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Iconography: Meaning and Myths of Icons

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Ganesh Cult

Ganesh, also known as Ganapati, Vinayaka, Vignaharta, Buddhipriya, Pillaiyar, and Ekadanta, is one of the most popular and loved Gods in Hindu culture.[1] The extent of his popularity has boosted him to be included in the Hindu pantheon, the *Panchayatana Puja*, consisted of the 5 main cults: the Vishnu cult, the Shiva cult, the Shakti cult, the Surya cult and lastly, the Ganesha cult[2] which started spreading in 6th Century AD[3] and reached its peak prominence in the 9th Century AD.[4] Together, the *panchatyatana puja* are known to represent the five aspects of God – the five elements of Earth, Air, water, Fire and Ether. Ganesha is supposed to represent water, which is why is he associated with creation, according to Ganapatya belief and Hindu cosmology[4]. Born as the son of Shiva the Destroyer and his consort Parvati,[5] there are numerous stories in the Puranas (3rd – 16th Century AD), which tell different stories of

[1] Coomaraswamy, Ananda. "Ganesha."*Bulletin of the Museum of Fine Arts* 26.154 (1928): 30-31. *JSTOR*. Web. 17 Dec. 2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4170104>.

[2] Das, Subhamoy. "Ganesha: Lord of Success (The Hindu Elephant-Deity)." *About Religion*. Web. 17 Dec. 2014. <http://hinduism.about.com/od/lordganesha/a/ganesha.htm>.

[3] Varadpande, Manohar Laxman. "Introduction." *History of Indian Theatre*. Vol. 2. New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1992. 5. Print.

[4] Grewal, Royina. *The Book of Ganesha*. New Delhi: Viking, 2001. *Google Books*. Web. 19 Dec. 2014. <https://books.google.co.in/books?id=0xzlP9CXUQsC&pg=PP5&dq=Ganesha&source=gbs_selected_pages&cad=2#v=onepage&q=Ganesha&f=false>.

[5] Moulton, J. C. "Hindu Image from Sarawak." *Journal of the Straits Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* No. 85 (1922): 210-11. *JSTOR*. Web. 19 Dec. 2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41561408>.

Ganesh's birth. While there are myths saying that Shiva's spirit gave birth to Ganesh,[6] in the *Vamana Purana* (450–900 AD) and *Matsya Purana* (250–500 AD)[7], Ganesh is Parvati's creation[8]. Whereas, a completely different school of belief is the popular Vaishnavite belief is that Ganesha is said to be Krishna's incarnation.[9]

      Known for his elephant head, Ganesha's many names all correspond to what he is known for. While the name *Ganesha* is used in North India, South India prefers to call him *Ganapati*, which means 'Lord of the Hosts' as he is the appointed head of Shiva's regime of Ganas.[1] His other names *Ekadanta* or *Pillaiyar* are derived from his appearance of having only one tusk (both Danta and Pella mean tooth and tusk), having removed one of his tusks to write the epic Mahabharata (400 BCE - 400 AD).[10] His other name *Vignaharta* is in reference to his Puranic title as the 'Remover of Obstacles,' although, originally, he was a malevolent deity known as *Vignakarta* as the 'Lord of the Obstacles' as he was appointed by the Gods in the heavens to create hurdles for the people so that the heavens wouldn't be over crowded.[8] Ganesha's dual role of being the 'Lord' and 'Remover' of Obstacles shows the transformative nature

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[6] Handelman, Don. "Myths of Murugan: Asymmetry and Hierarchy in a South Indian Puranic Cosmology." *History of Religions* 27.2 (1987): 133-70. *JSTOR*. Web. 19 Dec. 2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1062666>.

[7] Collins, Charles Dillard. *The Iconography and Ritual of Śiva at Elephanta*. Albany: State U of New York, 1988. *Google Books*. State University of New York Press, 1 Jan. 1988. Web. 19 Dec. 2014. <http://books.google.co.in/books?id=pQNi6kAGJQ4C&pg=PA36&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false>.

[8] Krishan, Y. "Evolution of Gaṇeśa." *East and West* 44.2/4 (1994): 293-314. *JSTOR*. Web. 19 Dec. 2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29757155>.

[9] Phillips, K. J. "Hindu Avatars, Moslem Martyrs, and Primitive Dying Gods in E. M. Forster's "A Passage to India"" *Journal of Modern Literature* 15.1 (1988): 120-40. *JSTOR*. Web. 19 Dec. 2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3831536>.

