A Monograph on the Elephant-Headed God Ganesha: The Mythological Concept and Distinct Iconography

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Introduction

Ganesha is the Ever-Blissful, elephant-headed god who is lovingly worshipped and revered by millions of people worldwide. *Ganesha* is one of the best-known and most popularly worshipped deities in *Hinduism. Ganapati* is worshipped by both *Vaishnavas* (devotees of *Vishnu*) and *Saivites* (devotees of *Shiva*). The son of *Shiva* and *Parvati, Shree Ganesha,* is the God of good luck and auspiciousness and is the Dispeller of problems and obstacles. He is also worshipped as the God of wisdom, wealth, health, celibacy, fertility and happiness. People call upon him at the beginning of any task, because his blessing supposedly ensures success. In the *panchayatana* puja, *Ganesha* is glorified as one of the five prime Hindu deities (*Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva, Shakti* and *Ganesha*) whose worship confers immortality and liberation. The rise of *Ganapatya* sect was a significant departure from the traditional *Saivism* and it coincided with the rise of tantric form of worship in ancient India some time during the post Gupta period.

Worship of *Ganesha* has transcended the frontiers of India. The discovery of *Ganesha* image at Sakar Dar in Kabul, assigned to the middle 4th century A.D. on the basis of its iconographical peculiarities has thrown significant light on the worship and popularity of *Ganesha* not only in India, but beyond its frontiers in the early Gupta period. A large number of his images are identified in various countries like Indonesia, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, China, Japan, Nepal, Tibet, Ceylon, Mongolia, Afghanistan and Central Asia (Figures-1, 2). Characteristics of *Ganesha* images found in these countries have close similarities, although differences can be seen in the various art forms that developed, with national characteristics, from the earliest basic forms into more complex forms, along with the religious beliefs.

Hindu religious texts describe many *Ganesha,* with thousands of forms in various incarnations throughout Brahmin history. Belief in *Ganesha* originated in India, but may not have originated with the Aryans; it is possible that it arose from the indigenous people of India who practiced *'totemism'* (animal worship) from protohistoric time. The elephant, a very large and powerful animal, was worshipped as a tribal god, along with many other animals. In the later Vedic times, when the Aryans migrated to India and established the Brahmin religion, they incorporated local beliefs and god from the indigenous population. Later still, the elephant god was made into the icon *Ganesha,* with the body of a human and the head of an elephant. The idea of gods with animal heads probably came from Egypt, where, from ancient times, many gods were depicted with animal head like *Anubis* (god of funerals and death) with the head of a jackal; and *Horus* (god of the sky and kingship) head of a hawk.

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Mythological Concept

Several texts relate mythological anecdotes associated with his birth and exploits, and explain his distinct iconography. There are various names, forms and incarnations of *Ganesha* in many *Puranas*. Although he is known by many other attributes, *Ganesha's* elephant head makes him easy to identify. *Ganapati* is the earliest name that occurs in literature. It is mentioned for the first time in Rigveda. *Vinayaka* is mentioned in Manav Grihyasutra and Yajnavalkya Smriti. In Mahabharata *Ganesha* is described as the scribe to sage *Vyasa* for writing the epic Mahabharata and is given the names – *Ganesha*, *Vighnesha*, *Gananayaka* and *Heramba*. *Vinayakas* are described both as benevolent and malevolent in this epic. *Ganesha* is also referred in the Gatha Saptashati.

Various Names

Ganesha is referred extensively in Puranic literature. He is described as *Nikumbha* and *Kshemaka* in the Vayu Purana. The Varaha Purana gives the description of his origin. The Vamana Purana also narrates the story of his origin and mentions that *Shiva* gave the name *Vinayaka* to this son of *Parvati*. The Brahmanda Purana gives his various names such as *Ganesha, Lambodara, Gajanana, Ekadanta, Vighnanashaka, Vakratunda* and also their importance. The Skanda Purana throws light on the divine powers of *Ganesha* and describes that even *Shiva* worshipped him because he was hopeful of getting his Varanasi Puri back. The Purana describes that *Shiva* gave him the name *MahaVinayaka* when he was consoling *Parvati* for *Ganesha's* large elephant head. The Matsya Purana describes rat as the *vahana* of the *Vinayaka*.

