kingdoms, cities, rivers and hills appearing in the Buddhist scripture were by and large familiar to him. In the eighth century we come across further evidences of the high esteem the Japanese had for India. Attempts were made to associate as many things with India as possible. I would like to mention just one such example here. Nihongi, the oldest official history of Japan written in the eighth century, has an entry under summer, 4th month, A.D. 654 stating that one woman of Sravasti was driven by storm to Hiuga, a province in Kyushu.

For the Japanese India was the ideal land in the west, the direction where Amitava Buddha resided. It was here that the known world ended for the Japanese. The ancient Japanese coined a very interesting expression *sangoku*—meaning three countries literally—to denote the world symbolically.

The three countries are India, China and Japan. The adoration for India led Kitabatake Chikafusa of the fourteenth century to write in his *Jinno Shōtōki* that China was indeed a vast country, but compared to India it was nothing more than an insignificant small kingdom.¹ This view of India persisted till at least the sixteenth century as can be deduced from the letter of the Jesuit monk Lewis Frois dated 12 July 1569 on the interview he had with Oda Nobunaga. In this letter Frois mentions that Nobunaga asked him many questions on Indian Geography.²

The seventeenth century saw an important change in the intellectual life of the Japanese people with the passing of the intellectual leadership of the nation into the hands of the Confucianists from the Buddhists. India was crucial in Buddhist thinking, but for the Confucianists it was just another country. There was nothing special about it. Again, the *Seiyō Kibun*, a work on world geography of Arai Hakuseki (1657-1725) clearly showed that India occupied a very small fragment of the global space, devoid of any special glamour. The description of India occupies just about two pages in this work.³ A number of schools flourished during this period, one of which was the Kokugaku school. The exponents of the Kokugaku school were not happy with either the Buddhists or the Confucianists because of their low rating of Japan. They searched for their national identity, the roots of their own culture, in an attempt to establish the superiority of the native culture. All foreign elements in the Japanese culture came under their attack. Buddhism was no exception. One of the pioneers to initiate this attack was Tominaga Nakamoto (1715-46) through his book *Shutsujo Kōgo*. This was the background in which Hirata Atsutane wrote *Indo Zōshi* around 1840 just before his death as a piece of polemics against the Buddhists. He thought that a sound knowledge of India was the best weapon to fight the Buddhists. This motivated him to go through the materials available on India and piece together the picture of India. His major source of information indeed was the vast mass of Buddhist literature readily available in Japan. As a rational thinker he also made use of the information obtained through European sources. Three topics have been selected from this book for this paper, and I hope it will give some idea of the type of Indian Hirata and his fellow Japanese knew during the early part of the nineteenth century. Accounts of India by travellers coming from regions west of India and from China are known to us, but this work on India is virtually unknown. I think time has come for making an in-depth study of this work.

INDIAN MYTHS OF CREATION

Hirata has tried to piece together the Indian myths of creation in the early part of his book. Some of these myths and their sources will be taken up first for discussion.

Discussing the creation of the universe he takes up the theme of creation of the existent from the non-existent. He sums up the ancient legends of

India in one place as follows. Heaven, also known as *Mahabrahmaloka*, is without any beginning or end. The principal deity of this heaven is Brahma, also known as Narayana or Mahesvara. He is also without any beginning or end. He produced the existent from the non-existent and created the universe.⁴ The source of this hypothesis can be traced back to the *Rig Veda* where we find that in the beginning everything consisted of non-existent thing, and through *tapasya* or austerity appeared the existent things.⁵ Again, the *Chhandogya Upanishada* says that the universe was non-existent and then became existent.⁶ It will be seen that a combination of the above two passages from the *Rig Veda* and the *Chhandogya Upanishada* by and large gives the version given by Hirata. Although Hirata gives the sources of his information meticulously, in this particular he just says that it is from the ancient Indian legends.

Another very popular early Indian concept of creation is given in the so-called *Hiranyagarbha* hypothesis. This word appears in the *Rig Veda* and has been translated as golden womb or golden egg. Hirata gives this hypothesis as follows: The sun, the moon, the stars and the earth were not present in the beginning. Only a vast mass of water was there. In the course of time a big egg like that of a hen appeared. It was surrounded by a golden hue. After some time it matured and broke into two. The one on the top formed the heaven and the one below formed the earth. Brahma was born in between the two.⁷ This myth is scattered across a number of hymns in the *Rig Veda*. Piecing them together will be a rather complicated matter for this paper. I will only quote here the version appearing in the *Manu Smriti*. It says:

He desiring to produce many kinds from his own body, first with a thought created water, and placed his seed in that. . . . That seed became a golden egg, in brilliancy equal to the sun; in the egg he himself was born as Brahman, the progenitor of the whole world. . . . The divine Brahma resided in the egg for one year and then slit it into two halves, one becoming the heaven and the other the earth.⁸

Hirata has quoted Honjo Anda Ronji as the source of his information.