[10] Michael, S. M. "The Origin of the Ganapati Cult." *Asian Folklore Studies* 42.1 (1983): 91-116. *JSTOR*. Web. 19 Dec. 2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1178368>.

of the deities' different portrayal in different texts.[11] Ganesha, in this case, was originally a negative character around the 4th Century BCE, who soon turned good in the Puranic times (1st Century AD - 18th Century).[12]

Additionally, Ganesha is also the God of Intellect and Wisdom, the Destroyer of Selfishness and Pride. It is said that he is the personification of the elemental universe in all of its different forms and figures.[2] Since he is the 'Lord of Beginnings', every Hindu prayer and Tantric worship starts with a dedication to Ganesha, to please him into blessing and providing an easy path to glory.[13] [14] Ganesha is the Lord of all Creatures, the Lord of Success, and the Lord of Education, Knowledge and Wisdom. He has a rat as his vehicle, which, as legend goes, was actually a demon that Ganesha defeated by stomping upon him and transforming into a rat.[12] A patron of Letters and the Arts, he is often depicted as a dancing figure, surrounded by musicians to please and entertain his parents. He is also associated with the first chakra, the *Muladhara Chakra*, representing preservation, survival and health.[15]

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[11] Hajjavanija, Jitraphan. *Ganesha - Iconographic Conception, Motif, and Its Social Outlet*. S.l.: Grin Verlag, 2013. *Google Books*. Grin Verlag. Web. 19 Dec. 2014.
<https://books.google.co.in/books?id=dtG29kzKqxwC&printsec=frontcover&dq=Ganesha+iconography&hl=en&sa=X&ei=9veTVNniJIi7uASY74HACQ&ved=0CCEQ6AEwAQ#v=onepage&q=Ganesha%20iconography&f=false>.

[12] Class notes.

[13] D., G. P. "Lord Ganesha and His Historical Plight." *Economic and Political Weekly* 37.34 (2002): 3483-484. *JSTOR*. Web. 19 Dec. 2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4412508>.

[14] Rajarajan, R.k.k. "Sugarcane Ganapati." *East and West* 51.3/4 (2001): 379-84. *JSTOR*. Web. 19 Dec. 2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29757520>.

[15] Phillips, Charles, Michael Kerrigan, and David Gould. *Ancient India's Myths and Beliefs*. New York: Rosen Pub., 2012. *Google Books*. Rosen Publishing Group. Web. 19 Dec. 2014.
<https://books.google.co.in/books?id=p3-RkE-Xxa0C&pg=PA107&lpg=PA107&dq=ganesha+cult+beliefs&source=bl&ots=BW-IyBFCLi&sig=4xenO2fFgUufiFWLrwbJwgERov8&hl=en&sa=X&ei=u6OTVKiOIcG5mAWCxYLgAw&ved=0CHUQ6AEwCA#v=onepage&q=ganesha%20cult%20beliefs&f=false>.

He is said to be created by both Shiva and Parvati, but there are stories where he may have been created by only Shiva, or by Parvati, or may have just been discovered by Shiva and Parvati.[8] Ganesha also has another brother called Skanda or Kartikeya, who is worshipped in South India as the older brother as the manifestation of courage, poise, and determination to do right.[10] His lack of popularity in North India puts him down, literally, as the younger brother of Ganesha.[12]

Originally, a non-brahmanical God, he was worshipped as a rural deity in Maharashtra, by the lower castes since he was an idol of the masses, representing what was exclusive to the lower castes – the arts.[16] He is also said to be one of the main reasons how and why animal worship popularized in India because of his therianthropomorphic appearance.[17]

Ganesha was a non-Vedic, Dravidian God.[10] Although a few references were made in the Rigveda (1500BC – 1000BC), to Ganesha's character, to describe the power of Indra (and his being addressed to as Ganapati), healing nature of Indra's friend Brahmanaspati and the fierce destructive nature of the Maruts, Ganesha himself wasn't specifically named until the Puranas (3rd - 16th century AD), which is what allows us to trace back the extent of his popularity to early times.[18] The confusion

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[16] Rege, Sharmila. "Understanding Popular Culture: The Satyashodhak and Ganesh Mela in Maharashtra." *Sociological Bulletin* 49.2 (2000): 193-210. *JSTOR*. Web. 19 Dec. 2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23620114>.

[17] Fuller, Steve. "Chimeras, Hybrids and Interspecies Research: Politics and Policymaking. By Andrea L. Bonnicksen. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2009. 192p. $26.95." *Perspectives on Politics* 9.02 (2011): 424-26. *JSTOR*. Web. 19 Dec. 2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41307119>.

[18] Gesler, Wilbert M. "Hindu Varanasi." *Geographical Review* 90.2 (2000): 222-37. *JSTOR*. Web. 19 Dec. 2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/216120>.

between the different references to Brahmanspati and Ganesa is what led to the wisdom trait of Brahmanaspati to transfer onto the Ganesha we know now.[19] Those who go by this train of thought also firmly believe that Ganesha was originally a malevolent deity who later became benevolent as he became more prominent and his cult grew.[10] Scholars also believe that Ganesha was a Non-Aryan God, who was originally a demon – he was even known as Vinayaka which means evil spirit – because of his constant associations with demons and other evil spirits like Sala, Katamkata, and Devayajana and other spirits mentioned in the *Yajnavalkya Smrti* and *Manava Grhyasutra*.[20] [21] Ganesha additionally has 4 evil types of spiritual representations of himself also known as Vinayakas, who are said to possess people and and bring bad luck, as mentioned in the *Manava Grhyasutra*.[22] Originally, Ganesha's traits were portrayed as primitive and non-Aryan, but as time progressed, he was granted a few aspects of Krishna in the *Brahmavaivartta Purana* (10th Century AD) to bring him up to the level of the other Gods.[20]

Ganesha's varied names prove him to be the head of Vinayakas (evil spirits) and Ganas. His references in the Puranas also show that Ganesha was originally a malevolent demon himself.[19] His appointed role of the placer and remover of obstacles means that he puts problems in front of enemies of the gods, and removes

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[19] Krishan, Y. "IS GAṆEŚA A VEDIC GOD ?" *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute* 71.1/4 (1990): 61-70. *JSTOR*. Web. 19 Dec. 2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41693517>.

