

An Analysis of the Roles of Sakka Devarāja (Sakka, King of Devas) in Recent Theravāda Buddhist Societies in South-East Asia

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ABSTRACT

The main objective of this article, which is a qualitative literature-based one, is to analyze the roles of Sakka Devarāja in recent Theravāda Buddhist societies in South-east Asia in terms of his textual history as Vedic and post-Vedic Indra and Buddhist Sakka. The research indicates that Sakka Devarāja is a persistent and influential figure who continues to manifest in Thailand, Myanmar, Laos and Cambodia. Moreover, his roles in these recent Buddhist societies can be well understood in terms of his historical and textual ‘mythical background’ as Indra and Sakka.

Keywords: Sakka Devarāja, deva, tavātimsa devaloka.

Introduction

Sakka Devarāja is a persistent and influential deva who continues to manifest in the Theravāda Buddhist lands of Thailand, Myanmar, Laos and Cambodia. He has performed various roles in recent Buddhist traditions around the region and in general he is regarded as being a symbol of leadership, kingship, morality, piety, patience, and hard-work.

In South-east Asian Buddhist countries, Sakka Devarāja is regarded as a symbol of leadership and good citizenship. He is also seen as an active heavenly figure who has strong associations with the departed Buddha; he is seen as an ambassador or representative of the Buddha and thus many people believe he can intercede in the affairs of gods and men.

The Historical Background of Sakka Devarāja in the Vedic and Post-Vedic Hindu traditions

We begin with an examination of the historical background of Sakka Devarāja in the Vedic and Post-Vedic Hindu traditions. Indra in the Vedas is respected as a king of the gods, warrior of the gods and the god of rain in the *Rg Veda*, which is an ancient Indian collection of hymns and prayers in the Sanskrit language that were dedicated to deities (deva). It is first of the four canonical ‘revealed’ (*śruti*) texts of Hinduism that collectively form the Vedas (PDH:87). Doniger observes that Indra’s broader nature can be traced back to proto-Indo world. (Doniger, 2005: 4466-4488). Indra is the prime recipient of hymns and prayers in the *Rg Veda*. One legend has it that Indra was born of a human mother and father (*Rg* 4.18). This is highly significant as he is then the only Brahman-Hindu god to be born of human parents. Furthermore, Indra’s birth was highly unusual (Doniger, 2005: 4466-4488).

In the Vedas, Indra and other devas exist in a hierarchical cosmos, one version of which is the three-world scheme (*trilokya*). Indra inhabits the realm of atmosphere or sky (Flood, 1996: 45), and has a celestial city, Amaravati, frequented by heavenly beings. The beings there do not suffer from pain, sadness or fear, and enjoy the sights and sounds of the singing and game-playing of the apsaras and their gandharva husbands (Hopkins, 1915: 140).

Indra goes by a variety of names in the Vedas. The names Indra, *Vāsava* and *Śakra*ⁱ ‘mighty one’ are used interchangeably in the oldest texts, and other names include Maghavan, Purendra and *Vṛtrahan* (*Rg*.1.32).

The characteristics of Indra are quite well described in the Vedas. He is a strong man with golden or red skin who drives a golden chariot and is a skilled horseman. (*Rg*.1.65)

He has a vajra, a white elephant, beautiful nymphs, holy cattle, and a wishing tree. Although he is a troubled god, he is a great warrior. He fights against and defeats the demonic enemies of the gods, the asuras. Indra is a powerful but less-than perfect god. He has various flaws, and when he regularly over-partakes in soma, he tends to be garrulous and boastful (EOH, p.419).ⁱⁱ

Indra performs a wide variety of roles in the Vedas. He loves and helps his worshippers, destroys enemies with his thunderbolt (vajra) (Doniger, 2005: 4466-4488) brings and dispenses rain, keeps rivers flowing (Rg.1.13. 1-2) and discovers and makes available soma (Rg. 4.26-27), which is like amṛta, the elixir of immortality (EOH: 25).