Following the creation of universe comes the creation of various physical elements. Regarding this, equating the universe with Svayambhudeva symbolically, Hirata writes that the head of the Svayambhudeva is the sky, his eyes are the sun and the moon, his body is the earth, his urine is the rivers and the seas, his stool is the hills and the rocks, his body heat is the fire, his breath is the air and the insects of his body are the living beings.⁹ It is obvious that the origin of this legend goes back to the Purusha Sukta of the *Rig Veda* where we find that Purusha was offered as a victim for sacrifice and that his body was cut into pieces. The moon was born from his mind, the sun from his eyes, the fire from his mouth, the air from his breath, the sky from his navel, the heaven from his head and the earth from his feet.¹⁰ Again, conceiving Brahma as Purusha, *Mundaka Upanishada* says that his head is the heaven,

his eyes the sun and the moon his breath the air, and his feet the earth. All the seas and the hills are born from him.¹¹ The versions of the *Rig Veda* and the *Mundaka Upanishada* suggest that the *Purusha Sukta* circulated in a number of forms in the later ages, one of which formed the source for the version given by Hirata. As for source, here also Hirata just says that it is an ancient legend of India.

Once the physical environment for the living beings is created, as stated above, there comes the question of populating it with living beings. Hirata discusses the Indian myths of creation of living beings both through man and woman. About the creation of living beings through man, Hirata writes that according to the Veda, Brahma created four sons in the ancient times. They were Sanaka, Sanandana, Sanatana and Sanatkumara. At the age of sixteen they acquired four qualities spontaneously, viz. *dharma*, wisdom, emancipation from desire and self-existence.¹² We know that Brahma's design to create living beings through them failed, and he created sons once again. Regarding this Hirata writes that Brahma created eight sons who created the heaven, the earth and everything. They are the fathers of all the living beings.¹³

The *Vishnu Purana* relates the above legend as follows: Brahma, desirous of producing human beings, first produced four mind-born sons, Sanaka, Sananda, Sanatana and Sanatkumara. They were without desire or passion, and were inspired with holy wisdom. They were undesirous of progeny. So Brahma created nine sons who created the living beings.¹⁴ Sanandana mentioned by Hirata is obviously Sananda, and it may be a coincidence that *Vishnu Purana* mentions him also as Sanandana at least in one place.¹⁵

It will be seen that the version given by Hirata has a striking resemblance with the version given in the *Vishnu Purana*. Hirata mentions a commentary of Churon as the source for the eight sons story, and Kinshichijuron as the source for the four sons legend.

Regarding creation of living beings through woman, Hirata writes that Mahesvara created eight women: Aditi, Diti, Soraba, Binata, Kapira, Mato, Ira and Kato. Aditi gave birth to gods, Diti to *Asuras*, Soraba to dragons, Binata to birds, Kapira to four-legged animals, Mato to human beings, Ira to crops and Kato to crawlers and insects.¹⁶ Here, Soraba, Binata, Kapira and Kato can easily be identified with Surabhi, Vinata, Kapila and Kadru respectively. Muni probably got corrupted into Mato in her journey from India to China and then to Japan.

The above quotation immediately reminds us of the familiar legend of the creation of living beings through the thirteen daughters of Daksha. *Mahabharata* gives their names as Aditi, Diti, Danu, Kala, Danayu, Simhika, Krodha, Pradha, Visva, Vinata, Kapila, Muni and Kadru.¹⁷ *Vishnu Purana* gives their names as Aditi, Diti, Danu, Arishta, Surasa, Surabhi, Vinata, Tamra, Krodhavasha, Ira, Khasa, Kadru and Muni.¹⁸ Surabhi and Ira, missing in the *Mahabharata* list, are to be found in the list of *Vishnu Purana*. According to *Mahabharata* and *Vishnu Purana*, the eight women of Hirata gave birth to the following living beings. Aditi created the gods, Diti

the demons, Surabhi the bovine animals, Vinata the two birds Garuda and Aruna, Kapila a few girls and others, Muni the *apsaras* or sixteen sons, Ira the trees and plants, and Kadru the serpents.