[20] Banerjea, Jitendra Nath. "Ganesha - Vyantara Devatas." *The Development of Hindu Iconography*. Calcutta: U of Calcutta, 1956. 354-61. Print.

[21] Brown, W. Norman. "Review: Yakṣas." *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 51.3 (1931): 286-88. *JSTOR*. Web. 19 Dec. 2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/593455>.

[22] Gupte, Ramesh Shankar. "Ganesha." *Iconography of the Hindus, Buddhists, and Jains*. Bombay: D.B. Taraporevala Sons, 1972. 47-48. Print.

them on behalf of the gods, to prevent over crowding in the heavens. Appointed by Parvati, he is believed to create desires for wealth in people to divert them from the path of pilgrimage to heavens.[23] Etymologically, 'Ga' symbolizes intellect (Buddhi), while 'Na' symbolizes wisdom (Vijanana), in addition to the fact that, in some parts of India, his consorts were Buddhi, Riddi (prosperity), and Siddhi (attainment), showed that he was the Master of Wisdom and Intellect.[57] In South India and some parts of North India, Ganesha is known to be Brahmacharin, however, he still has his three consorts – Buddhi, Siddhi, and Riddhi in some myths.[8]

In terms of power, Ganesha was speculated to be the sole leader of the animal cult, because of his rat vahana's possible nature of being an emblem of different Dravidian tribes, and because scholars see elephants as 'determinants' below anthropomorphic symbols of godly potential.[24] In some cases, he is also seen as the combined embodiment of Shiva and Vishnu, to symbolize the camaraderie between the two sects. In the Kusana age (140BC – 1BC), Vaishnavites and Shaivites believed that the two Gods were in Ganesha, as hypothesized by Shiva holding Vishnu's emblem on a Kusanic coin. In the Mahabharata, Shiva is referred to as Ganesa, while Vishnu is called Ganesvara, which could suggest Shiva and Vishnu being alike, acting as inspirations for Ganesha's creation.[10]

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[23] Doniger, Wendy. *The Origins Of Evil In Hindu Mythology*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976. Print.

[24] Brown, Robert L. *Ganesh: Studies of an Asian God*. Albany: State U of New York, 1991. *Google Books*. State University Of New York Press. Web. 19 Dec. 2014.
<https://books.google.co.in/books?id=oF-Hqih3pBAC&pg=PA224&dq=Ganesha+animal+cult&source=gbs_selected_pages&cad=2#v=onepage&q=Ganesha%20animal%20cult&f=false>.

However, despite the number of papers written on Ganesha, how exactly a non-Vedic and therianthropomorphic God was included in the sacred Hindu pantheon and how quickly his character was changed to be so widely accepted in the Indian culture is still not full explored.[8] The development of Ganesha is said to have originated from the worship of the elephant in the Kabul Valley in 4th Century BC, while there is evidence that the elephant was even worshipped by the Vedic Aryans. The Ganesha cult developed comparatively late, some time in the post Gupta age (500-750 AD).[20] The earliest representation of Ganesha was the sculpture elephant headed yakshas in ancient Mathura art, which are suspected to be prototypes of later Ganesha iconographical representations in later periods.[25] Trying to trace the historical origins of this god, scholars believe that have traced the inception of the Ganesha cult to harvest season. The different attributes of Ganesha were critically analysed to search for meaning and connection to farming – the fast multiplying nature of his rat vahana symbolizes the fertility and fecundity of the lands, the name 'Ekadanta' representing ploughshare, the yellow colour of Ganesha which is characteristic to a corncob which signifies good harvest,[10] Ganesha being the 'Mother of the Lands' Ambika's son in the *Talavakara Upanishads* (1200 – 500 BCE),[26] and Ganesha being in control of his 'rat' vehicle, which is considered a pest in farming, all portray Ganesha as the Lord of the Harvest,[10] which is logical as he was originally worshipped by the lower castes who worked in such areas.

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[25] Dhavalikar, M. K. "ORIGIN OF GAṆEŚA." *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute* 71.1/4 (1990): 1-24. *JSTOR*. Web. 19 Dec. 2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41693515>.

[26] Muir, J. "Uma and Mahadeva." *Original Sanskrit Texts on the Origin and History of the People of India: Their Religion and Institutions*. 2nd ed. Amsterdam: Oriental, 1967. 424-425. Print.

