

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# From the Ganges to the Globe: The Transformation of Indian Folklore in Japanese Anime

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## Abstract

Since its inception, anime has been recognized as popular culture hosting a global fanbase of approximately 100 million (Anime, 2024). Pop culture is not only a reproduction of reality but also a constant influence on our views, attitudes, and experiences (Wardle 203–17). Anime is more enticing and exciting than mainstream films with its stunning visuals, intense plots, wonderful characterization, and soul-pleasing music. The consequence is that anime has turned into a melting pot of East and West motifs and mythologies. Adaptations of Hindu mythological references are abundant as in Tatsunoko Production's *Shurato* (1989-90), Clamp's *RG Veda* (1991-92), TV Tokyo's *Arjuna* (2001), Type-Moon's *Fate* series (2006), and Graphinica and Netflix's *Record of Ragnarok* (2021-23). This study investigates the allusions to Indian folk narratives in such anime and demonstrates how they have contributed to contra-flow, context sensitivity, and the globalization of culture. Indian intertextuality in Japanese anime is also investigated through a semiotic analysis. The research objective is to identify and analyze the formation of "counter-structures" in Japanese anime against their Indian classical counterparts (traditional folktales in Indian mythology). The research design is kept within the methodology of an exploratory case study. This study adds to the present literature by introducing the reformatting of old Indian folktales into "new Oriental perspectives" in anime that are transmitted as global popular culture for the world audiences increasing context-sensitivity and creating a "transformed" meaning of Indian folklore. The emergence of two distinct representations observed between the original representations in Indian folklore and its counterparts in globalized depictions in Japanese anime raises ethical issues of misappropriation or cultural appropriation. This paper recommends that cultural experts, academicians, or researchers be consulted before the incorporation of cross-cultural elements.

## Keywords

Indian folklore; Japanese anime; context sensitivity; semiotic analysis; counter-structures

## Discovering the Art of Anime

Japanese animations began as a creative, cultural, and commercial reaction to the Hollywood Disney films that had become prevalent in the last century (Novielli). Experimentation with animation techniques started by filmmakers Ōten Shimokawa and Jun'ichi Kōuchi engaged in creating a style of animations that exhibited local artistic expressions as well as presented a Japanese cultural identity. This is the main reason why many anime are grounded in rural or urban Japan but showcase international plots and characters that occur in a localized Japanese setting.

Classical Japanese art techniques such as "Ukiyo-e" and "Kabuki theatre" were also experimented with during these times. According to Novielli, anime started as a reaction to Western animation's dominance in Japan, with producers trying to carve out their niche by combining traditional and modern aspects of animation. As a result, since its inception, anime may be said to have adopted an east-to-west communication flow, which Daya Thussu refers to as "contra-flow" (Paterson 223–25). In simple terms, this can be referred to as narratives

or plots introduced in Japanese anime that are representative of more Eastern characters and traditions than that of Western culture. For this paper, this is termed as “new Oriental perspectives” that create new meaning from old and traditional concepts and ideas. However, this paper questions whether such representations can be typical of Eastern or Oriental representations, or are transformed cultural depictions borrowed interculturally to enhance and promote plot structures.

According to Lu, anime creates new cultural forms and meanings while homogenizing local cultures, creating concerns about cultural supremacy, and globalizing Japanese culture (169+). This globalization promotes cross-cultural understanding, subjectivity, and intercultural contact. While Lu has focused on the globalization of Japanese culture, the purpose of this research is to represent the Indian folktales in Japanese anime and their context. Another study looked at the trend of “Japanese anime replacing American animation on Indian children’s TV,” emphasising Doraemon’s appeal to Indian children. Indian children’s tastes in anime have changed significantly, impacting their cultural values, social skills, and entertainment preferences (Jaggi 7-12). This demonstrates how anime, as a pop culture behemoth, shapes worldwide trends. India has the world’s second-largest anime fan community and is predicted to account for 60% of the worldwide increase in fanbase in the future years (Pherwani).

Ramasubramanian & Kornfield’s research investigated how Japanese anime characters (women) were copied by American teenagers. According to this study, women in Japanese anime promoted positivity, empowerment, and cultural appreciation among young audiences, hence, fostering diversity and inclusion in media portrayal (189–207). Therefore, developing a protagonist based on folklore from a certain culture can be seen to increase cultural awareness which may require active participation from viewers of the protagonist’s country. The ethnicity of the protagonist plays a major role in anime since most actions performed by him/ her are culturally based.