It will be seen that this version of creation of living beings has reached Japan without much change. Hirata has mentioned Myonin Kenzoku Ronji as the source of this legend. I would like to say a word here about the change of Muni into Mato, a great deviation indeed compared to the other names. I have read this name as it is read today, and as such its reading might have been closer to the original when the word was transliterated in China centuries ago.

CASTE SYSTEM OF INDIA

Early in his work Hirata has made a remark that the Buddhist literature abounds in reference to the four castes of India. Thus it is very natural for Hirata to select this topic for a closer look.

Discussing the origin of the four castes Hirata writes that a great lotus appeared from the navel of Narayana. Brahma the great ancestor appeared on the lotus. The Brahmana appeared from his mouth, the Kshatriya from his arms, the Vaisya from his thighs and the Sudra from his feet.¹⁹ He mentions Indaronji of Daibaron as the source of this legend. He, however, gives another legend on the origin of the four castes that he found in the Choagon Seikikyo. According to it, in the beginning of the *kalpa*, a large number of people appeared. They made one from among them as their lord and it is said the Kshatriyas came from him. However, one from among them thought that the world was full of evils. So he decided to go away to the forest and meditate quietly in quest of the right path. Accordingly he left human habitation, went to the forest and started meditating under a tree. People respected him and offered him *pūja*. They called him a sage and said: 'Oh! what a magnificent man he is. He has left his home and is living all alone in the forest meditating quietly. He has dissociated himself from all evils. Because of this all people started calling him Brahmana. Among them was a man who learnt various trades for earning his livelihood. He accumulated a lot of wealth. He came to be known as *kulapati* or Vaisya. Because of this we have the Vaisyas now. There was another who was very skilful in making things. He made this as the means of his livelihood. This is the beginning of the Sudras. This is how the four castes originated in the world.'²⁰

Being an alien religion, Buddhism had many concepts which were typically Indian and unfamiliar to the Chinese. So a large number of commentaries on these concepts called the Ongi appeared in China. I would like to introduce here some of the information collected by Hirata on the four castes of India from the Ongi commentaries like those of Daihannyakyo, Konkomyoosaishookyo, Rokuharamittakyo and Dainehankyo.

The Brahmans are the people of pure conduct. Their hereditary profession is to study the four Vedas. They are highly educated and talented. They

possess great wisdom. Many of them are the *gurus* of the kings.²¹ The word Kshatriya means *kshetrapati* or the owner of land. It is a term used for the kings and the nobles since ancient times. They study the Vedas and have extensive knowledge and strong memory. Those among them having good looks and wealth were raised to the position of king. They constituted the royal and the noble caste. They were the owners of land since the beginning of the kalpa.²² The Vaisyas were the merchants. They were very wealthy and possessed many precious things and great wealth. However, they were incapable of comprehending the classics. They dealt with money and pursued profit. They accumulated lots of wealth. So they were protected by the kings. The kings gave them land so that they may become rich.²³ The Sudras followed the profession of agriculture. They cultivated the fields, grew food and paid taxes to the kings and officials. They had very little scholarly attainment. They were the lowest of the four castes.²⁴

