

Ganesha: The Lord of New Beginnings

Lord Ganesha's emergence

In Hinduism, God is both naturally divine and culturally sublime. Natural in that god is formless and represents the highest manifestation of super consciousness. The trinity is on the lead: Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh (Shiva). Cultural in that god comprises Generative power (represented by Brahma), Operative power (represented by Vishnu) and Destructive power (represented by Shiva). It is in this vast realm that human beings live by wishes for actions, good health, knowledge and achievements. This is where the cult of worshipping Ganesha comes into practice.

Representations of Lord Ganesha reveal various manifestations. He may be portrayed on a perching position; at times, standing or dancing, heroically taking on demons or playing as an infant with his family or engaging in a variety of contemporary situations. He possesses scores of forms and names with two or several hands or heads, which individually bear exclusively different interpretations.

Ganesha (also known as Ganapati or Vinayaka) is one of the most popular and loved deities in the Hindu pantheon of gods and is revered in the Indian sub-continent and beyond. The fascinating attributes about Him is He possesses the head of an elephant with an imposing protruding belly and mounts on a rat; amid variegated confectionaries, He's the lover of sweet balls, *laddus* and *modakas*. He is the supreme of all Hindu gods and the primary ice-breaker in all ritualistic, intellectual and business endeavors.

His image is set in all the temples, in the streets and high roads, or in the open plains at the foot of trees. People invoke Him before they begin any business undertakings and travelers pay homage to Him before they proceed on a journey.

Why Lord Ganesha goes global?

The Legend

As regards to the genesis of this elephant-headed deity, there are several mythological underpinnings; one among others, the most well-received version reels off that He was born from the skin-dirt of his mother Parvati, the venerated wife of Lord Shiva. One day, the infant Ganesha was rendered as guard while she was bathing. At that time, when there appeared the great Shiva after his prolonged meditation in the Kailasha, the Himalayas, the stranger was obstructed by the young guard for entry into her bathing chamber. As a consequence, an irate Shiva chopped off the infant's head with his trident. Mother Parvati was naturally heart-broken, and seeing the grief of His beloved wife, Lord Shiva asked his cohorts, Nandhi, Bhringi and others to fetch the head of any sleeping animal. They ended up finding a sleeping elephant. They brought its head and the great Lord clapped it into the body of the headless infant. This is how Ganesha got His surrogate head. One legend has it that out of remorse and regret, Lord Shiva decided to empower Ganesha and pronounced that 'no rituals or business undertakings can bear fruits without initially invoking the name of Ganesha'. Thus, Ganesha got a new avatar and earned the status of the pre-eminent god in the litany of all Hindu rituals, all serious compositions in writing, and all worldly affairs should begin with an invocation to Lord Ganesha.

Ganesha's popularity began with the traders and merchants of India who travelled or migrated abroad for commercial ventures sometime in the 10th century. They also took their culture, including Ganesha as the principal deity and a divine mascot for success. He appeared with new titles and reincarnations elsewhere as Tshog Bdag in Tibet, Kangiten in Japan, Maha Peinne in Burma, Pra Phikhanet in Thailand, and Gana Aviyo in Sri Lanka. The Hindu God of Wisdom has similar characteristics to that of Janus of the Latins, and the combined version of the Greek gods Dionysus and Apollo, or Horus and Seth of Egypt; they are all embodied in Ganesha.

Sometimes, Ganesha is represented as having three symbolic consorts: Buddhi (of wisdom, knowledge and intelligence), Riddhi (prosperity), and Siddhi (powers and attainment).

Festivals associated with Ganesha are Ganesha Chaturthi or Vinayaka Chaturthi in the *suklapaksa* (the fourth day of the waxing moon in the months of August and September). His birthday is celebrated in the month of Magha (January/February) as *Genasha Jayanti*.

What does the deity mean to devotees?