Mínguez-López argues that Akira Toriyama’s Dragon Ball Z employs symbolic characters, narrative patterns, and mythological references that reinterpret traditional Japanese methods of storytelling (27–46). His analysis demonstrates that Buddhist (Zen) and Christian references are common in anime. One such character is King Yemma, referenced to the ruler of death, Yamaraj. According to Barkman, Christian allusions are employed in anime to enrich literary effects, emphasizing symbols over syllogisms to convey easy-to-understand universal information. Where Barkman has focused on Christianity within Otaku culture (viewers of anime and readers of manga worldwide) as a form of promoting aesthetic and narrative goals, this paper delves into an expose of the Indian folk narratives present in it.

Folklore is a fluid and ever-changing concept impacted by cultural, social, and historical elements. “The Folkloresque” by Foster & Tolbert delves into a comparison between folk and pop culture. They investigate how folklore is reinterpreted and recontextualized in modern media. Folklore research in pop culture sheds light on how culture, identity, and community are produced and contested. While many papers have studied anime from different perspectives, they have not done so from an Indian perspective. Hence, to fill this research gap, the selected anime series are used to forecast and debate allusions to Indian mythology.

This paper employs a mixed-methods approach, with a quantitative methodology (content analysis) to find out how Indian folklore is transformed in their depictions in Japanese anime through discourse analysis. Is it creative liberty or is it gross reduction or sexualized portrayals that generate and perpetuate existing stereotypes about Indians? Global streaming websites “h!anime” and YouTube (YT) are used to access time-stamped content for analysis. Although the paper’s quantitative analysis is limited, Indian audience reception from fanbases on Quora and Reddit have been included wherever possible to enhance its empirical strength. A qualitative technique (context analysis) is then applied to better comprehend such allusions.

### Select Interviews of Japanese Mangaka

An introduction to Japanese anime cannot begin without select interviews from the original creators of the “manga” (graphic novel version of the anime series) to attribute to the irrefutable fact of the inclusion of Hindu mythological motifs and concepts in anime. Shurato of the Heaven Wars is one such anime which includes direct and multiple representations of Hindu Gods such as Asura, Lady Vishnu, and Indra. The series aired on TV Tokyo from 1989 to 1990 and ran for 38 episodes. It is to be noted that there are very few anime creators who have openly admitted to using Indian stories, myths, and folk tales which raises issues of cultural appropriation and misappropriation as discussed in this paper. Shurato directly features elements from Hindu mythology but no interview to date acknowledges it. The plot may be summarized as two friends exported to a parallel world that runs on “Sohma” (spiritual energy) and they must defend that world from dark forces. The producers of such anime are observed to take creative liberties without acknowledgement of the references to

Indian myths and culture.

RG Veda is a manga created by Nanase Ohkawa, Mokona, Tsubaki Nekoi, and Satsuki Igarashi. This Japanese women's manga group in a "Clamp interview" in 2005 admitted that they as creators were fascinated with "Hinduism and esoteric Buddhism". Mokona in the interview states that she had even carried the Rig Veda everywhere, however, only ended up taking the names and relationships from the Indian religious book. For this paper, from the studios of Usagi Ya and Studio Signal, only two episodes are taken up for analysis, each with a runtime of about 45 minutes. RG Veda is a story that borrows its name from the Hindu religious textbook "Rig Veda", one of the four Vedas that are sacred to Hinduism. The protagonist Ashura is driven by the prophecy of the "Six Stars" to rebel against the powerful God of Thunder who originally usurped the throne in the story.

Creator and director Shoji Kawamori's "Earth Maiden Arjuna" series features Juna, an incarnation of Arjuna from Indian folklore, as a Goddess with the task of saving the Earth which is dying due to a genetically engineered bacteria (Raaja) which devours all life forms on the planet. TV Tokyo aired this in 13 episodes from 2001 onwards. Prince Arjuna is one of the five brothers who were blessed with exceptional skills in warfare and archery in the Hindu epic of "Mahabharata". Kawamori has been pretty open in interviews regarding his infatuation with Bollywood movies and Indian cultures (ANN, 2016). According to Gundam News (2022), this anime series was influenced by Kawamori's expeditions to "Malaysia, Borneo, India and even a nuclear plant." Individuals such as Juna, Ashura, and Chris bear similarities to Indian mythological characters and even behave similarly to their counterparts from the traditional tales in Bhagavad Gita, a sub-text from Mahabharata.