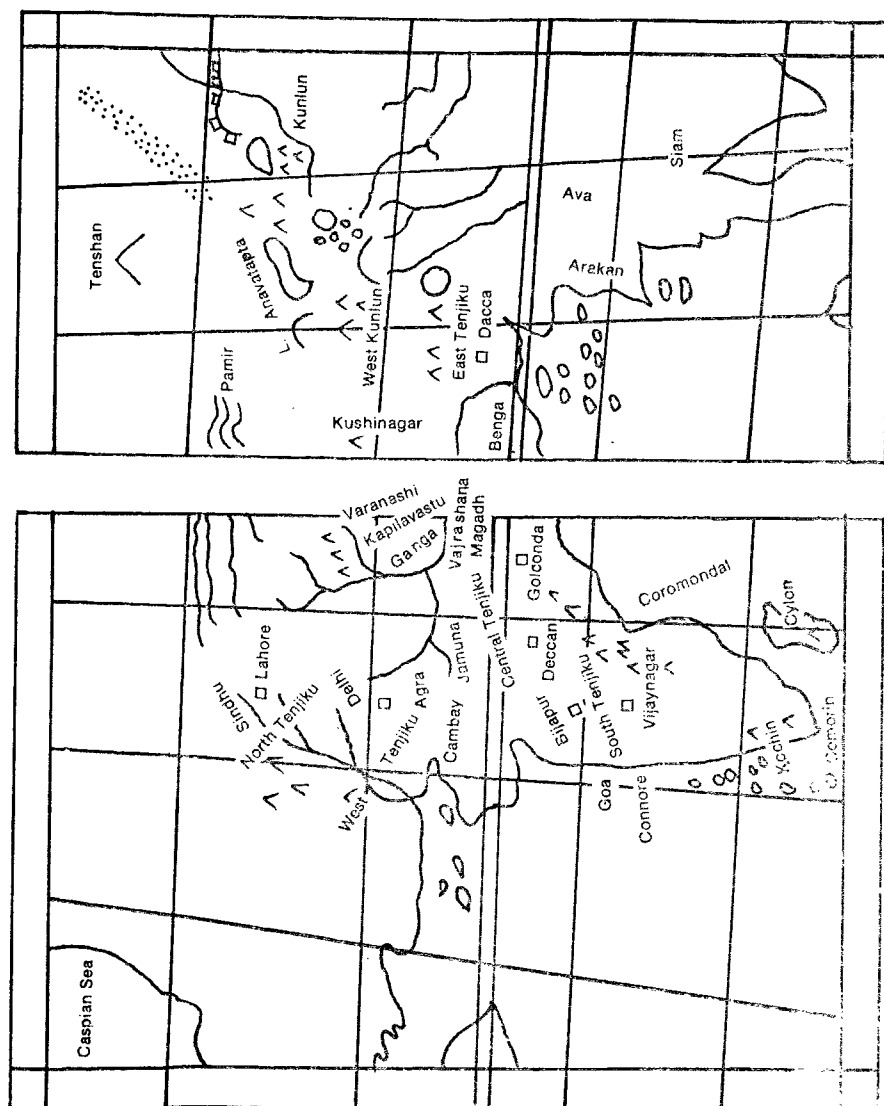
Hirata was intrigued to note that some of the Buddhist literature assigned the top position in the social hierarchy to the Brahmanas, whereas some others assigned it to the Kshatriyas. This induced him to have a close look at the question and he sums up his findings as follows. Accounts of both Huen Tsang and I Tsing have assigned the top position to the Brahmanas. Some of the Ongi commentaries like the Ongi of Konkomyokyo and the Ongi of Zoabidonshinron have assigned the top position to the Brahmanas, whereas most of the other Ongis have assigned the top position to the Kshatriyas.²⁵ The Shiseikyo and the Seikikyo also have given the top position to the Kshatriyas and the second position to the Brahmanas.²⁶

It is very clear from the accounts of the Choagon Seikikyo and the majority of the Ongi commentaries mentioned above that there was a deliberate attempt by the Buddhists to assign the top position in the social ladder to the Kshatriyas because Shakya Gautama himself belonged to his caste. Hirata probably got the answer to his question from the accounts of Huen Tsang, the legend of the origin of the Brahmanas from the mouth of Brahma and the following passage of the Daibibhasharon. The possession of the world originally belonged to Brahma. He bestowed it on the Brahmanas. However, with the decline of the power of the Brahmanas, Kshatriyas and others usurped the position of the Brahmanas and appropriated the land belonging to them.²⁷ In this light Hirata concludes that the attempt to put the Kshatriyas on top came from the Bhikshus because Shakya Gautama himself belonged to that caste.²⁸

HIRATA ATSUTANE ON INDIAN GEOGRAPHY

Hirata's information on Indian geography is derived from two sources, the traditional Buddhist and the latter day European ones. I find his account of special interest because it contains a map of India which was probably the first to be produced in Japan based on modern cartographical principles.