Iconographically, Ganesha's representations have changed drastically over the collective time. As mentioned before, the depictions of Ganesha have developed from a simple elephant in early depictions, to elephant headed figures in the Puranic times, to the current Ganesha with his potbellied figure, four arms, and characteristic elephant head.[11] Shown in ornamental Brahmanical attire, Ganesha's hair in put up in Kirit Mukuta, in a gold crown to show his divinity.[27] In most sculptures and paintings, he is portrayed as standing in Samapada posture or seated, although there are depictions of him dancing to show him in the act of entertaining his parents. Generally, he is depicted with four arms, each holding his characteristic attributes – his broken tusk in his lower right hand, a noose in the upper left hand, a bowl of modaks (a Maharashtrian sweet) in his lower left hand, and an axe or goad in the upper right hand.[28] In some modern depictions, the lower right hand doesn't hold the tusk, but is in Abhay Mudra, providing protection to the devotee.[27] Each item has its own symbolic significance, however Ganesha's attributes could change to include a water lily, rosary, or a spear.[5]

Furthermore, each attribute of Ganesha has its own significant symbolism, which provides explanations to why and what Ganesha is known for. The noose indicates bondage of passions (which is also symbolized by his belt of a snake over his belly), and how he captures all the obstacles to remove them, while the axe represents

[27] Lerner, Martin. *The Flame and the Lotus: Indian and Southeast Asian Art from the Kronos Collections*. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1984. *Google Books*. Metropolitan Museum of Art. Web. 19 Dec. 2014.
<https://books.google.co.in/books?id=c59UogZeXFYC&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false>.

[28] Ghose, Madhuvanti. *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies* 35.2, NOTABLE ACQUISITIONS at the Art Institute of Chicago (2009): n. pag. *JSTOR*. Web. 19 Dec. 2014.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40652402>.

destruction and war.[29] If a goad replaces the axe, it represents control over one's own emotions, and specifically to Ganesha – creates obstacles.[12] The broken tusk is a symbol of sacrifice and proves his patronage of arts and letters,[1] because he had to purposely break off his own tusk to write the epic Mahabharata because it was dedicated to him by the sage Vyasa.[2] The bowl of modaks, or sometimes laddoos, shows how he has the ability to bestow prosperity upon his devotees.[30] His trunk is usually turned to his left, towards the bowl of sweets, showing his childish greed to add a relatable and human touch to his name.[31] A popular belief of the Ganesh cult is that the four arms collectively show how Lord Ganesha is omnipresent in all directions, and the right side symbolizes reason while the left side symbolizes emotion, showing how he has control over mind and heart, together.[32] Another belief states that the four arms represent the mind, ego, intellect and conscience – attributes original associated with Brahma, whose title of the Creator is passed onto Ganesha for the Ganesha cult followers.[33] In the *Ganapati Upanishad* (Mid-17th Century), Ganesha's head symbolizes the soul (Atman), which is the most supreme of all of man's reality, while his human body (Maya) symbolizes the earthly materialistic living of humans.[34]

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[29] Subramuniyaswam, Satguru S. *Loving Ganesha*. 1st ed. Vol. 1. N.p.: Himalayan Academy Publications, n.d. *Google Books*. Himalayan Academy Publications. Web. 19 Dec. 2014. <https://books.google.co.in/books?id=_sV4_JpQvycC&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false>.

[30] "Hindu Deities: Lord Ganesha." *Hindu Deities: Lord Ganesha*. Kashmiri Overseas Association, n.d. Web. 17 Dec. 2014. <http://www.koausa.org/Gods/God8.html>.

[31] Mahony, William K. "Review: Ganesh: Studies of an Asian God." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 52.4 (1993): 1050-052. *JSTOR*. Web. 19 Dec. 2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2059407>.

[32] Coomaraswamy, Ananda K. "Indian Images with Many Arms." *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* 22.118 (1913): 189. *JSTOR*. Web. 19 Dec. 2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/859216>.

[33] Pugh, Judy F. "Celestial Destiny: Popular Art and Personal Crisis." *India International Centre Quarterly* 13.1, IMAGES (1986): 54-69. *JSTOR*. Web. 20 Dec. 2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23001675>.

[34] Dalal, Roshen. *Hinduism: An Alphabetical Guide*. New Delhi: Penguin, 2010. *Google Books*. Penguin Books. Web. 19 Dec. 2014.

The elephant head also symbolizes wisdom and understanding, traits commonly associated with elephants, while the human body shows that he feels human kindness and compassion for others. According to the folktales, Ganesha's big ears are supposed to advise people to listen more, small mouth is to talk less, and small eyes are to focus on small details. His fat belly, which gives rise to his name *Lambodara*, signifies how man should be able to digest all the good and bad things in life.[35] Even the colour of the red/yellow attire worn by Ganesha holds meaning – Red symbolizing worldly activity and chaos, while yellow symbolizes peace, happiness and truth. In addition to representing control over passions, the snake around his belly also represents his restraint over all forms of energy.[24]

