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Ganesh the Elephant-Head

Hinduism, a polytheistic religion, contains many gods and goddesses that represent different parts of the world. All of these deities fall under Brahman, the ultimate reality. Ganesh, also called Ganesha, Ganeśa, and Ganapati, remains one of the most popular Hindu gods in the tradition. The two crucial supernatural entities responsible for his birth are Shiva and Parvati. One of the more widely accepted tales of the birth of Ganesh is that Parvati, the goddess of fertility, formed Ganesh “as a boy from the residue of her bathing tub and set him to stand guard while she bathed” (Fisher 115). She basically fashioned the ideal son out of clay or dirt and gave him instructions to stand watch and not allow anyone in. When Shiva tried to come in the bathroom, Ganesh would not allow him to. Insulted by Ganesh’s disrespect, Shiva destroyed Ganesh’s head into thousands of pieces, which greatly angered Parvati. She demanded he bring her son back to life, and he does so by finding a new head for Ganesh’s body. The first head that is found is that of an elephant’s. Compensating for angering Parvati and apologizing for giving her son an elephant’s head, Shiva gave Ganesh the power to remove obstacles. Ganesh, along with this famous story of his elephant head, has various roles and duties as a prominent god, and an understanding of his appearance is necessary to properly comprehend the image of Ganesh in the eyes of the Hindu people.

Ganesh is often described as dwarfish and potbellied, and is sometimes depicted as sitting on his rat, *vahana*. His complexion is primarily reddish, like “molten gold, rising sun, and vermillion” (Mankodi 129). Ganesh constantly holds certain items in his hand: rice balls, bowls of *modaka* (sweet rice), an ax, and a broken off tusk. It is believed that Ganesh wrote the Mahabharata with the broken tusk. His most prominent feature is his elephant head, which was given to him by Lord Shiva. Another belief is that he can have many arms, which is why he can hold all his items at once, and multiple heads. If Ganesh is seen with multiple heads, it is most commonly five. A god like Ganesh must have many different aspects, which is why he should be represented in several different ways. Therefore, the multiple heads are commonly seen as five different images of Ganesh. He is “predominantly the god of good luck,” and his importance in Hindu tradition is irreplaceable (127). Hindus must pray to Ganesh before all undertakings: celebrations, birthdays, marriages, etc. “The most widely worshipped god is Ganesha…Even the gods must worship him before they assume any undertaking for he is the remover of obstacles” (Kolanad 32). Ganesh’s importance can be seen through people’s daily offerings and prayers to him. Since the gods must also worship Ganesh, he can be seen as one of the most powerful gods because he controls the outcome of one’s endeavors. If someone does not perform puja to Ganesh before taking action or before any auspicious occasion, the person will not get what he or she desires. This is because Ganesh will intentionally place obstacles in that person’s path as punishment for their disobedience. He exists as a type of *yaksha*, or a moody, mythical deity. Since he signifies good luck, Ganesh is often coupled together with gods and goddesses similar to him, such as Kubera and Lakshmi. Another aspect of Ganesh’s existence is that he has two wives: Siddhi (Success) and Buddhi (Wisdom). Taking into consideration his immense importance in Hindu tradition, it is a surprising fact that Ganesh does not gain importance until around the 6th century.

There are actually five different periods of time that are essential in understanding the emergence of the elephant-head god Ganesh. In the initial period, Ganesh is seen as the scribe for the *Mahabharata*. Compared to his brother Skanda, however, he is quite insignificant. Also during this period is evidence of Vinayaka, the god relating to anything inauspicious. By the 4th century, there are believed to be four Vinyakas that combined to create a god that creates or removes obstacles. Following this period is the rapid spread of Ganesh, and he quickly develops into a popular deity. In the Mahapuranas, the third period, Ganesh is born into Siva’s family and acts as his mother’s protector and his father’s opponent. The formalization of Ganesh’s theology involved “six groups of *ganapatyas*, or recognized cultic groups worshipping the god under a variety of names” during the 6th century (Bailey). The final period is from the 14th century until the present, where Ganesh is seen as one of the greatest gods and has much literature describing his powers and greatness. He “brings together in his figure three important components: youth, the imagery of the elephant, and ritual techniques for achieving success in all things” (Bailey). The image of Ganesh has transformed throughout time, constantly adjusting to the modern beliefs. Currently, he is seen as an extremely powerful god, which is apparent by his multitude of roles: handler of obstacles, bringer of good luck, and king of the harvest. Throughout history, many different ideas about Ganesh have arisen, such as his taking over of the role of Vinayaka and his supposed origins and birth stories. Another idea relating to Ganesha’s appearance come from the scholar Przyluski. He “suggests that Shiva and Ganesha were originally one and the same god” (Michael 96). This concept of dualism means that Ganesha is just another part of Shiva, which allows followers to have a sound reason as to why Ganesh is so powerful. It is believed that the sprits that haunted mountains and forests came together to create Ganapati. The roots of how he came to possess the head of an elephant have been interpreted differently, leading to multiple stories of origin.