In the post Vedic-texts, Indra is portrayed as an often-drunk hedonistic deity. His importance declines, and he ends up a minor deity compared to Shiva, Viṣṇu, Brahmā and Devi. His glory starts to fade in the Brāhmaṇas,ⁱⁱⁱ and such references have been dated to around 900 BCE. He is surpassed as creator by Prajāpati.^{iv} Indra is mentioned in a number of texts in the Upaniṣads (PDH:109).^v Indra, as portrayed in the Upaniṣads, is a figure very removed from his warrior king warrior role in the Vedic myths. He is of course regarded as a king of heaven, but he is very subordinate to Brahmā from whom he attempts to learn the true nature of the ‘self’ amongst other things (Ch.U. 8.9.1.).

Indra’s decline is particularly emphasized in the Purāṇas.^{vi} Significantly, it is in the Puranic tales where Indra is revealed to be a title or a position rather than an immortal god (Brahmavaivarta Purananam, Krishna Janma Khanda, 47.50-161). Furthermore, it is in the Puranas that Indra’s powers are acquired by the new supreme sectarian gods Viṣṇu and Śiva. Indra’s reputation further suffers in the epics, where some of his early strengths become his weaknesses, in particular his phallic powers (Rā.1.47- 1.48). Danielou argues that in the later mythology, Indra is thought to be an aspect of Śiva and is a lesser deity in comparison to the three main gods. However, he stays as the king of all the other gods (Danielou, 1991:106).

Sakka Devarāja (Sakka) in the Theravāda Buddhist texts.

The Sakka that we know in the Theravāda scriptures is a colorful figure who has been born into a universe that is very different to the Vedic-Brahman world. It would seem that the Buddha chose to pick up and recreate Indra into the likeable reformed rogue Sakka

and the Sakka seen in the Theravāda textual tradition is an ambassador from the past who supports the Buddha's new order.

In Buddhism, Indra is remodeled as a popular deity of many names, but he is usually known as Sakka, a name which can refer to fact that he gives generously and thoroughly (DPPN, p. 957). He is almost always spoken of as Sakko Devānam Indo and is ruler of tavātimsa devaloka.

The Buddha, in the Samyutta Nikāya, offers a detailed list of Sakka's many epithets and these reflect his previous and present activities, talents and roles. The list consists in Maghavā, Purindada, Sakka, Vāsava, Sahassakkha and Sujampati (S I 229).

Sakka is a god of great patience and not too bright. He is of course still subject to the conditions of *samsāra*, and is far from free from lust, ill-will and stupidity. He is deeply devoted to the Triple Gem, and he is present for many of the major events in the life of the Buddha. Sakka's roles in the texts of Theravāda are many and varied, and a short summary of some of them will suffice here.

Sakka is king of the deities in the tavātimsa heaven, where he rules like a first among his peers. He is a devoted follower of the Triple Gem, he is present at many of the major points in the Bodhisatta and Buddha's career (J I 65). Sakka, through his legends exemplify and illustrate many aspects of the Buddhist teachings. Furthermore, exemplifies key themes concerned with the roles of the gods in the Buddha's cosmology. The gods like Sakka are in no way of the same ilk as the all-powerful eternal gods of the Vedas and later Hinduism, and Sakka and the gods in the Buddhist pantheon are in fact inferior to the Buddha, arahants and even well-practicing lay people. Furthermore, to be Sakka is to occupy a position; the kings of the thirty-three 'come and go'.

A Comparison of Indra in the Vedic and Post-Vedic Hindu texts and Sakka in the Pāli Canon and Commentaries

The character of Indra and Sakka that we see across the Vedic-Brahmin, Hindu and Buddhist texts is a figure of considerable significance. It seems reasonable to assume that Indra at the time of the Buddha was well-known to the people and worshipped, and this might have been a reason that the Buddha included the role of Indra as Sakka in his 'new' movement.

The Buddha was familiar with Sakka and met him on a number of occasions. The Buddha praised Sakka for his good behaviour (D II 275) and admired him for the merit he had earned, his kingship qualities, and for his personal characteristics such as patience and gentleness. Then, in comparison to the Indra described in the Vedic and later Hindu texts, Buddhist Sakka is a gentle and thoughtful king who is a strong follower and supporter of the Buddha.