As the times progressed, different medieval icons of Ganesha were developed. In the *Ganapati Upanishad*, Ganesha is called the 'Supreme Self', and 32 different icons arose, to which different people pray to different icons according to what aspect they consider to have the most significance. The 32 forms of Ganesha are Bala Ganapati, Taruna Ganapati, Bhakti Ganapati, Vira Ganapati, Shakti Ganapati, Dhvija Ganapati, Siddhi Ganapati, Ucchista Ganapati, Vighna Ganapati, Kshipra Ganapati, Heramba Ganapati, Lakshmi Ganapati, Maha Ganapati, Vijaya Ganapati, Nritya Ganapati, Urdhva Ganapati, Ekakshara Ganapati, Varada Ganapati, Tryakshara Ganapati, Kshipara Prasada Ganapati, Haridra Ganapati, Ekadanta Ganapati, Srishti Ganapati, Uddandta Ganapati, Rinamochana Ganapati, Dhundi Ganapati, Dvimukha Ganapati, Trimukha Ganapati, Sinha Ganapati, Yoga Ganapati, Durga Ganapati and

<http://books.google.co.in/books?id=zrk0AwAAQBAJ&pg=PT470&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false>.

[35] Wright, Astri. "Javanese Mysticism and Art: A Case of Iconography and Healing." *Indonesia* No. 52 (1991): 85-104. *JSTOR*. Web. 20 Dec. 2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3351156>.

Sankatahara Ganapati.[36] Out of these 32 forms, certain specific icons gained more popularity than the rest, based on what they depicted, provided and represented. They rose to such great extents that the 6 most popular icons of Ganesha lead to the development of 6 different sects in the Ganesha cult who each worshipped the 6 different aspects of Maha, Haridra, Ucchista, Laxmi, Shakti and Heramba.[20]


The first and most popular sect of the Ganesha cult worshipped 'the Great' Maha Ganesha, a red skinned, three eyed, ten armed figure carrying his broken tusk, a pomegranate, a club, Kama's sugarcane bow, noose, blue lotus, a jewel box, a paddy sprig, discus and a mace, which can all be seen in the picture above[37], depicting this specific aspect. Accompanied by a white 'Shakti' on his left, he is the representation of Ganesha as the Supreme Being, and stands for happiness, prosperity and brilliance.[36] The Maha Ganapatyas believe that he existed before the Universe, created it, and will continue to live even after it has been destroyed.[4]

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[36] Rao, Gopinatha. *Elements of Hindu Iconography*. New York: Paragon Book Reprint, 1968. *Google Books*. Motilal Banarsidass. Web. 19 Dec. 2014. <http://books.google.co.in/books?id=MJD-KresBwIC&pg=PA58-IA69&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false>.

[37] Sritattvanidhi. *Maha Ganapati*. Digital image. *Wikimedia Commons*. N.p., n.d. Web. 19 Dec. 2014. <http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3AMahaganpati.jpg>.

The second sect of the Ganapatyas are the Haridra Ganapatyas who worship Haridra Ganapati (also known as Ratri Ganapati), whose picture can be seen above[38]. Golden in color, dressed in yellow clothing, and sitting on an ornamental golden throne, the four armed and three eyed Haridra Ganapati, holds his tusk, a modak, a noose to bring his devotees forward and a goad to push them on.[36]

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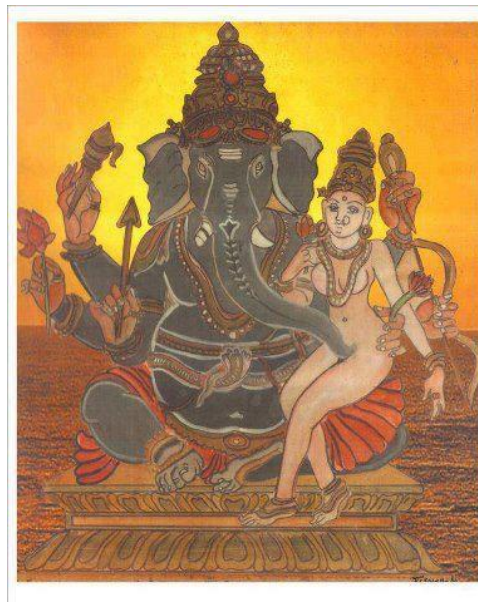
[38] Sanagala, Naveen. *Haridra Ganapati*. Digital image. *Hindupad*. N.p., n.d. Web. 19 Dec. 2014. <http://i0.wp.com/hindupad.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/Haridra-Ganapati.jpg>.

The third sect is the Ucchista Ganapatyas who follow the deity of 'Blessed Offerings' and the 'Tantric Guardian of Culture', as pictured above.[39] Six armed and blue complexioned, he holds a vina, pomegranate, a paddy sprig, a blue lotus and a rosary.[34] Accompanied by his consort, Ganesha has his trunk on her lap, and is often seen as an erotic form because of her often nude appearance. This particular aspect is worshipped when the devotee is in the sacrilegious state (Ucchista) state to get what is desired.[36]

The fourth sect is the Lakshmi Ganapatya sect which worships the Lakshmi Ganapati for his Intelligence and Accomplishment, as pictured above.[40] Commonly seen in pure white, in varada mudra – symbolizing boon giving, he holds a green parrot – sign of intelligence, a sword, pomegranatae, noose, vase, goad, a creeper

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[39] *Ucchista Ganapati*. Digital image. *Flor De Lotus*. N.p., n.d. Web. 19 Dec. 2014. <http://preman.zip.net/images/ucchistaganapati.jpg>.