Kinoko Nasu created the TV series "Fate/Stay Night", which consisted of 24 episodes in the initial run that aired in 2006. Studio Deen produced it, and Yuji Yamaguchi directed it. The series debuted on Japanese TV (Animax) on January 7, 2006. Outside of Japan, "Fate" has been broadcast on a variety of TV channels and streaming platforms, including Animax Asia (Southeast Asia), Animax India (India), Funimation Channel (North America), ADV Channel (North America), Anime Network (North America), and Crunchyroll (global streaming). In an interview with Famitsu (2024), Nasu admits to incorporating motifs of "samsara and fate" (reincarnation cycle) into characters reflecting his acquaintance with Indian culture. Additional films and original video animations (OVAs) expand on the "Fate" universe, and Indian epic heroes like Arjuna and Karna feature directly in the game versions of Fate/Grand Order and Fate/Apocrypha.

Netflix's Record of Ragnarok (RoR) is a recent anime series which was banned in India due to the depictions of Gods and Goddesses such as Shiva, Vishnu, Parvati, and Kali (Clute, 2021). This anime series includes 12 episodes in Season 1 (2021) and 15 episodes in Season 2 (2023). It is to be noted that the first season was produced by Studio Graphinica and for the next season, due to all the backlash and controversies it faced on news and social media, Yumeta Company joined in to collaborate with Graphinica. The plot deals with a tournament between the Gods and humans where legendary heroes from the human world, both dead and alive compete with the Gods led by Zeus in a showcase of feat and strength.

This anime is a prime example of misappropriation and cultural appropriation due to the gross misrepresentation of Gods and Goddesses from Indian culture. The anime reinterprets and recontextualizes Indian mythological characters such as Shiva and Vishnu in a contemporary and modern environment, departing from traditional characterizations, plots, and themes. This subverts the order and power dynamics of the characters from Indian folklore providing a distinct story that provides a new viewpoint on Indian myths. Although this strategy advances both aesthetic and narrative aims, cultural appropriation and representation issues become concerning. Viewers from different fanbases in the subreddit "r/anime" (2021) have claimed that "people that are watching who has little to no knowledge of Hinduism will have a very wrong understanding of it". This comment sums it all up how misinterpretation can occur when cultural depictions are not made in the correct sense.

The above discussion reveals without a doubt that Japanese studios and creators have deliberately incorporated Indian cultural references in their anime and sometimes even based an entire anime series on it as seen in the case of the Arjuna anime series. However, it is noted that wherever the directors and producers have failed to accurately represent such Indian mythology and folklore, they have remained silent about such depictions to the media through interviews. Instances such as the RoR and the Shurato series have both failed to acknowledge why they have depicted Indian folklore in such light.

On the other hand, creators who have read and researched religious texts are quite open to a discussion on why and how they have represented their protagonists in a specific way as seen in the interview with Nanase Ohkawa, the primary art director of RG Veda. This leads to the blurring of boundaries between adaptation and maladaptation, appropriation and misappropriation. It is recommended for future cultural adaptations to research the specific Indian folktale reference, and their background, before including them in their anime series and also showcase the appropriate values that the character stands for.

The interviews also reveal that the main driver of the adaptation of Indian mythology and folklore is the fascination with Indian spiritual beliefs closely linked to Hinduism and Buddhism along with personal drives to cater to the Japanese viewers who are unfamiliar with such topics. Both Kawamori and Nasu admit to the depiction of characters of Arjuna from Indian culture but their depictions vary. In Kawamori's Arjuna, he is shown to be the saviour with a human touch whereas Nasu's Arjuna is a servant depicted to fight a "Holy war" for his fellow human companion. The values that Arjuna stand for in both anime are love, compassion, a warrior with extraordinary skills, and the use of his legendary weapon of the "bow" known as the "divine bow Gandiva".

Both anime reflect the moral values embedded by the character of Arjuna correctly however, Kawamori's Arjuna is an "ordinary teenage girl" instead of the legendary warrior that Nasu portrays in the Fate series. This can be seen as a deliberate act of incorporation that causes cultural misrepresentation leading to misinformation. However, this is neutralized with the character portrayal of Arjuna as the saviour of Earth. Comparing this to the depictions of Indian Gods in the Record of Ragnarok series, they are just grossly misrepresented through lewd depictions that if taken at face value deteriorate the moral value that the actual God from which the mythology is adapted stands for. For instance, Shiva is shown to get scared when facing his opponent Raiden. This cannot be acknowledged by Indian people since Shiva is revered as the "God of Destruction" in Hindu culture and fear is not one of his attributes. Vishnu is portrayed as a villain when he is the "Protector of the Universe" in Indian culture.