The Japanese believed in the ancient Indian Sumeru hypothesis of the



NOTE : Tenjiku is the Name Given to India in Ancient Days

world as described in the Buddhist literature. According to it, the human beings inhabit the southernmost of the four continents, viz., the Jambudvīpa. India is located at the centre of Jambudvīpa with the centre of the earth located either at *vajrasana*, the seat where the Shākya prince had attained enlightenment or in Kapilavastu.²⁹ India was broadly divided into five regions, east, west, north, south and central. As for the shape, India is broad in the north gradually narrowing down in the south. Hirata was quick in pointing out the contradictions in the Buddhist accounts regarding the number of countries present in India. According to the Lankavatara Sutra, India is divided into two thousand and three hundred large countries, whereas according to the Nīkkyō it is divided into sixteen large countries and one lakh small countries.³⁰

The Japanese concept of the world changed radically with the advent of the Europeans. The famous Jesuit monk Matteo Ricci arrived in Peking in A.D. 1583, and the century that followed saw the publication of a large number of books and maps on world geography in Chinese language under the Jesuit initiative. These works were brought to Japan immediately after their publication and helped in enlightening the Japanese on world geography. The Chinese learnt the modern cartographical principles from the Jesuits and soon realized their military importance. Hirata has used the Chinese maps of the Tibet and Pamir regions to a certain extent, especially Eizo Zushiki, an official publication of the Manchu government prepared for carrying out military operations in the region.³¹ Lake Anavatapta, the legendary source of the Ganga has somehow attracted his special attention probably because of its association with the Japanese folk tales. Basing first on the legends he writes that there are four heads on the four sides of this lake, those of a cow, a horse, a lion and an elephant. Ganga and three other rivers issue from these four heads. These rivers go round the lake once before flowing away.³² Next he brings the Chinese maps mentioned above into the picture and writes that according to Eizo Zushiki and other works, there are four hills near the Lake Anavatapta shaped like elephant and horse, etc. and there is nothing strange about these.³³ He also writes that the region lying to the east of the Pamirs has been recorded in fair detail but not much is known about the region lying to the west of the Pamirs.³⁴

Hirata however got much valuable information on Indian geography from Dutch works. He observes that the maps by Westerners are the real maps of India prepared on the basis of actual observation. However, these maps do not mention the ancient place names.³⁵ Again, on the basis of information on India obtained from Dutch works, Hirata concludes that the Mughal kingdom together with the India of the Dutch accounts, which in fact represents South India, constitute the ancient land of India.

Hirata has given a very interesting account of the Mughal kingdom which is given below. The Mughal kingdom was founded by Tamerlane, a native of Samarkand in Sakatai (Sogdiana?) country lying on the southern shores of the Caspian Sea in Tartary. In the beginning he was a brigand, but he slowly grabbed northern and central India and declared himself emperor

in A.D. 1396. Following this he captured western India and became the master of three of the five regions of ancient India. He made Agra his capital. Later on he captured the northern part of southern India.³⁶ However, Hirata commits a grave mistake in mentioning the region lying beyond the Bay of Bengal, viz., Arakan, Ava (both lying in the present day Burma) and Siam as parts of east India of the ancient times.³⁷ Hirata next continues his notion of the Mughal kingdom as follows. The Mughal kingdom is divided into thirty provinces and that the Europeans know fairly well about the two southernmost provinces of Bengal and Cambay. These two provinces are farthest from Agra and are closest to India (this is southern India) where the Europeans reside. The Europeans visit Bengal and Cambay and carry on trade freely.³⁸

Hirata was probably the first Japanese to draw an exclusive map of India. As the motive of drawing this map was basically to launch an attack on the Buddhist, he proceeded with the following two basic premises. The Chinese travellers to India in ancient times had given an accurate account of India although they had not prepared any map. The westerners have, on the other hand, prepared actual maps of the country, but have not mentioned the ancient place names.³⁹ Therefore Hirata consulted the western maps of India in order to get a rough idea of the region. Then he located a few places along the course of the Ganga which have still retained the ancient names. The distances between these places were compared with those given in the Saikiki of Huen Tsang. On the basis of this comparison he next tried to locate the other places associated with Shakyamuni. He argued that the accounts and maps may differ mutually, but there can be no variation in the location of the hills, rivers and seas, etc. or the distances between them mentioned in the accounts with the passing of time.⁴⁰

In preparing the map of India Hirata first drew the latitudes and the longitudes and then located India with China in the east, Persia in the west, and the barbarian country in the north. He had prepared four maps in all, two for the region lying to the north of Tropic of Cancer, one for the region lying to the south of it and the fourth one for the whole of India. He has reproduced this last map in his book. This map has been shown on page 71. Hirata's map can be assumed to give us an idea of the Japanese understanding of India's geography during his time. Barring a few mistakes, the locations given in the map are fairly accurate. This map shows some glaring discrepancies in Hirata's account which he did not somehow correct. One is the location of eastern region of India. This region has been shown correctly in the map, whereas in his account he has mentioned Arakan, Ava and Siam to constitute eastern India. Incidentally all these three places have been shown correctly in the map.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

It can be easily guessed that the Buddhist scriptures, being of Indian origin,

transmitted many Indian cultural elements to Japan. Some of these attracted the attention of the Japanese and others were ignored. It is important to know which of these elements attracted the attention of the Japanese and made valuable contributions to the Japanese culture. Time has come to locate these elements in Japanese writings and evaluate their relative importance.