[40] *Lakshmi Ganapati*. Digital image. *Hindupad*. N.p., n.d. Web. 19 Dec. 2014. <http://hindupad.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/Lakshmi-Ganapati.jpg>.

and a jewel box in his eight arms. On his two sides, he is seen embracing his two

consorts Buddhi and Siddi (Intelligence and Achievement).

The fifth sect is the Heramba Ganapatya which worships the Heramba

aspect for protecting the weak. This sect is particularly popular in Nepal, where the

Tantric worship of Ganesha is most popular. As seen above[41], he is depicted with five

faces – four facing the four directions and one raised to the top, looking upwards - in

white, riding a big lion to protect the weak.[34] His hands are in varada and abhay mudra

to show protection and boon giving, while holding a rosary, noose, his tusk, a modak, a

battle-axe and mallet. He is worshipped with Devi or Shakti as his consort, which are

reincarnations of his mother Parvati.

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[41] *Heramba Ganapati*. Digital image. *Hindupad*. N.p., n.d. Web. 19 Dec. 2014.
<http://hindupad.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/Heramba-Ganapati.jpg>.

Lastly, the sixth most popular sect of the Ganesha cult is the Shakti Ganapatyas which worship the aspect which combines the Maha, Urdhava, Ucchista, Lakshmi and Pingala aspects into one Tantric form[34], as seen above.[42] Eight armed and white, the Shakti Ganapati holds a parrot, a pomegranate, a lotus, a water vessel, a gold set with rubies, goad, noose. He embraces his consort Sakti on his left knee, and is known for guarding the household. His right hand is in abhay mudra representing protection and hence, the Ganapatyas worship this aspect to bring peace and safety to their households.[24]

In the *Manusmriti* (5th century BCE), the collective Ganesha cult was initially a Shudra cult because of the popularity among the lower castes and relevance of the deity to their livelihood. The Ganapatyas, who mostly developed in the state of Maharashtra. The main festival celebrated all around India to honour Ganesha is known as Ganesh Chaturti, which is mainly celebrated in Andra Pradesh, Gujarat,

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[42] *Shakti Ganapati*. Digital image. *Hindupad*. N.p., n.d. Web. 19 Dec. 2014. <http://hindupad.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/Shakti-Ganapati.jpg>.

Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra. As the times changed and India got more and more urbanized, the 'Shudra' majority of the Ganesha cult began to decrease, and more and more people of higher power began to follow Ganesha, which is precisely the reason why there are more temples dedicated to Ganesha than any other deity in India.[8]

Within India itself, it is said that the Ganesha cult evolved from Maharashtra. In Maharashtra, the growth and development of the Ganesha cult had three booms of popularity which lead to the current widespread nature of the cult. The first boom was the appropriation of Ganesha by the ruling classes. Hence, when the Peshwa clan overthrew the Marathi kings, they appropriated Ganesha to be their family emblem to promote themselves. By using Ganesha as their *kuldaivata,* they built numerous temples and built several traditions for Ganesha's worship to bring significance to their name and to gain political power. Even currently, the traditions are still upheld in the Ashtavinayak sites in the name of Ganesha, as the Peshwas had almost made Ganesha the national deity of Maharashtra.[13]

The second boom was when freedom fighter, Lokmanya Tilak was released from prison and began using Ganesha to round up support. In 1893, he launched the first ever *Ganeshotsava* Ganesh festival. There, in order to find some sort of support against the British, Tilak discovered relentless support in promoting Ganesha to a higher stance.[43] Not only did he achieve his goal of elevating Ganesha's importance to the public, but the festival also constructed the present day taste in Marathi theatre.[13] Other individuals also contributed in increasing the popularity of

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[43] Kolhatkar, Madhavi. "Review: GAṆEŚA, LORD OF OBSTACLES, LORD OF BEGINNINGS." *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute* 85 (2004): 186-89. *JSTOR*. Web. 19 Dec. 2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41691966>.

Ganesha. Famous poet Ramadasa dedicated many of his poems and songs to Ganesha, which helped spread the word about Ganesha, in the 1600s.[4]

The third and final boom was in 1990, when Pune's political party leader decided to appropriate the festival of Ganesha Utsava to 'Ganesha festival' in an attempt to shape his career.[13] While the locals had strong opinions about the change taking away the traditions and portraying the age old festival as something unnecessarily new and exotic, the globalizing effect of the modern world soon raised the popularity of Ganesh through word of mouth.[13]

From here, the glory of Ganesha soon grew to other parts of India and then later spread to other Asian countries. Indian shrines dedicated to Ganesha exist everywhere – from Kanchipuram to Trichy, from Nagapattinam to Varanasi, from Mayurapuram to Tiruvanthapuram. Scholars have speculated that such shrines only exist in places where there could be a danger to life.[36] Places with steep slopes, dense forests and deep rivers often have hundreds of pilgrims travelling to show their determination to worship the deity and prove their worth[44]. Even in temples dedicated to other deities, a sculpture of Ganesha is placed outside as the protector of the entrance. The three most important pilgrimage sites in India are the Ganesh temple below the Hariparbat Hill near Srinagar, the Ganeshghati temple on a cliff along the Kishenganga river and the temple over the Lidar Lake in Ganeshbal.[45]

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[44] "Abodes of Ganesha." *Karpaka Vinayakar Temple Pillayarpatti*. N.p., n.d. Web. 20 Dec. 2014. <http://templenet.com/Tamilnadu/karppill.html>.

