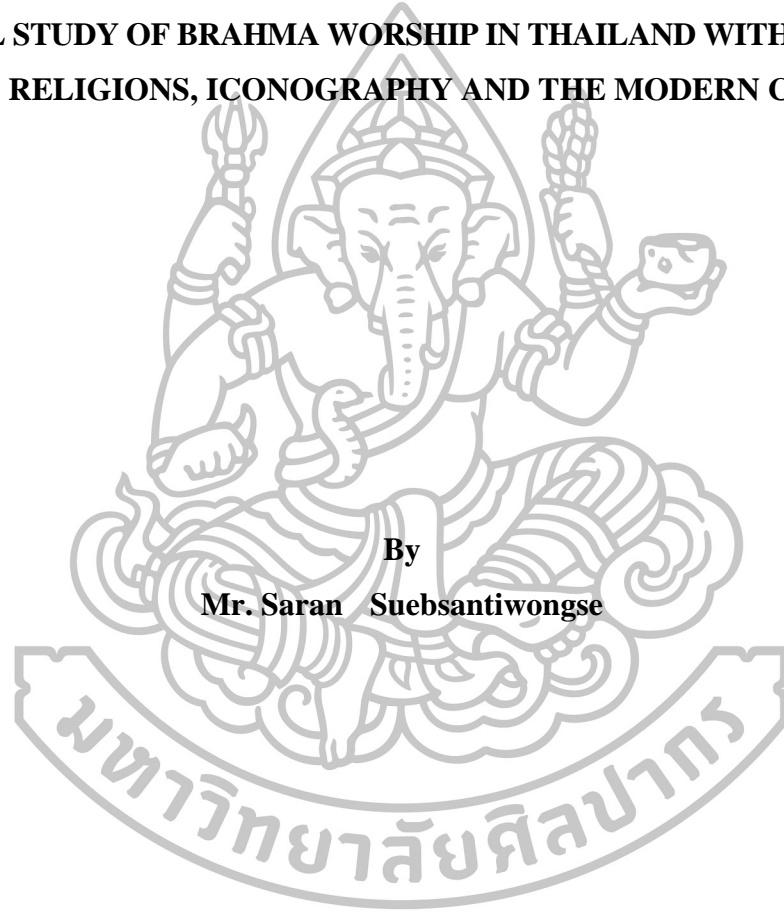




**A CRITICAL STUDY OF BRAHMA WORSHIP IN THAILAND WITH REFERENCE
TO RELIGIONS, ICONOGRAPHY AND THE MODERN CULT**



**By
Mr. Saran Suebsantiwongse**

An Independent Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts Program in Sanskrit Studies

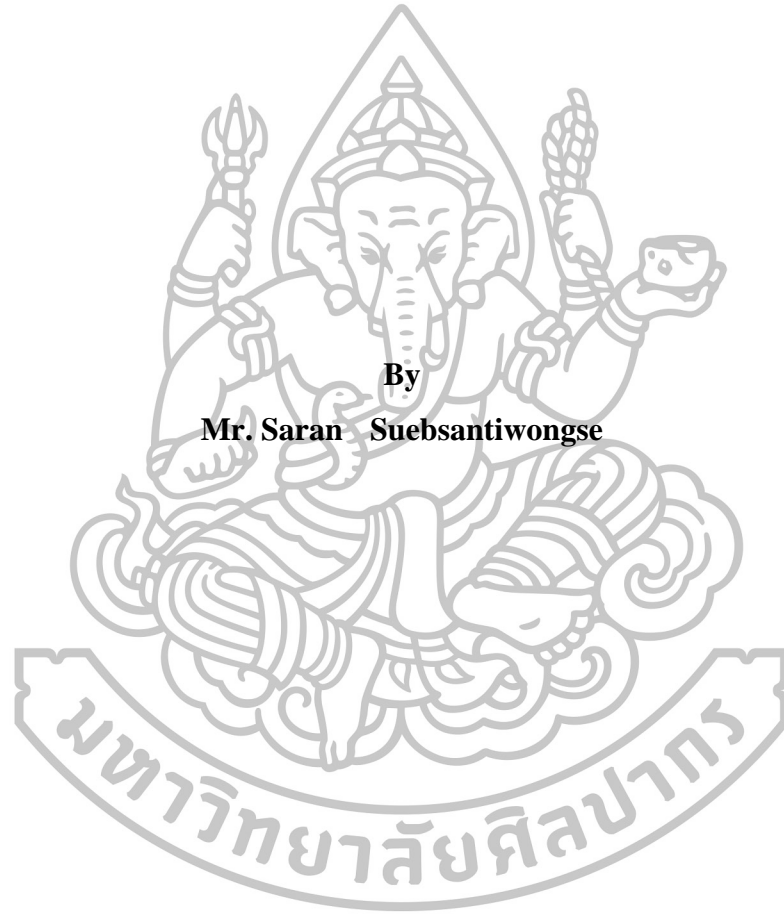
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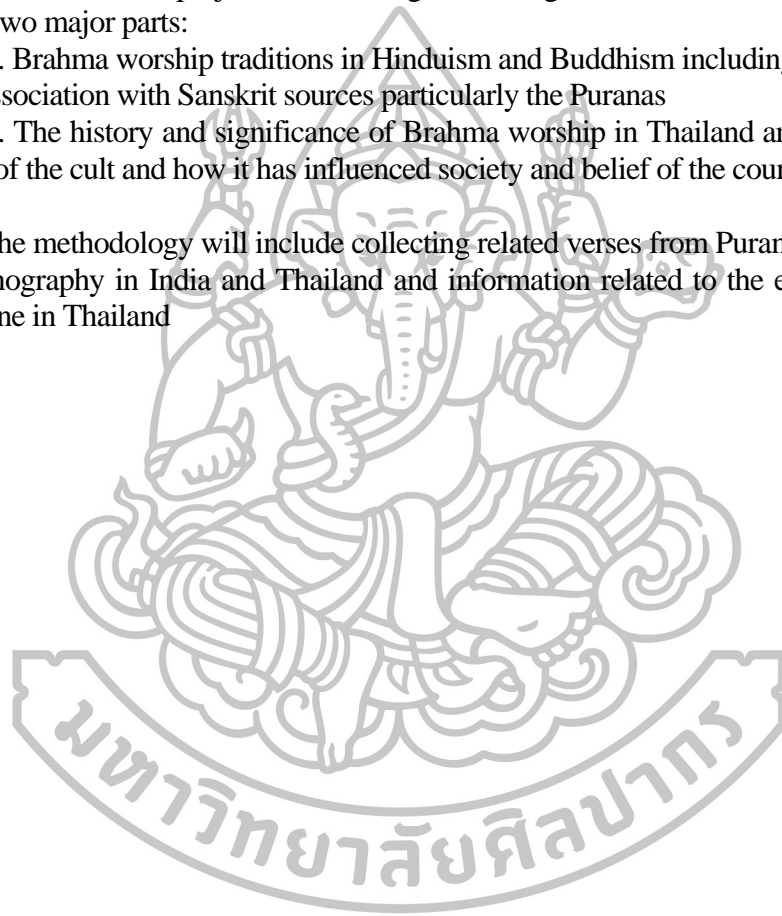
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WORSHIP

SARAN SUEBSANTIWONGSE: A CRITICAL STUDY OF BRAHMA
WORSHIP IN THAILAND WITH REFERENCE TO RELIGIONS, ICONOGRAPHY
AND THE MODERN CULT. INDEPENDENT STUDY ADVISOR: ASST. PROF.
CHAINARONG KLINNOI, Ph.D. 47 pp.