Various names of Ganesh are given in the Agni Purana such as – *Ganapati* (lord of ganas), *Ganadhipa* (chieftain of the ganas), *Ganesha* (lord of ganas), *Vakratunda* (having a bent trunk), *Mahodara* (big-bellied), *Gajavaktra* (elephant-faced), *Vikata* (dreadful), *Vighnanasha* (destroyer of impediments), *Dhumra-Varna* (smoke-coloured) and so on. The Padma Purana also gives twelve names of *Ganesha* which are – *Ganapati, Vighnaraja, Lambatunda, Gajanana, Dvaimatura, Heramba, Ekadanta, Ganadhipa, Carukarna, Vinayaka, Pashupala* and *Bhavatmaja*. The Garuda Purana gives a *gayatri mantra* in his praise and also describes his twelve names. These names are almost similar as described above. The *Ganapati Khanda* of the Brahmavaivartta Purana is exclusively on *Ganesha*. Metaphorical meanings of some of the epithets of *Ganesha* are also given in this Puarana. The *Ganesha* Purana and the Mudgala Purana are entirely devoted to *Ganesha*. The *Ganesha* Purana is full of *Ganesha's* admiration and his heroic deeds. According to this Purana even his father *Shiva* worshipped him for many years in order to get a boon from him for the victory over Tripurasura.

Birth Stories

Various birth stories of *Ganesha* are given in the Puranic literature. According to Matsya Purana and Padma Purana, *Parvati* had a great desire for a son. One day she made a toy with an elephant-head from her bodily dirt. She immersed that toy in the Ganga where that small toy assumed an enormous size and life also. Both *Parvati* (*Uma*) and *Jahnavi* (*Ganga*) addressed him as son and hence he came to be renowned as *Gangeya* and *Gajanana*.

A very interesting birth story is described in the Varaha Purana. It describes that *Ganesha* came into being only from the laughter of *Shiva*. He was very handsome at the time of his birth and due to this *Parvati* was gazing at him without a pause. *Shiva* became jealous to see that and out of jealousy he cursed *Ganesha* to be ugly with an elephant-head, a pot-belly and wearing a *naga-yajnopavita*. But later on as remorse *Shiva* appointed him as the chief of his *ganas* and called him his son *'Shankaraputra'*. *Shiva* ordered that *Ganesha* should be worshipped before every work to avoid the obstacles and thus gave him the name *'Vighnaraja'*.

The Vamana Purana gives a little different version of *Ganesha*'s birth. According to it *Parvati* made a toy from her bodily dirt. This was a four-armed, full-breasted male-being with the face of an elephant. After making him she put him under her throne and went for a bath. Then *Shiva* came and had a bath on the same throne under which was lying the filth made male being. The sweat of *Uma* (*Parvati*) and *Shiva* mixed on the moist earth. From this union sprang up (a person) with a trunk, blowing air from it. *Shiva* was happy to recognize him as his son.

The Linga Purana describes that *Shiva* himself entered into the womb of *Ambika* (*Parvati*) and a handsome boy was born as *Ganeshvara*. *Ambika* welcomed the elephant-faced lord *Gajanana*. *Shiva* gave him the name *Vighneshvara* as he was born to put impediments in the ways of wicked beings, the *asuras* etc. The Brahma Purana mentions that *Ganesha*, son of *Ambika* was born at the same moment he was conceived. Hence the gods called him *'Sadyojata'* (born in trice).