According to Marasinghe, Buddhist gods are really different conceptions to the gods of the Vedic and post-Vedic Hindu traditions. Gods, as depicted in the Brahmanic traditions, had the power to offer health, wealth and happiness to their followers if they were pleased or appeased by the worth and correctness of their worshippers' sacrifices, and these boons were offered on a quid pro quo basis (Marasinghe,1997:60). However, in contrast, Marasinghe says that in the new philosophy of the Buddha, grave doubts about the abilities of the gods to grant such favours to human beings existed. Instead what became important was man's ability to improve his lot by living in a virtuous way and by developing his mind. In Sakka's case, Marasinghe continues, rather than the war-hungry soma drinking Indra, there was born a kindly and humane Buddhist lord of the lower heavens (Marasinghe,1997:60).

The Buddha himself makes humorous allusion to differences between the pre-Buddhist Indra and Buddhist Sakka when he describes Sakka's epithets. Whereas Indra was called Purandara (destroyer of cities), Sakka is also known as Purindada (giver in cities, or generous giver in former lives). Another example is whereas Indra had the nickname of Saharāksha (1000 eyes - a reference to his covering with yonis then eyes as a punishment), Sakka was known as Sahassakkha or Sahassanetta (1000 eyes) because he could think of a thousand matters at once (S I 229).

Although he is a very different figure from the Indra of the Vedic and later Hindu world, it seems that the Sakka of the Pāli Nikāyas still has a number of the roles and characteristics of his non-Buddhist predecessor. Of course, he is still the king of the thirty-three and has to battle the asuras but curiously he sometimes displays old Indra's fear or mistrust of ascetics and their powers and Indra's dislike for those who might usurp his kingship. I cannot fully agree with Gunapala Piyasena Malalasekera, who opines that that Sakka and Indra as independent conceptions, and argues that none of the personal characteristics of Sakka resemble those of Indra (DPPN,Vol II:p.965)

Special Prof. Banjob Bannaruji, Lecturer in Peace Studies Program, MCU, talked about this comparison of the concepts of Hindu Indra and Buddhist Sakka. He observed that a major difference is that Sakka in Pali Canon and commentaries was originally a human being, who devoted himself to practice of the seven virtues. Prof. Banjob then emphasizes that Sakka's background in the Buddhist texts is firmly established when compared to Indra's ambiguous origins in the Veda's and post Vedic texts (Interview with Special Prof. Banjob Bannaruji, Lecturer in Peace Studies Program, MCU via email on 24/2/2019).

Then, some of the developments that occur in the figure and nature of Sakka Devarāja moving from the pre-Buddhist to Buddhist versions of the enduring god have been examined.

A list of the roles of Indra in the Vedic and Post-Vedic Hindu texts (H) and Sakka in the Pāli Canon and Commentaries (B)

A list of the roles of the king of the devas across the two traditions is shown below. It is notable and but perhaps not surprising that a number of roles appear in both traditions. It will be used in the analysis of his manifestations in recent societies.

Table 1: A Set of Roles of **Sakka Devarāja** that presents out of the Hindu (H) and Theravāda Buddhist (B) texts

Role Number	Role
1	God of Storms, War, and Fertility, Warrior (H)(B)
2	Supreme God of the Kṣatriyas (H)
3	Consumer and Purveyor of Soma (H)
4	King and Guardian of Heaven (H)(B)
5	An Ambassador from the Past (B)
6	An Ideal Leader (B)
7	Guardian of the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha (B)
8	Student of the Dhamma(B)
9	Guardian of Moral Law (H)(B)

An analysis of the Roles of Sakka Devarāja (Sakka, King of Devas) in Recent Theravāda Buddhist Societies in South-East Asia

We now examine the roles of Sakka Devarāja in various recent South-east Asian Theravāda Buddhist countries and traditions in terms of his historical textual ones.

Special Professor Banjob Bannaruji offered further helpful comments concerning Sakka Devarāja and the role he has and continues to play in Buddhist countries like Thailand. He commented that Sakka is still a significant figure in recent Buddhism. Moreover, he stated that in Buddhist countries like Thailand, Myanmar, Laos and Cambodia, Sakka played and continues to play a crucial role because of the influence of Buddhism. In other words, his career has benefited from him being picked up by the Buddha (Interview with Special Prof. Banjob Bannaruji, Lecturer in Peace Studies Program, MCU via email on 24/2/2019).