The aim of this project is to investigate the origin and the rise of Brahma cult in Thailand in two major parts:

1. Brahma worship traditions in Hinduism and Buddhism including iconography in India in association with Sanskrit sources particularly the Puranas
2. The history and significance of Brahma worship in Thailand and the modern phenomena of the cult and how it has influenced society and belief of the country

The methodology will include collecting related verses from Puranas, pictures of Brahma iconography in India and Thailand and information related to the erection of the Erawan Shrine in Thailand



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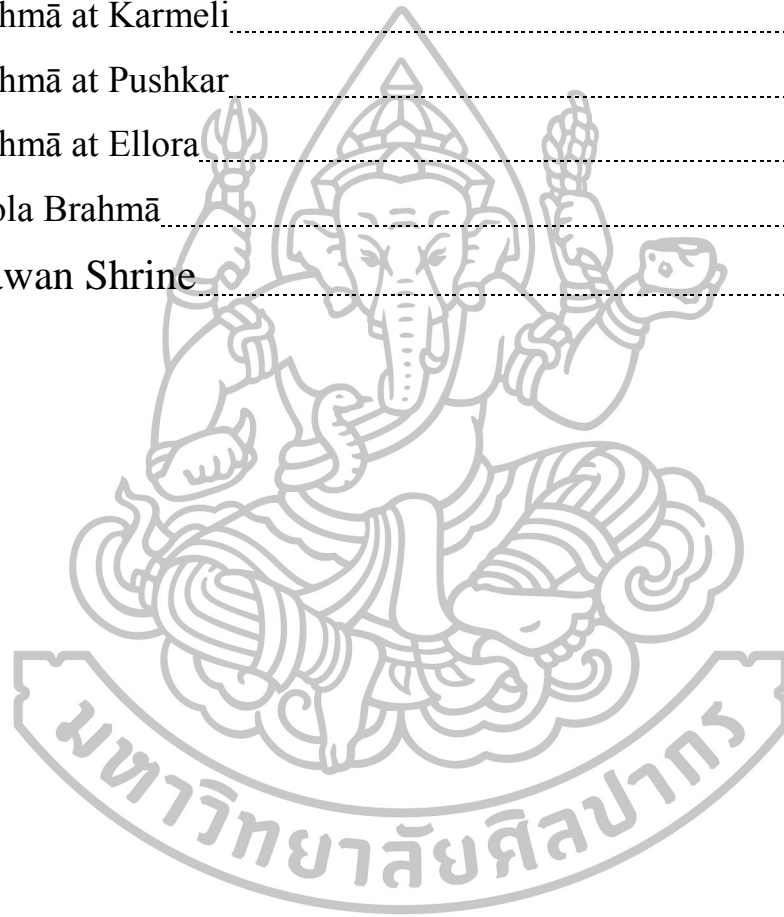
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Chapter I

Introduction

1. Statement and Significance of the Problems

1.1 Background

Amidst the thick smoke of incense, a herd of wooden elephants and a myriad of garlands of bright marigolds, a golden *murti* of Brahmā, the creator, sits majestically in a tiny open air shrine, dwarfed by the presence of Bangkok's premier five-star hotels, shopping malls and sky rises. This is undoubtedly one of Bangkok's most popular destinations, drawing in thousands of visitors from around the world who throng to the shrine each day to make their offerings of fruits, flowers, animal replicas and some also opt to sponsor the awaiting dance troupe to perform for the deity's entertainment.

Despite the popularity of the deity, who is said to easily grant all kinds of boons to his faithful devotees from passing exams to winning lotteries, the origin of the worship of this God still remains unclear. He is definitely an Indian God, whose homeland sparingly has him worshipped; there are probably only a handful of temples dedicated to him in India such the famous Pushkar Temple in Rajasthan and the Khed-Brahmā Temple in Gujarat.

It is widely accepted that Thailand has been extensively influenced by the Brahmin religion of India and ancient Khmer for thousands of years. The Thais have adopted countless of Indian and Khmer customs and incorporated the worship of their deities into its predominant religion of Buddhism, however, the active worship of Brahma as a *pradhana* deity did not exist in either civilizations, so how did the seemingly popular worship of Brahmā originate in Thailand?

Hence the aim of this project is to investigate the origin and the rise of the Brahma cult in Thailand in two major parts.

The first part will cover the origin of Brahmā worship at large including the reasons why the deity is not worshipped in India according to Sanskrit sources from various Puranas.

Subsequently, the history and the significance of Brahmā worship will be studied and compared with its Buddhist counterpart, which will also include a comparative analysis of the belief Buddhist and Hindu cosmologies regarding the status of Brahmā.


On top of this, the paper will cover aspects of art history and iconography of Brahmā images in India and Thailand and artistic inspirations from different regions.

The second part will be the studies of the modern phenomena of the Brahmā cult, starting with its origin and how it became viral throughout the kingdom as well as the methods used for worship in comparison to

the worship done in India.

Finally, how the Brahmā cult it has influenced the society, religion and the tourism industry of the country.

1.2 Goals

- 
1. To study Sanskrit original texts particularly Puranas regarding the origin of Brahmā and the decline of worship in India
 2. To study the history of Brahmā worship in Thailand
 3. To compare the traditions of Brahmā worship in Thailand and India especially in the field of cosmology in both Buddhism and Hinduism
 4. To study the evolution of iconography of Brahmā particularly in India and Thailand
 5. To study to rise of the modern day Brahmā cult and its influence on religions, economy and tourism

1.3 Hypothesis

Brahmā worship in Thailand certainly has its root in the Indian tradition but due to subsequent influences from preexisting traditions and those of other neighboring countries, the worship has probably acquired its own unique flavor and finally resulted in the development of the modern cult.

1.4 Methodology

1. Collect Sanskrit verses on Brahmā in various Puranas and make new translations
2. Collect pictures of Brahmā iconography found throughout India and Thailand analyze the source of its influence and evolution
3. Collect literature and texts regarding the building of the Brahmā shrine at Erawan and other notable shrines

1.5 Projected Results

1. A complete understanding of Brahmā from Puranic sources
2. A clearer picture on the origin of Brahmā worship in Thailand and its associated traditions
3. A clearer understanding of Hindu and Buddhist cosmologies regarding Brahmā
4. A satisfactory understand on the evolution of iconography of Brahmā both in India and Thailand
5. Achieve a better understanding on the mystery revolving the origin of the modern Brahmā cult in Thailand

Chapter II

Hindu Brahmā

In Hinduism, Brahmā is the deity responsible for the creation of the universe. He is one of the three god heads known as Trimurti, the two others being Śiva and Viṣṇu.