Such depictions warrant backlash from Indian viewers. Therefore, it is essential to balance creativity with sensitivity towards other cultures, especially when blending and amalgamating motifs from other religions and cultures. Alternatively, cultural experts can also be consulted such as academicians, translators, and subject-matter experts to address such ethical implications.

### **Unraveling Shurato: A Semiotic Perspective**

Legend of Heavenly Sphere Shurato is a vintage anime produced back in the 1990s. Only the first two episodes are taken up for a semiotic analysis from YT as the timeframe available for this study was limited. As the anime begins, the setting reveals a match between two characters, Shurato and Gai, and while they are at it, a lady dressed in white appears and transports them to another place. The hand gestures shown by this lady in white, later revealed to be, Lady Vishnu, who appears at 7:55 in the YT video, are Hindu gestures used for praying.

To create an affinity towards the culture, the anime moves on to use the repeated words from "Om barada handan haa" which although random words generated to produce an auditory and visual hallucination of an alternate world's forces at play, create effects of an alternate world filled with mysticism. Since in the 90s, Japanese viewers were not much aware of Indian people due to the lack of connectivity through media and electronic communication technologies, it is noted that anime such as Naruto, Fate, One Piece, Fairy Tale, and other anime series, sometimes, to create effects of an alternate world distinct from the one that the Japanese viewers are familiar with, words and characters from other cultures are incorporated to create that effect.

The plot goes on to reveal the "Hachibushu" which again draws Gods from Hindu mythology in episodes 1 and 2. Vishnu who is considered to be a male deity is shown to be female in this series. It is observed that such "sex changes" are apparent in other popular anime such as "The Seven Deadly Sins" and Fate, among others. This creates new creative elements for the character and dissociates it from the original concept or plot from which the character is chosen. This can be compared to the trend as seen in the present epoch by Hollywood TV series to normalize the LGBTQ+ community through couples from that community portrayed on-screen on live TV. Concerning anime, the reversed roles of portraying a male protagonist as female or vice versa can be seen as a way to uproot Japan's gender stereotypes of portraying the male as the only strong and dominant character. This subverts gender stereotypes and creates new perspectives engaging fanbases thereby promoting an upliftment of cultural and societal values.

Shurato even goes on to adapt "Armor transformations" in the anime as well as animal forms of mythical creatures such as Garuda, who is the animal familiar with Lady Vishnu. The genre under which this anime falls is categorized as "Isekai anime" where the protagonist must travel or be reincarnated in another world and continue his/ her journey. Audience reception to the anime was limited to only Japanese anime websites since the anime was released in the '90s. One such website "My Anime List" reveals that the audience did not like the repetitive plot occurring throughout the 38 episodes. The pace of the anime is considered to be slow and action scenes are underdeveloped. Cultural borrowings are not discussed on such fan sites, however, some comments reveal that this anime would likely be more appealing to viewers who are interested in Eastern mythology and motifs.



### Record of Ragnarok: A Symbolic Letdown

The adaptations in the anime portray why cultural sensitivity should be maintained and to clear this point Shurato is compared to the “Record of Ragnarok” (RoR) anime series produced in 2021. The rhetoric is built that since the ‘90s reception of Shurato did not elicit any serious response from Indian audiences about cultural appropriation or other gender and stereotype legitimization issues of Indian mythology, RoR takes it one step further in depicting lewd presentations added with the reversal of roles of Gods from Indian culture. It is said to take more “creative liberties” than an anime should which is why it was banned in India.

Shiva is shown as a young, cheerful, comic character who subverts the whole idea of Shiva as the God of destruction in Hindu culture. Lord Vishnu is shown to be a dark personality who acts as an antagonist in the anime. This departs from the traditional role of Vishnu as the preserver of life force in Indian mythology. Parvati and Kali are reduced to meek sexually suggestive appearances that strip away their power and respect. The subreddit by “r/ShuumatsuNoValkyrie” on “What do Indians think about record of Ragnarok” has over 20 responses from all over the world. An analysis of the posts reveals that the sexualized depictions of Goddesses are taken personally by the Indian fanbase. Distortion in the portrayal of Hindu deities is a major concern. However, certain Indian viewers talk about taking the anime portrayals lightly since they are “just cartoons”.