Sakka Devarāja, or Phra In, as he is commonly known in Thailand, is a well-known and popular figure who has played a wide range of roles in Thai history and recent-day society. He has long been studied, portrayed and worshipped in Thai society.

The first role of Sakka Devarāja in recent Thai society is that of him being a symbol of a good and worthy leader (roles 5 and 6), and his image can be seen in many places around the kingdom. In fact, Sakka Devarāja is the symbol of the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA). (Bangkok Metropolitan Administration home site). According to the BMA, their main institutional symbol depicts Phra Indra, who is the keeper of Amara-wadée. In the image, Phra Indra carries his three-bladed weapon and is seated on his white elephant, Erāwana, whose four ivory tusks signify celestial status. According to the BMA, Sakka Devarāja is Bangkok's 'Symbol of Service,' and embodies the roles and figure of the Mayor of Bangkok. ^{vii}

The second role of Sakka Devarāja in recent Thai society concerns him as a figure who is the focus of various kinds of devotional activity (roles 1, 5 and 6) (Sawarin, 200: 97-108).

Indra is the god of good deeds and is the king that governs all the gods in the heavens. Indra has a long history in Hindu-Brahmanism; and one of his most persistent roles has been to look after the happiness of those in the realm of humans. However, in the modern era, very few people attach importance to Indra and similar gods, and very few images of Indra exist. However, Sawarin believes that despite this lack of knowledge and interest in Indra, th

king of devas actually has a far more pervasive influence on the lives of Thai people. One persistent belief in Thailand is that Indra is a prototype of good behavior. He is an exemplary figure that people worship and adapt as a role model (Sawarin, 2000: 97-108).

Sakka (as Phra In) is a deity who is known to Thai Buddhists for a number of reasons. One reason is that a lot of information about him is recorded in the Tipitaka and commentaries. This information is often used as teaching material by monks who give Dhamma talks. As Sawarin argues, Sakka is a virtuous and inspiring role model for Thais because he cares for humanity and teaches the values of self-effort. It seems that in this age of uncertainty of economics and climate, many Thais need a compassion deity who cares for their happiness, helps them to overcome grief and sorrow and lead more peaceful lives (Sawarin, 2000: 97-108).

In fact, there are a number of large and interesting images of Sakka around Thailand. In Bangkok, two that receive worship are the image of Phra-Indra on Erāvana, located at Wat Thewarat Kunchorn Worawihan, near Thewet Market and an image of Phra Indra located in front of the Amarin Plaza. Yet another important image of Phra Indra on Erāvana (actually there are four images) is located on the second terrace of the central prang of Wat Arun, which is one of the kingdom's chief temples. According to Emmons, Phra Indra features in a second part of the central prang as the prang is topped with a thunderbolt, which is Indra's principle weapon (Emmons, 2018:26).

In the beliefs of many Thai people, Indra is a great god who cherishes the health and happiness of all human beings. He causes the rain to fall at the right time and in the right amount, keeps the land productive, and helps businesses to function smoothly. He helps to keep away evil and enemies. Thais therefore pay respect to Indra in order to protect themselves, their families and their broader communities (Sawarin, 2000: 97-108).

When people ask for something from Indra, they have to be practicing a good and moral life, and in particular be performing meritorious actions such as offering food to monks, giving alms to others, and participation in public projects. These acts are really examples of the practice of Sakka-dhamma. Furthermore, the worship of Indra is usually done inside some kind of Buddhist framework.

As Sawarin mentions, some Thai people make offerings to Phra Indra in front of his images in public places, whereas others do so from their homes. The ceremonies proceed in stages and involves certain key steps. People light incense, pay homage to the Buddha, and then offer several levels of prayers to Phra In (Sawarin, 2000: 97-108). They also offer auspicious items such as particular fruits and green drinks. The first level of prayer is a broader one; more of a general invocation. It is followed by a more specific request or wish for help or protection, and they may also invoke Erāvana's assistance at this stage. They then hold up their offering of food and drinks, and take their leave.