Although Brahmā is mentioned quite extensively in all Hindu texts spanning from Vedic to post-Vedic literature that also include epics and *kāvya*s (poetry), his descriptions can be found predominantly in the Puranas.

While Brahmā is often credited as the creator of the universe and various beings in it, several Puranas describe him being born from a lotus emerging from the navel of the god Viṣṇu. Other Puranas suggest that he is born from Śiva or his aspects.

Brahmā, along with Viṣṇu and Śiva, is also viewed as a different form of Brahman or the Ultimate Reality who is formless.

Ichnographically, he has four faces, springing out into the four directions (Sullivan, 1999: 85-86). Brahmā is also known as *Svayambhu* (self-born) *Vāgīśa* (Lord of Speech) (Hitebeitel, 1999: 292), and the creator of the four Vedas: Rig, Yajur, Sāma and Atharva (Macdonell, 1972). Additionally, the deity is often identified with Prajāpati and Hiraṇyagarbha – the golden egg (Leeming 2009: 146) in the early Vedic literature.

Therefore this chapter on Brahmā as a deity in the Hindu religion will largely cover three areas namely the origins of Brahmā, Brahmā in Vedic literature and Brahmā in Puranic literature,

1. The Origins of Brahmā

The origins of Brahmā are uncertain largely due to the fact that several related words such as Brahman, and priest (Brahmin) are also found in the Vedic literature (Gonda, 1960: 212). The existence of a distinct deity named Brahmā is only evidenced in late Vedic texts.

A difference between spiritual concept of Brahman, and deity Brahmā, is that the former is gender neutral abstract metaphysical concept in Hinduism, while the latter is one of the many masculine gods in the Hindu pantheon. The spiritual concept of Brahman is definitely older, and some scholars suggest deity Brahmā may have emerged as a visual conception of the impersonal reality called Brahman.

In Sanskrit grammar, the noun stem *brahman* forms two distinct nouns. One is a neuter noun *brahman*, whose nominative singular form is *brahma*; this noun has a sophisticated/abstract meaning (Medan, 1990: 79)

On the other hand, the other is a masculine noun Brahman, whose nominative singular form is Brahmā. This noun is used to refer to a person, and as the proper name of a deity Brahmā, the creator.

2. Brahmā in Vedic Literature

Brahmā is first mentioned along with Viṣṇu and Śiva is in the fifth Prapathaka of the Maitrayaniya Upaniṣad, composed in late 1st millennium BCE. The description of Brahmā is found in verse 5.1 and later expounded in verse 5.2 (Ernest, 1921: 459).

Furthermore, the Upaniṣad suggests that the Soul is Brahman, and this Ultimate Reality, Cosmic Universal or God resides within all beings. It also suggests that Brahma is one of the various divine manifestations of Brahman as follows:

"Thou art Brahmā, thou art Viṣṇu, thou art Rudra (Śiva), thou art Agni, Varuna, Vayu, Indra, thou art All."

In verse 5.2 Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva are grouped into the *guṇa* theory, or qualities that can be found in all living beings. This chapter of the Maitri Upanishad points out that the universe emerged from darkness (*Tamas*), first as passion characterized by actions (*Rajas*), which then refined and transformed into purity and goodness (*Sattva*) (Muller, 1921: 303-304) Of these three qualities, Rajas is then assigned to Brahmā as follows:

"Now then, that part of him which belongs to Tamas, that, O students of sacred knowledge (Brahmacharins), is this Rudra.

That part of him which belongs to Rajas, that O students of sacred knowledge, is this Brahma.

That part of him which belongs to Sattva, that O students of

sacred knowledge, is this Viṣṇu.

Verily, that One became threefold, became eightfold, elevenfold, twelvefold, into infinite fold.

This Being (neuter) entered all beings, he became the overlord of all beings.

That is the Atman (Soul, Self) within and without – yea, within and without !

— *Maitri Upanishad 5.2*

Additionally, Brahmā is also closely associated with Prajāpati, who is a Vedic deity presiding over procreation, and the protection of life.

In the Rgveda, he is mentioned as Dakṣa in HiraṇyagarbhaSūkta as the creator and as aspect of Viśvakarma, the divine architect and who ranks above all the other Vedic deities.

Later Vedic commentaries, nevertheless, identify Prajāpati or Brahmā with the creator referred to in the Nāsadiya Sūkta of the Rigveda, suggesting that he is the single creator deity predating all other gods (verse 8: "He is the God of gods, and none beside him.") (Macdonell, 1972).

3. Brahmā in Puranic Literature

There are several stories and descriptions on Brahmā as a deity in many Puranas. These include *Sarga* (primary creation of universe) and *Visarga*

(secondary creation), ideas related to the Indian thought that there are two levels of reality, one primary that is unchanging (metaphysical) and other secondary that is always changing (empirical), and that all observed reality of the latter is in an endless repeating cycle of existence, that cosmos and life we experience is continually created, evolved, dissolved and then re-created (Pinchtman, 1994: 122).

According to several Puranas, Brahmā is not the primary creator and is born from a lotus emerging from the navel of Viṣṇu who is considered as the primary creator. Nevertheless, Brahmā creates all the forms in the universe, but not the primordial universe itself.

In contrast, the Śiva-related Puranas describe Brahmā and Vishnu by Śiva and Parvatī. And in other places, Brahmā was born from Rudra. Thus in most Puranic texts, Brahmā's creative activity depends on the presence and power of a higher god (Frazier, 2011: 72)

In the Bhagavata Purana, Brahmā is portrayed several times as the one who rises from the "Ocean of Causes". The myth also describes the deity as being drowsy, errs and is temporarily incompetent as he puts together the universe (Anderson, 1967). He then becomes aware of his confusion and drowsiness, meditates as an ascetic, then realizes Viṣṇu in his heart, sees the beginning and end of universe, and then his creative powers are revived.

Furthermore, the Puranas also describe Brahmā as the deity that created time. They correlate human time to Brahmā's time, such as a mahākālpa

being a large cosmic period, correlating to one day and one night in Brahmā's existence (Frazier, 2011: 72)

For instance, the four *yugas* (Satya, Treta, Dvārpara and Kali yugas) comprise one day of Brahmā, and the same number comprise one night. Brahmā lives one hundred of these “years” and then dies. These "hundred years" total 311 trillion 40 billion (311,040,000,000,000) earth years (Thomas, 1966: 4)

The stories about Brahmā in various Puranas, nonetheless, are diverse and inconsistent. In Skanda Purana, for example, goddess Parvatī is called the "mother of the universe", and she is credited with creating Brahmā, gods and the three worlds. She is the one, states Skanda Purana, who combined the three Gunas - *Sattva*, *Rajas* and *Tamas* - into matter (*Prakṛti*) to create the empirically observed world (Gier, 1997)

Echoing the Vedic texts, the Srimadbhagavatam also refers to Brahmā as Prajāpati and further mentions a number Prajāpatis which are elected democratically. At first, Brahmā was elected as Prajāpati (in the west of Aryavrat or Bharta), Viṣṇu was then elected democratically as Prajāpati (in the North of Aryavarta or Bharta) by all the Rishis and subjects of that era and sat on the throne of Prajāpati. Thereafter, Śankara (in the South of Aryavrat or Bharta) or Rudras were elected as Prajāpatis (Bailey, 1983: 157). In all there are about 26 Prajāpatis.