'*Shrī Ganeshāya namah*' is a very popular phrase in a written form or verbally spelt out in the beginning of any socio-religious ritual, which means obeisance or salutation to Lord Ganesha, who is considered as the fortiori god, one who receives worship in the first place. He is depicted in a zoomorphic form with elephant head on human torso known by different names such as Ganapati, the Lord of demigods considered as Shiva's attendants; Lambodar, big bellied, Vighnesvara, Lord of obstacle, Vighnahartā or Vighnantaka, the obstacle remover, and Siddhantaka, the mission accomplisher. He is very popular among Nepalis—be them Hindus or Buddhists, and is worshipped in the beginning of any of their rituals, hoping to meet their goal without any obstacles. He also symbolises auspicious beginning and is believed to confer good luck on all ceremonies since time immemorial.

Cult of Ganesha Worship

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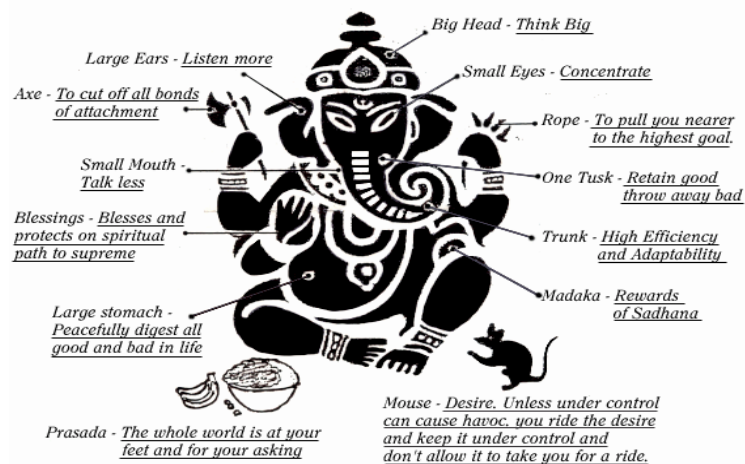
The cult of Ganesha worship is said to have prevailed in 3rd or 4th century in different parts of the Indian subcontinent. The two crownless images of Ganesha found in Kāgesvar and Chāngunāryan are the earliest images of Ganesha temples found in the Kathmandu valley and are believed to belong to 3rd century and 7th century AD

The cult of Ganesha worship is said to have prevailed in 3rd or 4th century in different parts of the Indian subcontinent. The two crownless images of Ganesha found in Kāgesvar and Chāngunāryan are the earliest images of Ganesha temples found in the Kathmandu valley and are believed to belong to 3rd century and 7th century AD respectively. This indicates the prevalence of worshipping Ganesha by the locals in the Kathmandu valley for ages. On the flip side, the mythologies depict the prevalence of Ganesha to the proto-historic origin. The Ganesha located in Chobhār is considered as the oldest Ganesha of the Kathmandu valley, the primordial one, so he is venerated as Ādi-Vināyaka, who was believed to be the only eye-witness to the creation of a passage that drained out water from the palaeo-lake of Nāgarhad.

Icons and Symbols

Lord Ganesha possesses multi-layered attributes, which are symbolic. These attributes indicate that He is attentive, redemptive, permissive, enduring, thoughtful, controlling, rewarding, directive, efficient and adaptive. Metaphorically laden symbols not only make the Lord iconic but they also are didactic. This implies that human beings should endeavor to act accordingly to attain success and prosperity through the grace of His wisdom and erudition in life. Ichnographically, Ganesha is depicted as elephant-headed, one-tusked, with three small eyes, but two big ears and a big protuberant belly and two hands, holding a rosary in his right and a bowl full of *laddus* (sweet balls) on his left hand, generally in sitting posture or Lalitāshan.

Ganesha Symbolism



An icon of Ganesha is always depicted with a mouse as His vehicle. This has only one tusk, the other having been lost in a scuffle between Him and Parasurāma when He opposed the latter's entrance to Shiva's inner apartments. Hence, Ganesha is called Ekadanta.