In the Shiva Purana, Parvati creates Ganesh from random items in her bath and places him on duty to make sure no one comes in. Shiva arrives, but Ganesh does not know that Shiva is his father. Shiva, also unaware of Ganesh’s existence, beheads Ganesh, but soon finds another head for his son. There are several other beliefs of how Ganesh became the elephant god. In the Skanda Purana, Parvati formed Ganesh from the “remains of her bath” but was only able to create his torso, so her eldest son Skanda put the head of an elephant on his brother’s body (Mankodi 128). In the Varaha Purana, Shiva had initially given Ganesha his elephant head along with serpents for his sacred thread rather than destroy or cut off his head and replace it later on. Lastly, in the Brahmavaivarta Purana, the planet Shani (Saturn) had a curse that if he looked at a person, that person’s head would fall off. Parvati, unaware of this evil, made Shani look at Ganesha and his head fell off. His head was “later replaced by that of the king of the elephants” (128). Some may wonder why do Hindu literature and history emphasize the elephant head, and the answer is simple. The elephant is a “symbol of both power and auspiciousness” and is also related to kingship (Bailey). The elephant head gives Ganesh much more importance in Hinduism than a human head would. Since “no puranic account tells us why Ganeśa should be regarded as auspicious,” it is safe to assume that his elephant head has given him major significance (Bailey). An important idea to remember is that Ganesh was “born at a time of crisis for Siva and Parvati” because Parvati wanted a child, but Shiva did not (Bailey). There are four basic elements that define the myth of Ganesh’s origin: first, there is already a conflict between Shiva and Parvati before his birth; second, Ganesh’s birth is always unusual; third, Shiva becomes more attracted to Parvati after Ganesh does not allow him to see his wife; fourth, the belief that his head is cut off enhances the idea of auspiciousness related to his life. Auspiciousness almost always relates to Ganesh, and a strongly held belief of why this is true is because of his relation to agriculture.

Agriculture is crucial in the society of South Asia, and Ganesh representing auspiciousness through agriculture is a strong argument because it outlines his importance in Hinduism in an Indian society. Ganesh is also known as *Mushak Vahan*, which means “rider on a rat” (Michael 92). He rides the rat because he destroys it in order to secure a rodent-free harvest. Another purpose of the rat is that it has lots of offspring quickly, so the reason Ganesh is related to the harvest is because he makes the crops multiply as fast as the rat makes babies. His connection to agriculture actually adds yet another story describing the origins of his elephant head. The cornsheaves swinging side to side represent the trunk of the elephant. Ganesh is seen as having a yellow hue because that is the color of corn. The food that people offer him continue to add to the long list of Ganesh’s connections to harvesting. *Modakas*, his favorite offering, are made of “rice flour, raw sugar, and coconut meat,” which are all part of the harvest (94). A final reason accounting for the connection between Ganesh and harvesting is that during the Ganapati festival, lots of clay is brought home in order to prevent rats from eating a family’s grain. There are many rituals that are performed to Ganesh in various parts of the world in order to guarantee a good harvest. On a day called “Undir Bi” in some areas of the Ratnagiri District in Maharashtra, people throw crumbs amongst the crops in order to satiate the field mice so that they will not eat the crops (94). In another ritual, people draw a line around grain with the ashes of chaff. The Panch Mahals farmers utilize ash to draw trees on the grain. However, in Kandesh, the svastika and a double triangle are used and images of the sun and moon are used in Karnatak. This inner diversity within Hinduism to praise Ganesh allows one to see the immeasurable value of Ganesh in Hindu tradition.

Hindus worship Ganesh on a daily basis, offering him prayers before all quests and journeys to make sure that good luck shines brightly on them. One important festival is the Ganesh Chaturthi, a ten-day festival that celebrates the birth of Ganesh. “Chaturthi” means the fourth day, and it is held in “the sixth month of the Hindu calendar,” which is typically during August or September (Ganesh Chaturthi). During this festival, idols of Ganesh are put on elevated surfaces either in the house or in tents outdoors. The worship starts with *panapratishtha*, which is when the people pray in order to give life to the idols. Next comes the *shhodashopachara*, which are 16 different ways of giving tribute to Ganesh. Everyone makes offerings and paints the idols with red paste. People also put red and yellow flowers on his idols. The idols are then taken to the rivers and immersed at the end of the festival. This is symbolic because it represents Ganesh traveling back home to Mount Kailas. The reason the Ganesh Chaturthi became a public festival is because the Shivaji, the ruler of Maratha, took advantage of the event to bring about nationalism during the war with the Mughals. Also during this time, idols of Ganesh are painted pink and placed in *mandals*, which are street shrines. The festival finally ends with a half-day long procession of 250 or more Ganesh idols on floats, and then pink powder is thrown everywhere. Ganesh craves laddu (a heavy sweet) when people make offerings. A miraculous event that spurred a debate was Ganesh’s Milk Miracle. “Ganesh temples are found in nearly every locale where Hindus live,” and on September 21st, 1995, when priests at temples in North India began to claim that Ganesh was drinking the cow’s milk that was offered to him, this led to widespread debate (Esposito 348). On one hand, believers thought this proved the existence of the Supreme Being while others thought this was a hoax and were quite skeptical. Regardless of what position a person held, this debate sparked the interest of scholars and passionate Hindus, increasing the relative importance of Ganesh in the Hindu tradition.

Throughout his emergence as a powerful and powerful deity, Ganesh has evolved and taken on many responsibilities, as previously mentioned. Overall, his importance to Hindu tradition can be clearly seen through puja and devout worship, and it is safe to say that his significance in Hindu deity worship will forever remain eminent.

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