To sum up, Brahmā has a root in the Vedic religion and is associated with the Rgvedic deity Prajāpati, but he is predominantly mentioned in the

Puranic literature,

Due to the rise of other deities particularly Śiva and Viṣṇu for whom various Puranas such as Śiva Purana and Bhagavata Purana glorify as being more superior than Brahmā, the popularity of the latter then gradually and subsequently waned.



Chapter III

Buddhist Brahmā

In Buddhism, Brahmā is the name for a type of exalted being (deva), of which there are several in the Buddhist system of cosmology, in contrast to the Vedic literature of which Brahmā is the sole creator of the universe. Hence the two are distinct.

The ideas of multiple Brahmās, however, are somewhat similar to the multiple numbers of Prajāpatis found in the post-Vedic literature.

Additionally, the Buddha described the Hindu Brahmā as a misunderstanding, or mistaken remembrance, of one or more of the Buddhist Brahmās, as explained in the Brahmajāla-sutta.

There is no similarity between the Buddhist Brahmās and the Hindu conception of Brahman whatsoever (Kalupahana, 1975: 20)

Brahmās in Buddhism can be described as divine beings in different of heavens in Buddhist Cosmology both with forms and formless and can be largely grouped as follows:

1. Divine beings in the Ārūpyadhātu or the Rūpadhātu
2. Divine beings in any of the nine lowest worlds of the Rūpadhātu, from Śubhakarṣna to Brahmāpāriṣadya.
3. Divine beings in any of the three lowest worlds of the

Rūpadhātu

4. Mahābrahmā, one of the highest deities of all groups.

Having established the notion of Brahmā in Buddhism, this chapter will cover the various types of Brahmās as mentioned in the Buddhist cosmology which include Brahmās in both form and formless realms and Brahmās that are mentioned by names in various Buddhist-Pali literature.

1. Brahmās in Formless Realm (Ārūpyadhātu)

The Ārūpyadhātu or Arūpaloka is the "Formless realm" and the highest realm in Buddhist cosmology. This realm belongs to the divine beings who have attained and remained in the Four Formless Absorptions (catuḥ-samāpatti) of the arūpadhyānas in a previous life and now enjoy the fruits (vipāka) of the good karma as a result (Harvey, 1995: 234). They may attain nirvana directly from this realm without having to be reborn again.

There are four types of Ārūpyadhātu devas which are also referred to as formless Brahmās:

1. Naivasamjñānāsamjñāyatana or Nevasaññānāsaññāyatana ("Sphere of neither perception nor non-perception"). In this sphere, the formless beings have attained the highest state where they do not engage in "perception" (samjñā, recognition of particulars by their marks) but are not totally unconscious either.

2. Ākiṃcanyāyatana or Ākiñcaññāyatana ("Sphere of Nothingness"). The formless beings in this realm dwell contemplating upon the emptiness which is still considered to be a subtle form of perception.
3. Vijñānānantyāyatana or Viññāṇāṇcāyatana ("Sphere of Infinite Consciousness"). Here, the formless beings are meditating on their all pervasive consciousness (vijñāna).
4. Ākāśānantyāyatana or Ākāśāṇcāyatana ("Sphere of Infinite Space"). In this sphere formless beings are meditating upon the infinite and pervasive space known as ākāśa.

2. Brahmās in Form Realm (Rūpadhātu)

The Rūpadhātu is the realm where divine beings have forms. The ones dwell in the upper four realms are referred to as Brahmās by names though beings in the lower realms are also still considered as Brahmās. They are said to have bodies composed of a subtle substance, but still remain invisible to the inhabitants of the lower realms. According to the Janavasabha-sutta, when a Brahmā from the Rūpadhātu realm wishes to visit a deva of the Trāyastriṃśa heaven (in the Kāmadhātu realm), he has to assume a "grosser form" in order to be visible to them. There are 17-22 Rūpadhātu in Buddhism texts, the most common number is 16 (Nakamura, 1990: 137) as follows:

1. Peerless devas (akanittha deva)
2. Clear-sighted devas (sudassi deva)
3. Beautiful devas (sudassa deva)

4. Untroubled devas (atappa deva)
5. Devas not Falling Away (aviha deva)
6. Very Fruitful devas (vehapphala deva)
7. Devas of Refulgent Glory (subhakinna deva)
8. Devas of Unbounded Glory (appamanasubha deva)
9. Devas of Limited Glory (parittasubha deva)
10. Devas of Streaming Radiance (abhassara deva)
11. Devas of Unbounded Radiance (appamanabha deva)
12. Devas of Limited Radiance (parittabha deva)
13. Great Brahmā (MahāBrahmā)
14. Ministers of Brahmā (brahmā-purohita deva)
15. Retinue of Brahmā (brahmā-parisajja deva)

The beings of the Rūpadhātu are not subject to the sensations of pleasure and pain, or governed by desires for things pleasing to the senses, as the beings of the Kāmadhātu are. Moreover, the bodies of Form realm beings do not have sexual distinctions (Werner, 1994: 74).

3. Personalized Brahmās

A few Brahmās are particularly mentioned by names in the Buddhist texts, but are somewhat ambiguous and there is often some uncertainty about how to place these individuals within the cosmological context. In terms of the texts where they appear, they either are presented as figures of authority or as characters with an exaggerated sense of their own importance (Bailey, 1983: 155)

3.1 Baka Brahmā

BakaBrahmā is mentioned in the Majjhima Nikāya, Bakabrahmā-sutta and the Brahmanimantanika-sutta. He is a deity who believed that his world is permanent and without decay and that therefore there are no higher worlds than his.

The Buddha refutes Baka Brahmā's claims and taught him the concept of *anicca* or impermanence, but he was not convinced by the Buddha's statement and tested the Buddha by disappearing from his presence, but failed. In turn, the Buddha showed his superiority by going into a heightened state known as *nibbanic* where there is no materiality or mentality. Baka Brahmā then realized that the Buddha is more superior and became his disciple.

3.2 Brahmā Sahampati

Brahmā Sahāmpati is mentioned in the Saṃyutta Nikāya where he is described as the most senior of the Mahābrahmās and was the deity who first visited the Buddha after his enlightenment.

Afterwards, when the Buddha was meditating at Uruvelā, he encouraged Brahmā Sahampati to teach the Dharma to humans. According to some commentaries he was an anāgāmi (non-returner) (Jootla, 2000) and one of the Suddhāvāsa (Pure Abodes) deities.

Additionally, the Saṃyutta Nikāya also contains verses describing Brahmā Sahampati attending to the Buddha at his *parinirvaṇa* (death). A similar verse of the same incident also appears in the Mahāparinibbānasutta. Therefore, of all the Brahmās, Brahmā Sahampati seems to have been associated with the Buddha more than any other Brahmās.

3.3 Brahmā Sanatkumāra

Brahmā Sanatkumāra (“Ever-young”) is mentioned in the Janavasabhasutta, where he is described as having created himself perceptible to the less subtle senses of Śakra (Indra) and the gods of Trāyastriṃśa and advised them to follow the precepts and practices of the Buddha and its merits.