Religious and cultural encounters

Ganesha is not only worshipped in the beginning of any rituals, but also worshipped on completion of major rituals, or when the desired wishes are fulfilled. People from Patan, Kirtipur and surrounding areas organise a Kvenāpujā, meaning worship of Ganesha of Chobhār after completion of major life cycle rituals such as wedding, Vratibandha (coming of age ritual for male) and so on. Similarly, the Ganesha located near Pakunājol, popularly known as Pokonāidyo among the local Newārs is worshipped by newly wedded brides some time after their marriage. The term *Pokonāidyo* is derived from *Poko*, meaning fermented rice for brewing the traditional beer and *ināidyo* means Ganesha. It is believed that the Pokonaidyo bestows upon the new bride with the skill of making good rice beer. Hence, He is called as "Thonsākim Ganedyo" meaning Ganesha who makes beer tasty. There is also a tradition of observing fasting on Tuesdays during Chaturmas for four months, from Harisayani to Haribodhini ekadahi, which is widely known as "Mangalbār-absan" in the name of Ganesha as Tuesday is the day of devotion to Ganesha. It is believed that by fasting on Tuesdays, one's wish is fulfilled with desired conjugal partners or off springs. Scholars are of the opinion that previously Ganesha was known as the Lord of hurdle, later transformed into a benevolent deity, popularly came to be known as obstacle remover or symbol of auspicious beginning, who brings good luck.

Kathmandu: A haven for religious tourism

There are numerous Ganesha shrines in Kathmandu. Popular are just the four shrines. There is no equivocal affirmation as to which shrines of Ganesha make a set of four.

However, according to the protective inventory maintained by the Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies (CNAS), Tribhuvan University, the set of four consists of Surya Vinayak, south of Bhaktapur; Jal Vinayak at the Chobhar gorge; Rakta or Chandra Vinayak in Chabahil; and Karya Vinayak close to Bungmati. Surya Vinayak temple, also called the temple of the rising sun has a

reputation for curing retarded children. Jala-vināyak of Chobhar is considered as primordial Ganesha, who is considered as obstacle remover. Chandra-vināyak, located in Chābahil, Kathmandu is considered as physician Ganesha, who heals the ailments of the devotees. He is considered as the healer of unrecoverable diseases. Traditional Newār physicians worship him as their tutelary god and their students are initiated with secret mantra in front of his image, and Karya Vinayak located in between two Newar settlements Khokana and Bungamati is considered as mission accomplisher.

The devotees believe that the worship of Ganesha, who is often associated with Saraswati (Goddess of learning) and Laxmi (Goddess of wealth), ensures success in terms of both knowledge and wealth.

The Lord of new beginnings

Ganesha is a zoomorphic deity by virtue of his head being that of an elephant. Ganesha is called the Lord of the Beginnings. Animals are more natural seconded by human beings. Ecosystemically, human existence without animals is unthinkable. Hence, the ways, behaviors and attributes of animals are venerated with high regard. Thus Ganesha is better posited as the Lord of the Beginnings in Hindu religious rituals. On yet another plane of thought, His zoomorphic posture is the result of power that has been bestowed to him during recreation by both Shiva and Parvati representing Purusha and Shakti of Super divine consciousness. This uncommon empowerment of Lord Ganesha is so surpassing that He is remembered and venerated prior to starting any ritual.

As per another legend, once Shiva and Parvati, asked both their sons, Kumar (Kartikye) and Ganesha to circumambulate the Sumeru mountain (Mt. Kailāsh). The first returnee will get worshipped first in every ritual. Kumar being smart rushed to Sumeru on the peacock, his conveyance, but poor Ganesah having protuberant belly even could not think of travelling all the way to Sumeru, thought for a while and eventually circumambulate both his parents, with obeisance he said "for me you are every thing, nothing else is greater than you, not even Sumeru", hearing Ganesha's wisdom and devotion towards oneself, Shiva blessed him as recipient of worship in the first place.

The Four Ganesha Shrines in the Kathmandu Valley



Surya Vinayaka



Jal Vinayaka



Chandra Vinayaka



Karya Vinayaka