These chants and ceremonial procedures that take place in the home are of interest. First, the idea of people offering items to a deva perhaps in some hope of gaining the deva's graces seems rather un-Buddhist. However, the Buddha, when discussing the values of having wealth for lay folks, taught five ways of sharing wealth that are beneficial for lay people, one of which was, as P.A Payutto observes, the offering to devas (devatā-bali) (Payutto, 2008:750). So, the idea of making offerings to devas is not totally foreign to the religion. But, as P.A Payutto further explains, within Buddhism it is done in a spirit of friendly co-existence (Payutto, 2008:750). Strictly speaking, Buddhists are allowed to show friendship, respect or even assistance to devas through their offerings, but their offerings should not be propitiatory, supplicatory, and nor should they be requests for favours. This suggests that this process of giving offerings to Indra then harks back to his Vedic-Brahmanic roots. It of course also needs to be said that the invocation to Indra is enveloped in a Buddhist shell. The worshippers first chant their respect for the Buddha. Then, the practice of offering things to Indra, and requesting his grace represents a present-day phenomenon that has built into it elements of both Hindu Indra and Buddhist Sakka.

As in Thailand, Sakka Devarāja has had a long history in Myanmar, and his history continues to impact upon recent Buddhist society in Myanmar. It is clear that Hinduism, along with Buddhism, arrived in Burma during ancient times, and as Taw Sein Ko notes, both names of the nation are rooted in the Hindu faith. The term 'Burma' was the British colonial equivalent of the first half of Brahma Desha, which was an ancient name of the region, and the term 'Myanmar' is a regional transliteration of Brahma (Taw Sein Ko, 1998:4). In Myanmar, Sakka Devarāja is referred to as Thagyamin (B. သိက္ခားမင်း), which is from Sanskrit शक्रः Śakra).

One role of Sakka as Thagyamin in Myanmar is as leader of the powerful nat spirits, a task he has carried out since he was appointed to do so by King Aniruddha (r. 1044 –1077). The king was attempting to reform Buddhist and animist practices in Pagan, and he thought that Thagyamin might be the best figure to herd the nats and their worshippers in the direction of the Triple Gem. Thagyamin's role then and now is to effectively maintain a harmony between the ancient and persuasive powers of the nats and the all-encompassing teachings and practices of the Buddha. We can see then that Thagyamin is acting as a guardian and supporter of the Triple Gem (role 7) and as an ambassador (role 5) as he maintains a balance between two traditions.

The Feast of the New Year as practiced to this day in Myanmar is an ancient celebration that acquired new meaning with the arrival of Buddhism into Ancient Myanmar and is a celebration that involves Sakka in a key role, as it marks the annual visit to earth of Sakka (Maung Htin Aung,1959:23).

The setting is a hot and dry one; the weather has been hot and dry since early March. The rice had been harvested, gathered and celebrated at the full-moon festival of Tabaung in March, but it is now almost mid-April, and the weather and the enforced holidays are trying the patience of even the most patient Myanmar farmers and oxen. However, there is a sense of hope in the air because the feast of the New Year is on its way. Thagyamin, the king of the gods is about to descend down to the earth on his yearly visit, which will last two days. How appropriate it is for Thagyamin to mark the end of the old year and the beginning of the new year. He is after all the ancient god of rain and thunder, and by virtue of those powers, a fertility god.

Thagyamin spends the last two (sometimes three) days of the old year in the human realm, and his precise time of ascendancy brings in the New Year. The celebration typically goes on for three days and sometimes lasts for four days.

During these three days (or four days) older people tend to fast and abide by the Eight Precepts or Ten Precepts. They usually visit temples and pagodas and make merit by offering food to the monks. Children are encouraged to behave well and are taught that the King of the devas, Thagyamin, is in town. He has with him his two massive volumes, one bound in dog-skin, the other bound in gold. In the former he notes the names of those who

committed bad deeds over the course of the year. In the latter, he notes the names of those who performed meritorious acts. (Maung Htin Aung,1959:23)

Thagyamin's arrival and departure from earth, are marked by the shooting of canons and guns organized by the authorities. Householders hold up flower pots full of flowers to greet him, and they acknowledge his ascension by reverently pouring the water from the pots out onto the ground. As they do so, they pray for good luck, the right amount of rainfall, crop fertility and happy and healthy families. All of these in-house activities are carried out in a spirit of reflection and mindfulness, which is in marked contrast to the riot that is developing on the streets, for as Maung Htin Aung observes, the New Year's festival is also the water festival (Maung Htin Aung,1959:24).