3.4 Mahābrahmā

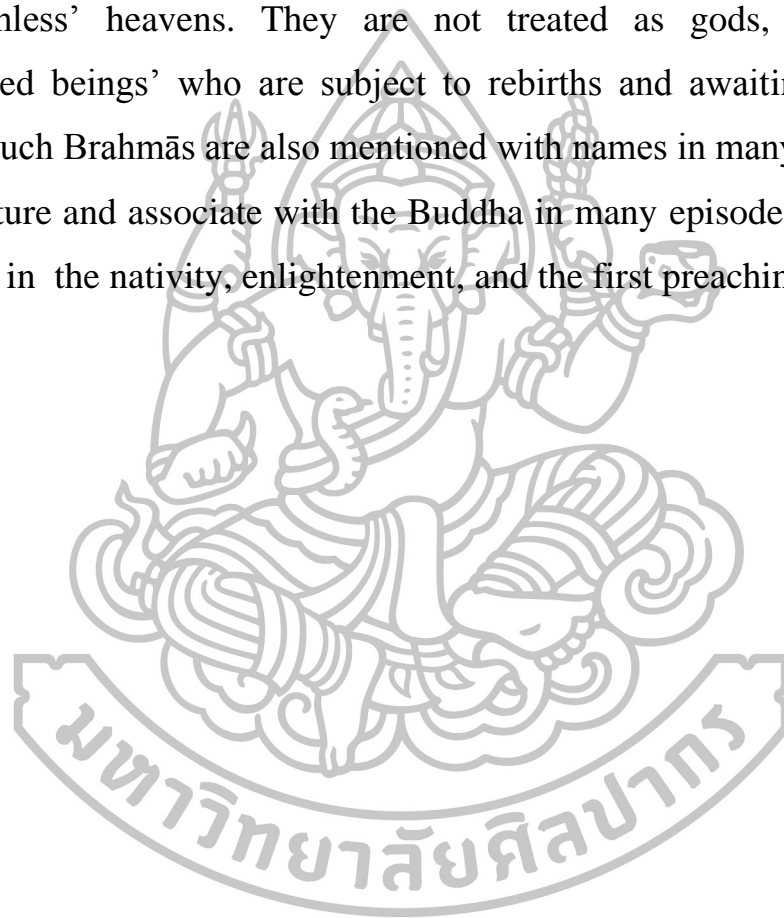
Mahābrahmā appears in several Palisuttas which refer them to deities belonging to the third world of the Rūpadhātu.

According to the Brahmajāla-sutta, a Mahābrahmā is a being from the Ābhāsvara spheres who is reborn into a lower world through exhaustion of his merits and imagines himself to have come into existence without cause (Warder, 1998: 80).

In the Kevaddha-sutta, a Mahābrahmā is unable to answer a philosophical question addressed to him by a monk, but conceals this fact from the

devas of his retinue so as not to lose face in front of them (Jootla, 1997: 126).

In summary, Buddhist Brahmās are distinct from its Hindu counterpart. They are numerous in number and occupy different levels of both ‘form’ and ‘formless’ heavens. They are not treated as gods, but rather ‘enlightened beings’ who are subject to rebirths and awaiting nirvaṇa. Many of such Brahmās are also mentioned with names in many Buddhist-Pali literature and associate with the Buddha in many episodes of his life especially in the nativity, enlightenment, and the first preaching scenes.



Chapter IV

Brahmā Temples and Iconography of India

As discussed in Chapter II, that Brahmā as the creator has been linked to having born from the navel of Viṣṇu and having been subdued by Śiva in various mythologies and which most likely contributed in the decline of the deity's worship. Therefore this is probably why only a handful of temples dedicated to Brahmā as *pradhana devata* (main deity) are found.

Beside the famous Pushkar Temple, most Brahmā temples are concentrated in the state of Maharashtra and Gujarat such as the temples at Sopara, Brahmā-Karmeli and Khed-Brahmā.

However, Brahmā shrines as *parivāra devatas* (periphery deities) are found in numerous especially in the outside niches in the Śiva temples in the southern Indian states of Tamilnadu, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. This was probably due to the numerous descriptions and stories of Brahma in the Śiva Purana that portray the deity as being subversive to Śiva such as the mythology of the Lingodbhava Murti.

This chapter outlines prominent Brahmā temples found throughout India as well as his images as both *pradhana* and *parivāra devata* in various states.

1. Brahmā Temples

Brahmā temples are relatively few in number. Most are actually situated near the west coast of India particularly in Maharashtra and Gujarat.

Brahmā cult was probably active at some point this region but the Puranas, perhaps under sectarian editing, maligned Brahmā (Frawley, 1991: 123) as seen in such verses:

“By the powers which I have obtained by the performance of tapas, may Brahma never be worshipped in temple or sacred place, except one day in each year. . . . And, Indra, since thou didst bring that milkmaid to Brahma, thou shalt be bound in chains by thine enemies, and confined in a strange country; and thy city and station shall be occupied by thine enemies.”

– *SkandaPurana*

“At the proud words of Brahma, Śiva was incensed; and from his anger sprang into existence a terrific form (Bhairava), whom he thus addressed: 'Chastise this lotus-born!' No sooner did Bhairava receive this order, than instantly he cut off the head of Brahmā with the thumb of his left hand. That member which had committed the fault received punishment; and therefore Brahmā was deprived of his fifth head.”

– *ŚivaPurana*

“When brought before Śiva, the flower falsely testified that Brahma had seen the end. Lord Shiva became furious at this lie. He then cursed Brahma that He would never be worshipped by any human being”

– ŚivaPurana

Hence few temples of Brahmās survived today and were constructed around 11-12th century AD.

One of the most prominent temples is the Pushkar Temple in Rajasthan while the other being the Khed-Brahmā temple in Gujarat.

The Khed-Brahmā temple is facing east and oblong in shape. Stylistically, it could belong to the 12th century.

The officiating priests in this temple belong to the Sukla Yajurveda branch and referred to themselves as ‘*audicha*’ Brahmins, a term denoting to the northern region.

Moreover, the temple also contains three images of Brahmā in all three principle shrines, yet the *vāhanas* for each is different. It is a horse on the north side, a bull on the west and Garuda on the south. Certainly, it was an attempt to connect the Brahmā with Surya, Śiva and Viṣṇu respectively.

Perhaps, the imagery of Brahmā at Khed-Brahmā temple with different *vāhanas* may indicate that Surya, Siva and Vishnu were considered as forms of Brahmā by the devotees of Brahmā only.

Another well known temple dedicated to Brahmā is at Delmal in Mehasana district. The main deity is accompanied by his wife Savitri in the principle shrine in the western direction. However, this temple was likely dedicated to Viṣṇu and Śiva as well, as the other two subsidiary niches facing north and east were dedicated to Viṣṇu and Śiva respectively.

In Goa, Brahmā is still worshipped in a small village bearing the deity's name of Brahmā-Karmali in Sattari district near Valpoi. The statue is life size and stands on a large lotus pedestal with an elaborate *parikara*.

Nevertheless, this was not the deity's original position. The image was moved from Carambolim when the Portuguese first arrived and started destroying images of Hindu gods.