[45] Patil, Vimla. "Indian Influence Abroad." *Ganesha*. Dimak Consultants, n.d. Web. 18 Dec. 2014. <http://www.esamskriti.com/essay-chapters/Ganesha-~-Global-God-in-a-Globalised-World-1.aspx>.

As mentioned earlier, the earliest representation of Ganesha was seen in ancient Mathura art where a 5 headed elephant sculpture was discovered, dating back to around 4th Century AD. The damaged quality of the sculpture prevents us from knowing if it was a sculpture of the forms of *Vinayakas* or *Gajasirsa Yakshas*, however, the elephant shaped heads are clearly in reference to Ganesha worship.[47] Essentially, the sculpture, now seen in the Mathura Museum, is divided into three horizontal sections: the first section has a fenced design, while the second section has five worshippers under six arches over their heads, while the five headed yakshas are below the worshippers in the most damaged third section. Varanasi, however, is a religious place filled with different Ganesha sculptural representations. The most popular sculptural representation is the *Panch-Ganesha* sculpture depicting 4 Vinayakas and 1 elephant right in the middle. The 4 Vinayakas are replicas of each other, all seated in Lalitasana and carrying the typical Ganesha attributes of modaks, a battle-axe, etc., while the central elephant figure is standing.[46] This particular sculpture of Panca Ganesa is seen in many places – in carvings of the red sandstone shine replica in Laksmi Kunda, dated to around 900 AD, and in a Shiva temple at Jamaroli, Jaipur, dated to around 11th Century, and the Somesvara temple at Kirandu, around the same time.[47] Varanasi itself has at least four sculptures of the same variety, with two similar sculptures in Khadwaha in Madhya Pradesh. The four Vinayaks are said to represent the four directions (Diskshas), whereas collectively, the middle figure could also be seen as the 'Lord of the Vinayakas' because of its central and standing position.[47]

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[46] Bastian, A. "A Visit to the Ruined Cities and Buildings of Cambodia." *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society of London* 35 (1865): 74-87. *JSTOR*. Web. 21 Dec. 2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3698080>.

[47] Agrawala, Prithvi K. "Some Varanasi Images of Gaṇapati and Their Iconographic Problem." *Artibus Asiae* 39.2 (1977): 139-55. *JSTOR*. Web. 21 Dec. 2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3250197>.

Outside India, the most famous Ganesha sculpture was in a Buddhist stupa in Sri Lanka, dated to the 1st Century BC. Scholars theorize that it's possibly due to the contact between the Sri Lankan Buddhists and the Amaravati Buddhists in Andra Pradesh. Ganesh became the Indian commercial traders' primary deity, as he was the God of New Beginnings. Hence, the more they travelled and more Indians migrated away, the word of Ganesha spread to other parts of the world. In Afghanistan, the Ganesh cult was easily embraced, as elephants were already considered sacred. We know from sculptures dated back to 531 AD, in Tibet and China, Ganesha was to be worshipped by Buddhists,[48] who later brought it to the Japanese, where it was embraced by the Japanese Shingon School of Buddhism which developed a popular cult around two elephant headed figures in embrace.[4] In Indonesia, Ganesha was portrayed as almost demonic because it was heavily influenced by the Javanese Tantricism.[49] There is also evidence of an elephant headed god in Mexico, and sculptures dating back to early Aryan period, in Oxonian excavations in the United Kingdom.[4] In Cambodia and Vietnam, Ganesha is usually independently worshipped in his classical 'Ganesha' form, but if seen with Shiva, is referred to as Vinayaka. Central Asian Buddhists preferred to worship Ganesha by his Vinayaka form, while South East Asians followed the Hindu form. Essentially, Ganesha is the only God so

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[48] Jones, Constance, and James D. Ryan. *Encyclopedia of Hinduism*. New York: Facts On File, 2007. *Google Books*. Web. 19 Dec. 2014.
<https://books.google.co.in/books?id=OgMmceadQ3gC&pg=PA162&dq=ganesh+in+tibet+south+asia&hl=en&sa=X&ei=IQ2UVNnDBcvJuATg5ILQCQ&ved=0CCEQ6AEwAQ#v=onepage&q=ganesh%20in%20tibet%20south%20asia&f=false>.