It is clear that the New Year's and water festival that takes place in what is predominantly Buddhist Myanmar features Sakka Devarāja in roles that are more Hindu than Buddhist in origin. As Dr Htin Aung notes, a lot of it seems like Brahmanism that gets a Buddhist covering (Maung Htin Aung,1959:31). Thagyamin still retains elements of his Vedic-Brahman past as Indra, many Myanmar folk still call the present era of Buddhism 'Thagya's Era Buddhism.' He goes on to say that the early chronicles record that Sakka acted as one of the heavenly constructors of the city of Prome, as it was foretold to flourish in the Pyu Kingdom. Importantly, Thagyamin is also said to have helped in the construction of Shwezigone Pagoda and other famous buildings of worship in Pagan (Maung Htin Aung,1959:33). Sakka also helped Aniruddha's father because Pagan was intended to be the center of a great kingdom. When he gained the throne of Pagan, Aniruddha actually needed little help because he had received from his father Sakka's 'Lance of Victory (Maung Htin Aung,1959:34).'

So, how do Thagyamins's activities or manifestations in recent day Buddhist societies compare to the list of roles? The Thagyamin we see in Burmese legends and festivals is a blend of the historical Hindu and Buddhist figures. He is clearly an ambassador from the past (role 5), as he is part of bringing the Hindu tradition into modern society and into Buddhism, and because he serves as a historical link between the Nat traditions and Theravāda Buddhism. Further, he seems to be an ambassador for the Buddha to this day as he is generally perceived to be an active and ever-present deva; one who is concerned with the welfare of living beings and one who is able to intervene in human affairs. Thagyamin is certainly more of a builder of cities than a destroyer. In this way, he is more Buddhist than Hindu, because

the Indra of old was the famous destroyer of cities. He is in general a keeper of the moral law (role 9), and his keeping of golden and dog leather books see him as at least a record keeper if not a judge! But finally, and importantly, although he is clearly a deva of great power, his activities are usually centered around the mundane. He is a leader and he leads the ordinary folk in the direction of the Triple Gem (roles 6 and 7).

Sakka Devarāja manifests in a variety of ways in present day Cambodian society, and these are similar to his appearances in Thailand, Myanmar and Laos. He is mentioned in chanting that monks perform every day. He is a folk figure who appears in legends, poems and art. He is key player in Cambodia's rain festival. He is well represented in some of the great religious monuments of Cambodia, including Angkor Wat. However, a very striking example of him as Sakka manifesting in Cambodia's extant religious architecture is his presence at the Angkor Thom site, which is based on his heavenly kingdom, and which according to Professor Bousellier is the City of Sakka Devarāja (Bousellier, 2007). Moreover, the heaven of the thirty-three, with its palace, assembly hall, and pleasure gardens is the Bayon, which lies at the very center of Angkor Thom. It is in the Bayon that the gods meet on sacred days. The walls of the city, which are huge and it seems unbreakable, are in the image of those of Indra's city. Incredibly, the city itself tells the paradigmatic story of Sakka Devarāja's (as Sakka) battle with the asuras. (Bousellier, 2007).

Sakka Devarāja, the persistent character that he is, continues to manifest in some of Cambodia's incredibly Hindu and Buddhist religious architecture. At Angkor Thom, the paradigmatic myth concerned with his leadership of the devas in their battle with the asuras is captured for people in modern times to think and wonder at. Further, Sakka is a great ambassador (role 5); one of his key roles is to communicate the knowledge of the Buddha's religion down to the folks to come, and this happens with the help of those wonderfully skillful and creative artists and their companions knowledgeable in the cosmological texts and in the Buddha's teachings. Furthermore, here we see Sakka's role in the development of the concepts of Buddhist kingship (role 4), a role that continues to influence Buddhist kingship in modern Southeast Asia.