This fact proved that the temple was in worship since the 5th century AD, before the first arrival of the Portuguese in the 6th century AD.

In the state of Maharashtra, Brahmā as a deity was given an importance in the 11th century AD when Ambarnath Śiva Temple was constructed near Kalya and which consists of several Brahma images in all the levels of the Śikhara starting from the *pitha*, *jangha*, *bhadra*, and *kaili* (Reddy, 2010: 64) on the outside and on many prominent pillars inside the temple.

Hence, this was a proof that Brahma worship was still active in the 11th century AD.

2. Brahmā Iconography

Very much like the case of Brahmā temples, Brahmā images are also relatively fewer in number when compared to the number of images of other deities scattered throughout India, particularly those of Śiva, Viṣṇu, Devī and Gaṇapati.

Although Brahmā is initially depicted with one head and two arms in ancient India time, today, nevertheless, he is traditionally depicted with four faces and four arms with each face representing each Veda and pointing to four directions. In one hand he holds the sacred texts of Vedas, in second he holds a mala (rosary beads) symbolizing time, in third he holds a ladle symbolizing means to feed sacrificial fire, and in fourth a utensil with water symbolizing the means where all creation emanates from.

Moreover, he is often depicted with a white beard, implying his sage like experience. He sits on lotus, dressed in white (or red, pink), with his vehicle (*vāhana*) – hamsa, a swan or goose nearby (Morgan, 1996: 74). The forms of images, however, differ from each manual of constructing the *murtis*.

2.1 Manasara-Silpaśāstra

A Sanskrit treatise for making idols and temples, Manasara-Silpaśāstra states that Brahmā statue should be golden in color (Acharya, 2001: 50). The text also prescribes that the statue must consist of four faces and four arms, depicted with *jatamukuta* (matted hair of an ascetic), and wears a crown. Two of his hands should be in refuge granting and show *varadamudra*, while he should be shown with *kundika* (water pot), *māla* (rosary), a small and a large *sruk-sruva* (laddles used in yajna ceremonies). The text details the different proportions of the *murti*, describes the ornaments, and suggests that the idol wear *chira* (bark strip) as lower garment, and either be alone or be accompanied with Sarasvatī on his right and Savitrī on his left.

2.2 Mayamatam

According to Mayamatam, a classical Sanskrit treatise on architecture and iconography which typical Brahmā iconography is based on, the deity is portrayed as follows:

“Brahmā has four faces and four arms. His complexion is of pure gold and the hair is braided in a shaped like a crown. He wears pendants, armlets and a necklace. A gazelle skin covers his upper body diagonally, hanging down from the left shoulder in the upavīta mode.

His things are tied with muñjagrass, his vestment is white in color. He also holds a prayer rosary, kuśa grass, water-pot, a

ladle and a pot of ghee, or else his lower two hands are showing abhaya and varada mudras.

Savitri is on his right and Bhāratī on his left”

The components of a Brahmā iconography prescribed in Mayamatam can be listed as follows:

1. Four faces
2. Four hands
3. Kuśa grass
4. Kamadalu (water pot)
5. Mālā (rosary)
6. Sruk (ladle)
7. Pot of ghee
8. Gazelle skin
9. White angavastra
10. Muñja grass
11. Varada mudra
12. Abhaya mudra
13. Armlets
14. Necklace

It is interesting to note that none of the existing images in temples match exactly the descriptions in Mayamatam. But several major components do match especially the four faces and hands. This may be due to the fact that they are the most prominent features. Smaller details such as the kuśa grass and muñja grass around the thighs might have been artistically

challenging for the artists to carve them on the stone.

2.3 Various Brahmā Images in India

Initially, however, Brahmā images contain only a single head and two arms and gradually changed to an older figure with four heads, four arms, beard and moustache and wearing a lot of jewelries.

This change is indicative of the myth changing slowly in different regions (Banerjea, 1974: 45) where beliefs were varied.

Buddhist Pali canons only mention Brahma and Indra, and not Siva or Vishnu, pointing that Brahma was widely worshipped and perhaps considered more important in India in the time before Christ. The image of Brahmā and Indra attending on the Buddha are numerous especially in the Gandhara period (Fig. 1).

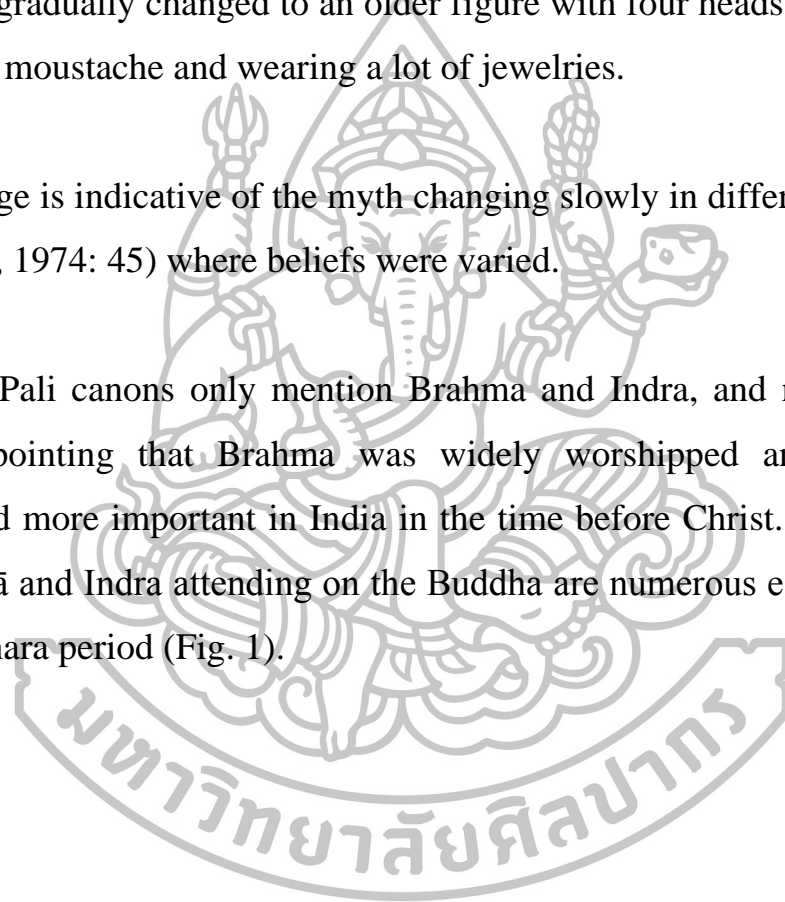




Figure 1 : Buddha with Buddhist Brahmā and Indra in Gandhara Art

The image in Figure 1 is dated to 1st century AD and presents Brahmā as an ascetic with a beard, with a single head and two hands and having no ornaments.

In the subsequent Gupta period, there was a substantial change in the iconography of Brahmā, as seen from four headed images (Nagar, 1998: 153). Cousens also mentions an early metal image dug up in the field in the Sind. It shows four faces without beard and only two arms thus indicating that it is an early image.

The next transformation is an image of Brahmā from Kashmir (circa 7th century AD) shows a four armed Brahmā with a single head, with no beard or moustache and accompanied by four figures, most likely representing the four Vedas as one them is a horse headed figure (Sāma Veda).