The Skanda Purana gives three stories of *Ganesha*'s birth. According to one version the gods were worried to see that the heaven was too full of the humans to accommodate any more. Being worried about this immigration, they requested *Shiva* to devise means to check this. After hearing the request of the gods, *Shiva* glanced at *Parvati*. She got the hint and began rubbing her body. From her bodily dirt she made a four-armed human figure with an elephant-head. The newly born was instructed to put impediments in the ways of wicked beings and thus the gods were relieved from their grief. According to the second story of this Purana once the god *Vayu* told *Shiva* that they were worried as *Shiva* had no progeny who could protect them. On hearing this *Parvati* (*Gauri*) became angry and left *Shiva* and went to the mountain *'Arbuda'* to practice penance. After some time *Shiva* also went there and told *Gauri* that she will have a son on the fourth day. She took her bath and removed the dirt from her body and created a human figure who was none else than *Vinayaka*. According to the third version, *Parvati* made him from her bodily dirt just in a fun but the figure remained headless due to shortage of the dirt. So *Parvati* ordered *Skanda* to bring the head of an elephant for that headless figure. *Skanda* brought an elephant-head but *Parvati* disliked it because the head was very large. Although *Parvati* was denying for this head but it got joined to the headless body by action of fate. *Shiva* gave him the name *'Mahavinayaka'*.

The Brahmavaivartta Purana mentions that *Ganesha* was originally Krishna. As *Parvati* was desirous of a son, *Shiva* advised her for *Vratas* and severe penances. *Parvati* did and her desire was fulfilled. *Krishna* was born to her. *Vishnu* wished him to be as brave as *Vishnu* himself and blessed him all the *siddhis*.

According to the *Shiva* Purana, *Parvati* made *Ganesha* with her bodily dirt on the advice of her companions *Jaya* and *Vijaya*. After making *Ganesha* she kept him as '*dvarapala*' at the gate

of her private apartments. Even *Shiva* was not allowed by *Ganesha* to go inside. As *Shiva* did not recognize him, he became angry at the misbehavior of *Ganesha* . On this matter a fight started between *Shiva* and *Ganesha*. *Ganesha* defeated *Shiva*'s army. This defeat aroused *Shiva*'s anger and he cut off *Ganesha*'s head. When *Parvati* heard about this incident she was grieved and in anger she created hundreds and thousands of goddesses. These goddesses started destruction and created havoc. The fight was so severe that gods went to *Parvati* and begged her pardon. But *Parvati* agreed only to stop it if her son would come to life and would get an honourable status among the gods as the chief presiding officer. Then *Ganesha*'s headless body was given a single-tusked elephant-head and he became alive. After coming to life *Ganesha* was red-complexioned. *Shiva* recognized *Ganesha* as his son. Then *Ganesha* begged pardon and paid reverence to gods and also to his father *Shiva*. *Shiva* blessed him to be ever happy and also blessed him '*Vighnaharta*'.

The Suprabhedagama gives a little different birth story. According to it *Ganesha* was born with an elephant-head when *Shiva* and *Parvati* assumed elephant forms. *Shiva* himself told *Ganesha* that he was born after *Shiva* and *Parvati* enjoyed themselves in the form of male and female elephants in the forests.

Elephant-head

According to the Matsya Purana, the Linga Purana, the Vamana Purana, the Padma Purana and the Skanda Purana, *Ganesha* was born with an elephant-head. But according to Varaha Purana, *Shiva* cursed *Ganesha* to be elephant-head later on.

The Brahmavaivartta Purana gives a different story about *Ganesha*'s elephant-head. According to this Purana when *Ganesha* was born *Parvati* wanted to show him to *Shani*. But *Shani* was reluctant to see her son as he was cursed that anything he will look at would be burnt into ashes. But on *Parvati*'s persistence he looked at *Ganesha* with one eye only and as a result the head was cut off and fell on the ground and was reduced to ashes. Seeing this accident *Parvati* became very sad. Then *Vishnu* went to the northern direction and brought the head of *Gajendra* and put it on the headless body of *Ganesha*.