There is a specific distinction that must be made with Indian folklore being adapted to anime. The Indian gods or deities are “still” offered prayers with specific days given to them for ritualistic occasions and celebrations in Hindu culture. For instance, Maa Durga also known as Parvati in RoR is celebrated throughout the whole country for 5 days and is considered to be a celebration of the defeat of evil. Other cultures do not have the same attachment to Gods like Zeus, Ra, Odin, Gilgamesh, and others. When an anime such as RoR depicts such vile and slanderous depictions of Indian mythology, such backlash is expected since Gods are not “just Gods” in Hindu culture. Indians actively pray to these Gods even in the present epoch and thereby consider them sacred. This brings us to the discussion of an anime that has done justice to representations of Indian folklore, Nasu’s Fate series.

### Mahabharata's Role in Shaping Fate

Recurrent throughout the anime are motifs of friendship, love, sacrifice, morality, and existentialism combined into the genre of magical fantasy. The war itself bears resemblance to Christian myths and references to the “Holy Grail”. However, this research paper has also found similarities between the Grail Wars with that of the Indian tale of “Mahabharata”. The epic tale of Mahabharata draws similarities to the war in the anime in its depiction of battles against Godly or heroic entities, highlighting moral issues, mankind’s survival, the aftermath of the battle, and the quest for justice and peace. While Fate does not include direct adaptations of Indian legendary characters, some characters are observed to take inspiration from Indian mythology, including Ma Durga, Lord Rama, Arjuna, and Krishna (Geekman). The following timestamps taken to provide context for a semiotic analysis are provided from the “h!anime” website as cited in the references section.

In Episode 3, the “Opening act”, Kiritsugu or Kirie (the antagonist) discusses the Grail. Kirie’s explanation of the concept of the War bears an indirect reference to “Samudra Manthan” (churning of seas) that produces Amrita (nectar). It is noted that the Amrita and the Grail both grant powers of immortality (Timestamp: 11:35 – 21:45). A semiotic analysis at duration 11:38, reveals a close-up of Kirie showing that he is robed in a formal missionary outfit which is both official and elegant. This represents the sophistication of knowledge presented in this scene as Kirie is describing the War that has been happening over the past decades. Dark and muted ambient colours provide a sense of seriousness and importance to the scene. The clerical outfit that he wears symbolizes his connection to the War as an Overseer. Though his facial expressions are serious and contemplative, it is noticed that he is hiding part of the information when he hesitates to divulge specific information. He is calm and asserts his dominance in the scene presenting information that clarifies most things in the anime. The magical forces in nature are symbolized by the dark, arcane setting of the Church providing a mysterious environment for suspense to thrive. The dimly lit setting also in a way promotes old symbols and artefacts visible in the background that allude to the grail’s power and history.

In “The strongest enemy” (Episode 4, Timestamp: 12:59 – 13:22), Rin (one of the protagonists) defines magical power, a notion derived from Hindu mythology (prana) that refers to the life force that powers magic. She explains how mages employ this life force (prana) to activate and regulate their magical talents. Mana and Prana are seen as a linkage to Western and Eastern traditions of representing the life force or unseen forces of energy in this series. In the frame at 13:22 in episode 4, the close-up of Rin’s face promotes a sensitive and vulnerable side which places her in stark contrast to the compelling, dominant persona that she expresses in other scenes. This close-up in episode 4 showcases her explanation of

magical power and prana. Her red clothing represents enthusiasm and determination, while dark green eyes and brown hair convey balance and stability. The dull background focuses attention on her words, emphasizing the importance of her explanation to Shirou. Since no hand-held objects are seen, this emphasizes Rin's emotional state and focuses on her thoughts. A soft, blurred background, creates an intimate atmosphere.

In "The sword of the promised victory"(Episode 16, Timestamp: 04:30 – 04:41), Shirou's (the main protagonist) sword is described which shares similarities with Arjuna's legendary weapon, the divine bow "Gandiva". It is indirectly referenced through the personality of Shirou's sword. At 4:39 duration in the episode, Shirou is wearing his casual clothes, representing his humble and down-to-earth personality. The scene is bright and vibrant, indicating optimism and confidence in the future. Shirou's sword has an aura of blue and white, signifying purity, courage, and strength. His facial expression is determined and focused, showing his dedication to the cause. He looks confident and strong, indicating his skill and mastery of the sword. He holds the sword in a way that reveals his commitment to his ideals and desire to protect others. The scene occurs in a bright and open environment, signifying freedom and limitless potential. The background is clean and unrestricted, indicating a sense of clarity and purpose. The sword itself represents Shirou's ideals and his desire to protect others, echoing the themes of "Gandiva" in Bhagavad Gita.