On the other hand, another 7th century AD broken image of Brahmā (Fig. 2) also from Kashmir at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford shows the deity with two arms with no beard or moustache, but the image has four heads symbolizing the four Vedas as are similarly represented by individual figures in the previous example.



Figure 2 : Two armed Brahmā at Ashmolean Museum

The 11th century images of Brahmā from Nagara in Gujarat show the deity accompanied by consorts and sages with *agnikuṇḍa*, a symbol which became closely associated with the deity in later period.

In Maharashtra, two large images of Brahmā exist. One was recovered from a lake in Thane district in 1995. It is carved in a circular shape and has an elaborate *parikara* suggesting that this was an image belonging to a cult (Kramrisch, 1983: 202).

All four faces have beard and four arms, but unfortunately they are broken from elbows and therefore the objects in the image's hands could not be identified.

Another Brahmā statue (Fig. 3) at Sopara, Maharashtra, is similar to the two found in the same state. The statue, however, is not entirely broken and one hand shows *varadamudra*, and holds *sruk* a book and *ajyasthali* in the others. The deity has four faces with three only shown and only the central face contains a beard. Additionally, an antelope skin is seen draping over his left shoulder, a symbol which also became closely associated with the god in subsequent periods (Champakalakshmi, 1981: 155-156).



Figure 3 : Life-size Brahmā at Sopara, Maharashtra

The image of Brahmā at Brahmā-Karmali(Fig. 4) in Goa is still in worship today. It stands on a circular pedestal and the central face is bearded. There is no antelope skin, but the image is finely decorated with other ornaments. The lower right hand shows *aksa-varada mudra* while the upper right holds a *sruva*, upper left, a book and lower left, an *ajyasthali*. Furthermore, this image wears a *jatamukuta*, a typical hair

style of an ascetic and which also became associated particularly with Brahmā and Śiva images. The deity is also accompanied by two consorts on both side and hold a lotus in each of their hands.



Figure 4 : Brahmā at Karmeli

Similarly, another image of Brahmā with consort at Hingalajagrah (11th century AD) at the Indore Museum shows both deities holding a lotus which symbolizes creation and the female *prakṛti* as well (Hume, 1921, 6-7).

On the other hand, Pushkar (Fig. 5), the most famous Brahmā temple in India is the newest (17th century AD) out of the ones already mentioned.



Figure 5 : Brahmā at Pushkar

The Brahmā obviously has four faces and four hands, but the smaller details are absent. Another similarity to the Mayamatam is the presence of one of his wives, which is likely to be Savitrī.

Other Brahmā images in India can also be found in large number, but only as *parivāra devata* (supporting deities) and are mostly found in outside niches. The oldest images in this group are at the Ellora Caves in Maharashtra.

The Brahmā images at Ellora (Fig. 6) all have four faces and four hands. The lower hands mostly show *varada mudra* and *abhaya mudra* and are seated in *vīrāsana*. The hair on all images is fashioned in the *jatamakuṭa* style signifying that he is a sage. He also wears a necklace and other jewels as described in Mayamatam.



Figure 6 : Brahmā at Ellora

Chola Brahmās (Fig. 7) are also found in most Śiva temples in Tamilnadu. They are either seated in *padmāsana* or standing. They always have four faces and four hands. The upper hands mostly hold akṣaramālā and a lotus flower. Lotus flower is not mentioned in Mayamatam. But the lower hands are either kept in *dhyanamudra* or *varada* and *abhaya mudras*.

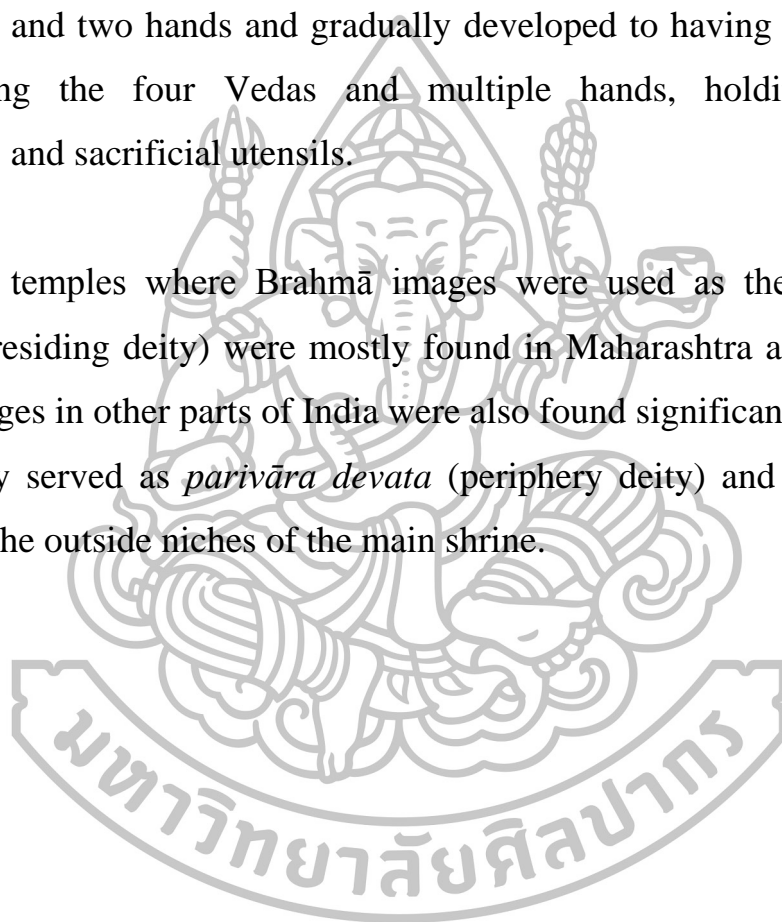


Figure 7 : Chola Brahmā

Having studied the development of Brahmā iconographies in India, it is conclusive that images of Brahmā are much fewer in numbers comparing to other deities.

Brahmā images are found throughout India. Initially the images contain two heads and two hands and gradually developed to having four heads, representing the four Vedas and multiple hands, holding several ornaments and sacrificial utensils.

However, temples where Brahmā images were used as the *pradhana devata* (presiding deity) were mostly found in Maharashtra and Gujarat. Other images in other parts of India were also found significantly but they are mainly served as *parivāra devata* (periphery deity) and are mostly found on the outside niches of the main shrine.



Chapter V

Brahmā Worship in Thailand

Though Thailand is predominantly a Buddhist country, Hindu deities and some mythological animals are represented and worshipped in a fairly widespread manner (Majpuria, 1993, 8) throughout its the history.

Nonetheless, little evidence shows the existence of the cult of Brahmā worship in Thailand prior to the 20th century except for a few iconographies of the neighboring Khmer kingdom.

Brahmā as a Hindu deity, however, probably came to Thailand along with other deities with the South Indian Brahmins in the 10th century AD, but like Brahma's fate in India, the worship of the deity gradually declined and eventually disappeared, perhaps also due to the spread of Buddhism in the region.