Ekadanta

Literary meaning of *'Ekadanta'* is the single-tusked. It is one of the epithets of *Ganesha* which describes *Ganesha* as having one tusk. Puranic legends also tell how he is only one tusked. The Brahmanda Purana and the Brahmavaivartta Purana narrate the legend that *Ganesha* lost his left tooth in an encounter with *Parashu*rama, the great sage. Their quarrel started when *Parashu*rama wanted to enter the private chamber of *Shiva* who was resting at that time. *Ganesha*, in his role of as a gate-keeper, refused him entrance. *Parashu*rama became infuriated and threw his axe at *Ganesha* . As this axe was given by *Shiva* to *Parashu*rama, *Ganesha* did not want it to go in vain and he received it on his left tooth. In this way his tooth was chopped off and he became *'Ekadanta'*.

The *Shiva* Purana gives a story that the head of the elephant which was cut off and later on put on the headless body of *Ganesha*, happened to be of a single-tusked elephant.

The Skanda Purana narrates the story of *Ganesha* being *'Ekadanta'* in a different way. According to it *Shiva* cut off the head of *Ganesha* but later on revived him by putting an elephant's head on his shoulders and gave one of the tusks of that elephant to *Ganesha* for using it as a staff.

His *Vahana* – the Rat

In Puranas there are legends about *musaka* as the *vahana* of *Ganesha*. The Skanda Purana describes that by the scent of *modaka*s a rat came out of its hole and became immortal only by the scent of the *modaka*s. He offered himself in the service of *Ganesha* as his *vahana*.

A different legend is described in the *Ganesha* Purana. According to in the *Dvaparayuga*, *Vamadeva* cursed the *Gandharva Kraunca* to become a rat. *Ganesha* showed pity on him and accepted him as his *vahana*. The Brahmavaivartta Purana describes about the gifts presented to *Ganesha* by gods and goddesses, and his *vahana* the *musaka* was given to him by *Vasundhara* (the earth).

Iconographic Features and Symbolism

Ganesha is usually shown with four arms, but can have anywhere from two to sixteen arms (Figure- 3). His arms hold symbols, depending on the occasion, such as sweets, fruit, a sesame seed, a plant shoot, a bundle of rice sheaves, a lotus, a rosary, a book, a stylus, a water pot, jewelry, a bunch of flowers, or weapons. The four most important symbols carried by *Ganesha* are –

1) *Pasha* (lasso) - an instrument used to destroy desire or craving

2) *Ankusha* (elephant hook) - represents control, or a means to steer one in the right direction

3) *Danta* (broken tusk) - a divine weapon for destroying obstacles

4) *Varada mudra* (attitude of blessing) - represents a wish for success.

The Puranic literature describes elaborately *Ganesha's* iconographic features. The Vishnudharmottara Purana describes that *Vinayaka* should have the face of an elephant and four arms. He should have a *shula* and an *aksamala* in his right hands and a *parashu* and a *modaka-patra* in his left hands. His left tusk should not be depicted. He has a big-belly and stiff ears and wearing a tiger-skin as cloth. He has a *naga-yajnopavita*. There should be a foot-stool and one foot only should be on the seat.

According to Matsya Purana, the *Vinayaka* is elephant-faced, three-eyed, large-bellied and four-armed. He wears a *naga-yajnopavita*. He is uni-tusked and his ears and proboscis is large in size. The attributes in his right hands are *svadanta* and *utpala*; and a *modaka* and a *parashu* in left hands. He is accompanied by *Riddhi* and *Buddhi* and his mount rat is also there.

The Skanda Purana describes *Ganesha* as of five faces, ten arms and three eyes. Of his five faces the middle face is described as fair-complexioned, three-eyed and four-tusked. The attributes in his ten hands are *pasha, padma, parashu, ankusha, danta, aksamala, langala, musala, varada*

mudra and a *modaka-patra*. He is large bellied and wears a waist band (*mekhala*). He is seated in *yogasana* and the crescent moon is adorning his forehead.