In Episode 2, "The holy grail" (Timestamp: 09:57 – 10:09), a reference to Karma and reincarnation is made by Gilgamesh. He explicitly states that he had been reborn again and again with the sole purpose of defeating Saber. In Indian folktales, this is referred to as Samsara, Punarjanma, or the Karmic cycle (Patheos). At 9:58, Gilgamesh is wearing his royal attire which is golden in colour. He is a symbol of power, wisdom, and nobility. The scene is filled with a combination of gold and red colours, representing power, destiny and magnificence. His facial expression reveals that he is serious about fighting Saber. Gilgamesh's hand gestures feature him as eager to battle Saber. A magnificent, and majestic setting conveys the significance and seriousness of the issue. The background is dark and mysterious, with hints of ancient symbols and artefacts (10:30). The way Gilgamesh uses his hands to summon the thousands of weapons in the background is analogous to the summoning of "Astra" (weapons) in B.R Chopra's TV series of Mahabharata (1988-1990).

Other references to Indian mythology are incorporated into Fate through the hero's journey (which symbolizes Arjuna's journey from the Mahabharata), mentor figures (Taiga Fujimura's character is similar to Guru Drona), magical artefacts (the Holy Grail and Excalibur have similarities with the Sudarshana Chakra and the Amrita Kumbha), and servants who are modelled after Hindu avatars. The idea of sacred duels is adjacent to that of the dwandwa yuddha (duel) tradition found in ancient Indian epics. Indian philosophical traditions also contain concepts such as the essence of existence (Maya) and the cycle of life and death (Samsara) as represented in the anime.

Ramanujan (1989) best describes Indian intertextuality regarding folk tales as a "web of Indian allusions" that are layered with "copresence" and "complementarity". He cites the example of "over 300 Ramayanas" (Hindu epic) being created in the process of Indian intertextuality in folk tales. The same instance is then used to explain Japanese anime through the five case studies that prove a somewhat similar storyline (tournaments/ battles/ wars) involving a somewhat similar character group of Indian deities that are drawn to war or battles such as Arjuna, Shiva, Vishnu, Kali, Durga, and others. However, the only difference obtained in the anime series is the change in the use of characters termed the "transformation of Indian folklore" in this paper. RoR uses the Hindu pantheon to their own needs in portraying them however they want without their original context, setting or background. Such depictions are a crass physical representation of Indian folklore and cannot be considered to contain the essence of the characters.

This creates alternative meanings and wherever multiple layers of meaning are created Ramanujan has described them as "context-sensitive". The parameter involved with context sensitivity is that characters with complex backgrounds and values are adapted and evolved due to the needs of the creator creating "intertextuality" which makes it "context-sensitive". In contrast, "context-free" conveys straightforward, repetitive and traditional storytelling (original folk tales from Indian culture) that does not change motifs or the change in values and backgrounds of the characters from Indian folklore.

To summarize and make this distinction clear, context-free depictions are used to refer to the original and traditional folk stories and mythology in Indian folklore. For instance, Shiva is always portrayed as someone who loses their temper at the slightest, is a revered husband and is known as the destroyer of worlds whereas Vishnu from Indian folklore can be considered as the God that preserves life depicting values such as calmness, intellect, and balancing good and evil without being tainted by evil. Arjuna is considered a warrior with the utmost bravery and wisdom. Context-sensitive meaning is created with the altered depictions in Japanese anime that refer to the adapted and evolved characters of Juna in Earth Maiden Arjuna, or Lady Vishnu in Shurato where Juna becomes a teenage girl depicting all the qualities and values that Arjuna stands for and Vishnu who is the female version of the Indian

God Vishnu.

As discussed earlier, it is noted that all five anime take character names and deities from Indian mythology and mould them to meet the demands of the plot of the Japanese anime. Then those character depictions that are considered “rigid” and unchangeable within a complete structure of Indian folklore become malleable and easily adaptable creating new layers of meaning and contributing to new Oriental perspectives in an Indian intertextuality in anime.