And since Thailand is a Buddhist country with a rich Brahmanism tradition, the two religions are closely knitted with almost no distinction. Hence, Brahmā worship is embraced by the followers of both religions and which eventually gave rise to the confusion as to what religion the Thai Brahmā actually belongs to.

On the contrary, in the present day while Brahmā worship is nearly completely disappeared in India, the deity's worship in Thailand is a

phenomena; every commercial and governmental building has a Brahmā and which are venerated with offerings on a daily basis.

The phenomena is indeed interesting for its spans across Thailand's religious, cultural and social aspects of the society.

1. 20TH Century Brahma: The Erawan Shrine

The Erawan Shrine (Fig. 8) was originally built in 1956 to ward off misfortunes that occurred during the construction of Thailand's first five stars hotel known as the Erawan Hotel at the Rajprasong intersection (Majpuria, 1993: 6).



Figure 8 : Erawan Shrine

After several incidents ranging from injured construction workers to the sinking of a ship carrying marble for the hotel, a Royal astrologer by the name of Luang Suvicharn Vaidyawas consulted.

Since the hotel was to be located at an intersection and to be named after the elephant *vāhana* of Indra in Hindu mythology, the astrologer determined that the site was not auspicious and suggested that a Brahmā temple be built on the site (Tossapol, 2549: 22-23). Hence, a team of artists from the fine arts department led by Ravi Chomsiri designed a statue and the misfortunes suddenly ended.

Although the original Erawan Hotel was demolished in 1987, the shrine still exists and remains an important place of pilgrimage for many people particularly those in need of some material assistance. Those making a wish from the statue should ideally come between 7am and 8am, or 7pm and 8pm, and should offer a specific list of items that includes candles, incense, sugar cane or bananas, all of which are almost exclusively given in multiples of seven or nine (Kingmanee, 2551: 37). Particularly popular are teak elephants, with money from the sale of these items donated to a charity run by the current hotel, the Grand Hyatt Erawan. And as the tourist brochures depict, it is also possible to charter a classical Thai dance, often done as a way of giving thanks if a wish is granted.

2. Perception of Worshippers

Due to a variety of beliefs in the modern Thai society and the lack of proper understanding in differentiating Brahmā worship tradition in either

Buddhism or Hinduism, there are three major perceptions.

2.1 Brahmā as a Hindu deity

This is the most common understanding for both Thais and foreigners alike as the statue is fashioned very similar to the traditional Hindu images in India as mentioned in previous chapter.

Like Hindu Brahmā in India the Erawan Brahmā also has four faces pointing out into four cardinal directions. However, the image contains six arms instead of four, holding a mala, a staff, a cakra, a śankha, a mirror and a water pot.

The major differences are the staff, cakra and śankha as they are normally attributed to the weapons on Viṣṇu (Jansen, 1993: 24).

2.2 Brahmā as a Buddhist deity

A small number of people believe that this image is one of the Buddhist Brahmā. This is largely due to the facts that style of the image is obviously Hindu in nature. On the contrary, as most of the worshippers are Buddhist, they have a strong believe that the deity is subservient to the Buddha and in a position somewhat like a Bodhisattva (Majpuria, 1993: 32) in a Mahāyāna tradition such as Lokeśvara or Kwan-yin which has already existed in Thailand long before the 20th century Brahmā image.

2.3 Brahmā as the incarnation of a past king

Luang Suvicharn Vaidya, the astrologer who suggested the erection of the shrine believed that King Pinklao was re-born in one of the Brahmā heavens (Tanmahapran, 2553). Therefore, when the misfortunes occurred at the Rajprasong intersection, he saw it as an appropriate measure to propitiate a Thai king whom he believed to be now a Brahmā to remediate the situation by building a Brahmā statue to represent his new heavenly body.

The problem most likely occurred during the conceptualization of the image by the Fine Arts Department who created the Brahmā statue in a Hindu style as a statue of Buddhist Brahmā/incarnation of a Thai King has never been done before.

However, this fact was not made known publicly at first and in due course it was forgotten totally. Thus public's opinion varies and became personalized just as any other spiritual matters.

Chapter VI

Conclusion and Suggestions

The critical study of Brahmā worship in Thailand with reference to religions, iconography and the modern cult can be summarized as follows:

Brahmā as a god and creator existed since the Vedic time and was known as Prajāpati in the Rgveda and became known in the present form during the Puranic period.

Later in the Buddhist period, Brahmā is regarded as a being in the heavens that could be attained by any being who has accumulated enough merits. Hence Buddhist Brahmā are numerous in number.

Brahmā never became a popular deity perhaps he stands for the aspect of the belief deemed too out of reach of the common people. For example, he is more associated with Vedic sacrifices rather than with the form of *bhakti* (devotional) worship as in Viṣṇu's case.

Though not as common as Śiva and Viṣṇu, Brahmā worship in India was active around 10th-11th century AD. This conclusion is mainly based on the images found which dated to that period.

Brahmā's iconography in India initially contains only one face and two arms. It is possible that the devotees of Brahmā modified the iconography

to contain multiple faces and arms, perhaps make the deity to seem more powerful by associating each of his face with each of the Veda and so on.

Another important contributor to the decline of Brahmā worship was likely the lack of organized religious order/sect like the Śaivas and the Vaiṣṇavas which on the contrary, established numerous *sampradayas* (sects) and in turn, gained many supports from the Kings and powerful patrons.

Politically, this enabled the Śaivas and Vaiṣṇavas to gain solidarity and strength to prevent attacks from other *sampradayas*. Additionally, their strength probably contributed to further decline of the Brahmā cult in India.

In Thailand, on the other hand, the phenomena of Brahmā worship started only in the 20th century, though a few images of the deity were found in the country through the Khmer influence, but like most places India, they were not worshipped as a *pradhana* deity

The Erawan Shrine was built to ward off bad luck in completing a five-star hotel. The advisor for the shrine, Luang Suvicharn, intended the deity of the shrine to represent a soul of the past king - King Pinklao, but due to the failed attempt of the artists to create an image of the king whom is believed to attained a *Brahmāhood* according to the Buddhist cosmology, the iconographical nature of the deity was put in jeopardy as most Thais and foreigners believe the image to represent the Hindu Brahmā. This is probably due to the fact that the image was created very much similar to a

traditional Hindu image. Though there are other perceptions such as the deity is Buddhist or even a hybrid between Buddhism and Buddhism, nonetheless, they are both eclipsed by the perception that the Erawan Brahmā is largely a Hindu deity.

Suggestions

Having studied the origins and development of Brahmā in Hinduism and Buddhism and the deity's iconographical evolution in addition to the origins of the cult in modern Thailand, the researcher has several suggestions as follows:

1. The significance and origins of the worship of any deity must be studied and understood properly in order to establish a clear understanding in the minds of the worshippers thus providing them with the right knowledge
2. Artists must properly understand the evolution of any iconography and keep the knowledge in mind before making new ones with injections of his/her own imagination
3. Iconographies of Hindu deities are elaborately described in many ancient Sanskrit texts and perhaps artists should study these texts in order to get some insights into the traditional ways of making new idols. Misinterpretations of iconographies could likely result in the misunderstanding of the public as in the case demonstrated in this research

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