Ganesha is described as elephant-faced, full-breasted and a four-armed male being in the Vamana Purana. The Linga Purana describes *Gajanana* as the wielder of *trishula* and *pasha*; and bedecked in wonderful garments and ornaments of various kinds.

The Bhavishya Purana describes *Ganesha* as seated on a lotus-seat. He is four-armed, three-eyed, bedecked with ornaments and the moon is on his head. He has a *naga-yajnopavita*. The attributes in his four hands are – a *danta*, an *aksamala*, a *parashu* and a *modaka*. This Purana also mentions *musala*, *pasha* and *vajra*, as attributes in his hands.

The Narada Purana describes *Ganesha* as of a red body and three-eyes. He holds *pasha* and *ankusha* in his two hands, and he shows *abhaya* and *varada* mudras with his other two hands. He is being embraced by his consort who holds a lotus in her hand. This Purana further describes him with his *Shakti*. The Bhagavata Purana describes *Ganesha* as large-bellied, long armed, handsome, charming, three-eyed, red-coloured and dazzling as the mid-noon Sun.

The *Ganesha* Purana describes that he, shining like the Sun, is elephant-faced, ten-armed and wearing ear-rings. He is accompanied by *Siddhi* and *Buddhi*. In his hands he is holding *mukta* and a *parashu*. A snake is at his navel. This Purana also gives an interesting iconography of *Ganesha*. According to it he has ten arms, wearing all the ornaments and holds a *trishula* in his hand. He is three-faced; the middle face is of *Vishnu*, the right is of *Shiva* and the left is of *Brahma*. He is seated on a serpent in *padmasana*. This Purana also states that *Ganesha's* form changes according to the *Yuga* (era) in which he manifests. In the first or the *Krita-yuga* he is described as *Vinayaka* with ten arms and rides on a lion. He is known as *Mayureshvara* (Figure-4) in the second or the *Treta-yuga*. Here he is six-armed and rides a peacock. As *Gajanana* in the third or the *Dvapara-yuga*, he is four-armed, red-complexioned and rides on a rat. He is described as *Dhumraka* in the last or the *Kali-yuga* and has two-armed, smoke-grey coloured and rides on a horse. A different iconographic description of *Ganesha* is given at another place in the *Ganesha* Purana. Here he is describes five-faced, ten-armed and wearing the moon on his forehead. It is also described that he has worn the ornaments of serpents and a garland of skulls. He is carrying weapons in his four hands but the names of the weapons are not given.

fig.1 Seated Ganesha C. 8-9th century, C.E. Java, Indonesia Indian museum

fig. 2 Dancing Ganesha (black stone) C. 12th century C.E. Gangarampur, West Bengal, IndianMuseum, Kolkata

fig. 3 Sixteen armed Ganesha

Nanjangud, Karnataka

fig. 4 Shri Mayureshwar Ganapati

Morgaon, Maharashtra

Conclusion

Along with the Puranic literature the Agamas also describe the birth and the iconography of *Ganesha* such as – the Ajitagama, the Amshumadbhedagama, the Uttarakamikagama and the Suprabhedagama. Apart from these the Shilpa texts and the other literary works also state *Ganesha's* iconography, such as – the Aprajitapriccha, the Shilparatna, the Mayamata, the Pratisthalaksanasarasamuccaya, the Rupamandana, the Devatamurtiprakarana, the Sharadatilaka-Tantra, the Jnanarnava-Tantra, the Prapancasara, the Tantrasara, the Nityotsava, the Shukraniti ans so on. The Many research works have been done on the origin, mythological concepts and development of *Ganesha's* iconographic features of Asia, Indonesia, Thailand, Japan and Vietnam and so on. A number of scholars like Alice Getty, T.A. Gopinatha Rao, Amal Sarkar, I.K. Sharma, R.P. Yadava, A.K. Narain, Paul B. Courtright, A. Banerji, M.K. Dhavalikar, Edi Sedyawati etc. have produced good monographs and papers on *Ganesha*. These works have a great importance to know the history of past. It reconstructs the origin and development of *Ganesha* images in India.

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