Sakka Devarāja manifests in various ways in in present-day Laos Buddhist. He often does so in association with the colorful elephant, P. Erāvana, S. Airāvata. However, the area of manifestations of Sakka Devarāja in recent Lao society of focus here is his important role in

the Lao version of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the Phra Lak Phra Ram (L. ພຣະວັກພຣະຮາມ), which many think of as being one of the nation-wide classics of the Lao folk. It is an adaptation of Valmiki's Hindu epic, the *Rāmāyaṇam*. The *Rāmāyaṇa* arrived in Laos much later than it had in Cambodia and Thailand, so it was even further removed from its original Hindu form.

As Reynolds next observes, Indra, who is a particularly significant deity in the Theravāda tradition, is very active in this myth, listening to the concerns of humans and intervening in their affairs. He facilitates the rebirth processes that result in the births of two of the main characters, Ravana and Rama (Reynolds, 1982). How can we interpret Indra's role in this classic with the list of roles we made for Sakka devarāja? Certainly, Indra's activities are consistent with his roles in the Vedas. He is a most powerful figure, a king of devas, who intervenes in the lives of humans (roles 1 and 4). Indeed, as noted he enables the births of two of the principal characters, Ravana and Rama, the latter being the Bodhisattva. In a way, it makes sense that he, as the supreme god of the Kṣatriyas (role 2), should 'direct' the action in this rendition of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, which is after all a Kṣatriya text. Finally, we note that the historical story fits into its Jātaka shell. Historical Indra, in that age when the gods were much more active participants on the human realm, as Sakka, fits into the new universe prescribed by the Buddha (role 7 and 9).

Conclusion

The main objective of this article was to analyze the roles of Sakka Devarāja in recent Buddhist societies in terms of his textual history as Indra and Sakka. The research shows that Sakka Devarāja is a persistent figure, and he maintains a presence and influence in the South-east Asian countries that we have analyzed, which were Thailand, Myanmar, Laos and Cambodia. Furthermore, the research shows that his roles in recent Buddhist societies can be better appreciated when analyzed in terms of his historical and textual background as Indra and Sakka. Sakka Devarāja's ongoing presence and influence in the region manifest in the areas of kingship and government, devotional practices, folk beliefs, festivals, drama and theater, and architecture and art. Sakka Devarāja gains respect and devotion precisely because he is an important part of the Buddha's sāsana and because many people see him as an ambassador or representative of the Buddha. Sakka Devarāja, in modern Buddhist societies retains elements of Old Vedic-Brahmanic Indra; he keeps his connections rain, thunder and lightning, and thus life, fertility, and

prosperity. However, within Buddhist societies, as Sakka, his function and roles are nestled within a Buddhist framework.

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¹ Rg.1.10.5: 'To Indra must a laud be said, to strengthen him who freely gives, that Śakra may take pleasure in our friendship and drink-offerings. Him, him we seek for friendship, him for riches and heroic might. For Indra, he is Śakra, he shall aid us while he gives us wealth. (tr. Griffith)

² **Soma** (Sanskrit: soma) a Vedic ritual drink of importance among the early Indians. It is mentioned many times in the Rg Veda, and the 114 hymns of the ninth book of the Rg Veda are concerned with the soma sacrifice. (EOH, p.419)

³ The **Brāhmaṇas** are a number of prose commentaries attached to the Vedas. (The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, Brahmana, Encyclopedia Inc, Accessed Feb. 9th, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Brahmana>)

⁴ **Prajāpati** refers to the primordial creator or lord of creatures. Here, the term is an epithet of Brahmā. (Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, 1982, p. 350)

⁵ The **Upaniṣads** are philosophical and mystical writings included in the śruti part of Vedic literature as its 'end' or closing part (hence called summarily also Vedānta). (PDH, p.109.)

⁶ The **Purāṇas** are religious works of Hinduism, mostly in verses, which contain legendary and mythological versions of creation, history and destruction of the universe with its divine, human and subhuman inhabitants, sometimes in great detail and dramatic narration. (PDH, p.83.)

⁷ **Amara-wadēe** is a reference to Amaravatī, Sakka Devarāja's heavenly city in Tāvatimsa devaloka in the Hindu and Buddhist traditions.