According to the folktale references in the anime, the utilization of Indian folklore in anime is then, understood to be “context-sensitive”, as it is adapted and reinterpreted within the Japanese cultural context. In the context of Shurato, RoR, Fate, RG Veda, and Arjuna anime series, context sensitivity is determined to reflect the universalized effect of pop culture globally. When a storyteller combines motifs from other cultures in his/ her story, the original context and meaning are stripped making them universal. Therefore, the trend is from a context-free meaning towards context-sensitive meaning, i.e. from a localized to a globalized version of meaning.

The production of counter-structures in anime concerning traditional mythology is described as a postmodern pastiche of folk tales (Watkins). This postmodern re-creation shows a creative re-engagement with classical tales, resulting in a distinct counter-structure that coexists alongside the original stories (classical counterparts) and provides a new perspective on Indian cultural history. The use of Indian folk stories in anime successfully exhibits the “contra-flow” phenomenon that reverses traditional west-to-east cultural flow, diversifying the media content, increasing representation, and stimulating a global understanding of local cultures. Such is the globalization of culture faced by the evolution of modern mass media (Kraidy 359-363). It is also observed from the audience reception of Fate from Reddit and Quora that most fans are happy with the portrayals of Arjuna, Karna, Ashwatthama, and others since they do not distort or subvert the values that the characters stand for. This brings us to the discussion on the direct representation of Arjuna in Kawamori’s portrayals of the Indian God.

### **Arjuna Reborn in Cyberpunk**

In the anime, Earth Maiden Arjuna, otherwise referred to as Arjuna, gender is reversed and Juna, the protagonist depicting the Indian God is shown to be a teenage girl. Arjuna, Ashura, Raaja, and Gandiva, among others, are in the spotlight for the Indian folklore adaptation in this series. Motifs of chakra, reincarnation, and “Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam” (we are all connected) are evident throughout the anime. Kawamori seems to have used the “consulting experts” technique to construct this anime more seriously. It is a beautiful depiction of what Indian folklore stands for in a futuristic cyberpunk dystopian realm. The epic hero’s journey is wonderfully synced through the dystopian environment making it an addition to the genre of “eco-fantasy” in anime. Juna’s friend, Chris, portrays the part of Krishna as a guide to her actions while the Raaja (virus that leads to environmental degradation of the Earth) can be compared to the demonic forces in Indian mythology such as Ashuras.

A strong pantheist and environmentalist vision is created in the saving of the planet Earth by Juna. The visual imagery depicted in this anime conveys the devastating impact of human life and its actions on the planet and successfully exhibits themes of Juna as an “Avatar of Time” and the message of balance in actions related to the environment. Chris’s good intentions are not enough to preserve nature. Instead, even with good intentions, Chris unleashes the deadly virus on the planet. The anime constructs the characters with correct depictions of Indian folklore but it can be observed from the subreddit of “r/anime” that the anime lacks engaging characters. Even other anime websites have rated it lower than other anime with lesser engaging plot structures. There are also mixed feelings about the music and soundtrack that do not appeal to most audiences.

This anime series can be used to promote instances of how folklore can be adapted and transformed without raising ethical issues. Kawamori’s acknowledgement of Indian cultural origins adds to the fact that Japanese anime can be used to propagate Indian culture through the right stereotypes and not like the mere digressed depictions as in RoR to attract viewership. It is noted that vintage anime always respected the traditions, culture, and religion in creating anime, however, due to the globalization and Westernization (RoR is a Netflix-produced anime) that has widely occurred in the present century, anime is becoming more vulgar and negative in their depictions of Indian folklore. This is concerning and makes it important for Japanese manga artists and animation producers to take a page from the past and acknowledge proper depictions while incorporating motifs from other cultures.

### **RG Veda: Names Divorced from Meaning**

Finally, Clamp’s RG Veda is an anime series that discusses openly in interviews how Hindu and Buddhist cultures have played an important role in providing artists with enthusiasm to incorporate such cultural motifs in anime. Ashura and Yasha are words taken from the Rig Veda. It is to be noted that although names have been taken from Indian mythology as the

title of the anime series itself acknowledges, the plot digresses from Indian folktales. Again, the motif of the hero's epic journey is highlighted and although various themes do resonate with Hindu culture such as the creation of the universe and the conflict between demons and gods, there is a sinister observation to be made regarding the portrayal of Indian folklore in this series. This is a series that does not involve much context into why characters and settings appear as they do which creates a disjointed narrative. This is particularly unappealing to viewers acquainted with Indian culture. From the subreddit of "r/CLAMP", it is ascertained that the fanbase is annoyed at the "unengaging plot".