This paper has shown that the Hindu myths of creation attracted the attention of the Japanese, and the versions they knew were closer to those appearing in the Upanishadas and the Puranas.

The Hindu caste system was totally alien to the Chinese and hence the Ongi commentaries have devoted much space to explain this typically Indian concept to the Chinese. These Ongi commentaries are instrumental in disseminating many typical Indian concepts to the Chinese and the Japanese. We can see a distinct difference in the way the myths of creation and the caste system have been introduced to the Chinese. The myths were transmitted virtually without any modification, whereas in the case of the caste system there was a conscious effort to falsify the facts and present the Kshatriyas as the top social caste. This is because Shakyamuni himself belonged to this caste. The records of the early travellers from China and references to the caste systems in the scriptures and some of the Ongis led Hirata to the correct conclusion that the Brahmans indeed constituted the top class in the social ladder.

The section on geography shows how backdated Hirata's information was on Indian history. He had no information that the British had actually established its supremacy over India around the time he was writing the book. He still thought that the Mughals were the masters of India. Anyway it gives us an idea of the information the Japanese had on India in the fourth decade of the nineteenth century.

NOTES

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2. Arai Hakuseki, *Seiyo Kibun*, Toyobunko Heibonsha, 1970, pp. 48-50.
3. S. Ayusawa, *Geography and Japanese Knowledge of World Geography: Acceptance of Western Cultures in Japan*, the Centre for East Asian Cultural Studies, Tokyo, 1964, p. 42.
4. Hirata Atsutane, *Indo Zoshi* (Hirata Atsutane Zenshu, Kiseikai Edition, edited by Inoue Yorikuni and Maeda Sadayuki), Tokyo, pp. 3B 5-13.
5. *Rig Veda*, X-129-3.
6. *Chhandogya Upanishada*, III-17, 277, in *Upanishada*, Haraf Prakashani, Calcutta, 1980, p. 505.
7. *Indo Zoshi*, p.4 T20-B3.
8. Manusmriti, I 8-9, 12-13, p.5, in *Sacred Books of East*, Vol. XXV, Motilal Banarasidas, New Delhi.
9. *Indo Zoshi*, p.3, B16-19.
10. *Rig Veda*, X-90.
11. *Mundaka Upanishada*, II,1,26 & 31, p. 225, 228, in *Upanishada*.
12. *Indo Zoshi*, p.10, T20-B3.
13. *Ibid.*, p.4, B15-16, p.10, B6-7.

14. *Vishnu Purana* (tr. H.H. Wilson), Punthi Pustak, Calcutta, 1961, VII, p. 42-43, p.43, f.n. 13.
15. *Vishnu Purana*, VII, p. 42-43.
16. *Indo Zoshi*, p.4, B9-14.
17. *Mahabharata*, Adiparva, (Tr. Kali Prasanna Sinha), Basumati Sahitya Mandir, Calcutta, p. 85.
18. *Vishnu Purana*, IV, p. 120-123.
19. *Indo Zoshi*, p.40, T8-11.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 37, T4-18.
21. *Ibid.*, p.13, T8-20.
22. *Ibid.*, p.35, B12 p. 36 T9.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 36, T12-B3.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 36, B3-9.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 37, B5-7.
26. *Ibid.*, p.39, B6-8.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 38, B5-7.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 39, T14-16, p.39, B15-p.40 T5.
29. *Ibid.*, p.14, B7, p.15 T 16-20.
30. *Ibid.*, p.15, T10-14.
31. *Ibid.*, p.15, B17-20.
32. *Ibid.*, p.15, B1-4.
33. *Ibid.*, p.15, B14-17.
34. *Ibid.*, p.16, T3-6.
35. *Ibid.*, p.20, B12-13.
36. *Ibid.*, p.19, T2-12.
37. *Ibid.*, p.19, T12-14.
38. *Ibid.*, p.19, T15-20.
39. *Ibid.*, p.20, B10-15.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 20, B15-21.