Adapting folklore from other cultures can be both rewarding and demotivating. RG Veda is one such anime that fails to successfully integrate Indian folklore into Japanese anime and thus, ends up being just a video series that takes names from a culture which it does not reference. Again, hand gestures and Indian hymns are used by the anime to propagate the mysterious effects of an alternative world. Symbols and diagrams from Indian folklore are used in the anime extensively. It is noted that some art and architecture in the anime are revealing of Indian architecture with references to Hindu festivals and ceremonies such as Holi or the festival of colours. However, cultural portrayals are superficial in the sense that their incorporations do not contribute to the storyline.

Since cultural borrowings are done without context, the anime risks potential misrepresentation and distortion of the true meaning of names such as Taishakuten, the tyrant and rebel leader who is the main antagonist in the story. Being an incarnation of Indra, he is supposed to represent the king of Gods and God of thunder. However, he is misrepresented and cast as a villain in this series. This again becomes a case of inaccurate depiction of Indian folklore creating cultural appropriation issues that lead to misrepresentation.

Therefore, adaptation and borrowings from Indian folklore and mythology in Japanese anime are shown to blur the boundaries between creative liberties and cultural appropriation. However entertaining a medium of communication can be, it has no right to demean or distort another's religion, culture and belief. It is seen that aesthetic and narrative depth can be enhanced equally with cultural incorporations as in the Fate, Earth Maiden Arjuna as well as Shurato anime series. However, depictions of Indian folklore in RoR and RG Veda raise questions about cultural appropriations that may distort or subvert an entire culture.

### Concluding the Ethical Debate

A recurring pattern is identified where directors, animators, and writers use Indian mythology to appeal to global audiences. Gods and deities such as Arjuna, Indra, and Shiva, among others, have been reduced to mere characters in plots that create narratives to either strengthen or weaken specific stereotypes about Indian culture. It is noted that the execution and research aspect of creating an anime series involving other cultures is critical to observe including the employment of a variety of experts and professionals on the field to fact-check the borrowed motifs.

The limited timeframe available to artists to create an anime series is often why no research is conducted before the creation of a TV series. However, misrepresentation of cultural symbols through characters is a serious issue that must be kept in mind and it is recommended that cultural adaptations not change the moral value that a certain God or deity stands for since this causes misrepresentation. In the Fate series, it is noted that philosophical concepts are taken to advance meaning in the anime rather than to explore the true meaning underlying these concepts.

On the other hand, Earth Maiden Arjuna integrates the legend of a king more meaningfully and symbolically with an appropriate ending questioning environmental themes and their relation with humans. The potential for cross-cultural exchange will only be realized when mass media such as anime can balance ethical implications with cultural and spiritual depth. This paper successfully lays down the rhetoric through the semiotic analysis of the five anime that plagiarism of concepts and ideas is rampant in video technologies and can be recognized interculturally as well.

To avoid such issues, anime studios need to invest and spend time in thorough research, consult cultural experts or academicians or even undertake journeys, and engage with communities whose cultural elements they are using. Anime has grown into a massive cultural product, impacting folk culture and other forms throughout the world. It revives interest in folk culture, combines folk elements with modern themes, and sparks new genres. (Napier). However, its global appeal raises questions about perpetuating existing stereotypes. As anime evolves, its' cultural importance and possible threats to the globalization of information must be recognized.

This study looked at Indian intertextuality in Japanese animations and concludes that anime reimagines Indian stories utilizing pastiche tropes through cross-cultural borrowings of motifs, characters, and concepts. This paper also suggests that these new depictions support a context-sensitive viewpoint, creating counter-structures to traditional classical ones and introducing new perspectives into global media, improving our knowledge about Indian folk



tales. This results in the global transmission of cultural ideas promoting an acceptance of cultures worldwide. However, references to Indian folklore require prior knowledge of the local culture to grasp such themes. This may be the reason for the incorporation of such motifs in anime to target viewers in specific countries.

## Biography

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## Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflict of interest in relation to this research. There are no financial or personal relationships that could have influenced the work presented in this paper. All findings and conclusions are based solely on the research conducted and the available data.

## Ethics Statement

This research does not involve human or animal studies and therefore did not require ethical review or approval.

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