[49] Schober, Juliane. "Review: The Disguises of the Demon: The Development of the Yaksa in Hinduism and Buddhism." *Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 8.1 (1993): 138-40. *JSTOR*. Web. 19 Dec. 2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40860937>.

far that has spread so far and has so many versions of itself related to other religions

like Hindus, Buddhists and Jains.[25]

Even though there is no specific area in which the Ganesha cult is most

concentrated, since the deity's popularity is said to have originated from Maharashtra,

one of the most important places of Ganesha worship are the eight religious sites

around Pune called the Ashtavinayaks (ashta (eight) and vinayaks (Vinayaka)). The

eight temples are called Moreshwar Temple, Siddhivinayak Temple, Ballaleshwar

Temple,Varadavinayak Temple,Chintamani Temple,Girijatmaj Temple, Vighnahar

Temple and Mahaganapati Temple.[50] In all eight temples, there are sculptures of

Ganesha made out of a single rock, and are hence, said to be self manifested.[51] The

most famous temple is the Moreshwar temple, closely followed by the Siddhivinayak

Temple in Mumbai.[51] These eight Ganesha temples, arranged together to form a circle

around Pune, making Pune the direct center of the circle, which meant that in the 10th

Century BC, when the Ganesha cult rose to prominence, Pune was the centre for

Shastra and Sanskrit education because the eight temples guarded Pune's spiritual and

material power. Hence, Ganesha became the town's deity – *Gramadaivata* itself.[52]

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[50] "The Most Famous and Important Lord Ganesha Temples in India." *NextGEN Gallery RSS*. N.p., n.d. Web. 19 Dec. 2014. <http://www.walkthroughindia.com/festivals/religion/the-most-famous-and-important-lord-ganesha-temples-in-india/>.

[51] Krishna, Nanditha. *Sacred Animals of India*. New Delhi: Penguin India, 2010. *Google Books*. Penguin UK. Web. 21 Dec. 2014.
<http://books.google.co.in/books?id=DF_af8_547EC&pg=PT164&dq=&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false>.

[52] Fuller, C. J. "The 'Vinayaka Chaturthi' Festival and Hindutva in Tamil Nadu." *Economic and Political Weekly* 36.19 (2001): n. pag. *JSTOR*. Web. 19 Dec. 2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4410605>.

In addition to places of worship, the festivals of worship are important as well. The most important festival of the Ganesha cult is the celebration of Ganesh Chaturthi[4], which is also known as Vinayaka Chaturthi, celebrating the birth of Ganesha. It's observed between mid August to mid September, in the month of 'Bhadra' and is celebrated for 10 days straight with lights, elaborate decorations, dancing, and then the final immersion of a giant statue of Ganesha on Ananta Chaturdashi to symbolize the departing of the deity to go to his home of heavens.[52] Hymns from the *Rig Veda* (1500 BCE), and *Ganapati Atharva Shirsha Upanishad* (mid 17th Century) are chanted, while final offerings of coconuts and flowers are made to the deity for his blessings.[53]

An interesting tradition to note about Ganesh Chaturthi is the superstition to not look at the moon. As the myth goes, one day, at night, Lord Ganesha was on his way back from a feast and was quite full. Suddenly, his rat vehicle stumbled over a snake, so Ganesha fell down and his stomach burst open and all the food spilled out. Ganesh dusted himself off, collected everything, put it back into himself, and used the snake as a belt to keep his stomach together, hoping no one saw. Unfortunately, the Moon, Chandra had seen everything from the sky and was laughing at the God. Ganesha got angry put a curse on her that she would no longer shine. A few days later, upset at the disrupted balance of light, the other Gods went to negotiate the terms of Ganesha's curse on Chandra so that she may go back to normal, so Ganesha modified his curse and allowed her to wax and wane. Therefore, all because of Chandra's

[53] Ganeshchaturthi,. 'How To Celebrate Ganesh Chaturthi 2014'. N.p., 2014. Web. 20 Dec. 2014. < http://www.ganeshchaturthi.com/#>.

laughter at Ganesha, people think it is inauspicious to look at the moon on Ganesh's birthday, so that he remains on their side and brings them luck and good fortune.[54]

In contrast to the Brahma cult which has now declined completely, the Ganesha cult is still going strong. One of the main reasons why the cult is still prominent is because its rise coincided with the escalation of tantric worship in other parts of India, in the post Gupta period, which further influenced each other in the worship.[4] The Ganapatyas worship Ganesha as the ultimate God, following the *Ganapati Upanishad* (mid 17th Century) where Ganesha is praised as the creator, preserver, and destroyer of the worlds. They believe that Ganesha is the Lord of the Five Elements, and that chanting 'Om' will please and placate him to provide them with blessings.[55] The symbol of 'Om', associated with Ganesha, is said to have been the inspiration for the creation of Ganesha as Parvati pictured two elephants mating when she saw the symbol, from which Ganesha was created.[56] Since every mantra begins with 'Om' which is considered to be the seed of the universe, Ganesha is the rebirth of the entire cosmic universe.[55]

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[54] Krishnaswami, Uma, and Selven Maniam. "The Rhythm of the Moon." *The Broken Tusk: Stories of the Hindu God Ganesha*. North Haven, CT: Linnet, 1996. 16-19. *Google Books*. August House. Web. 19 Dec. 2014.
<https://books.google.co.in/books?id=Lj3IXqJkDgIC&printsec=frontcover&dq=stories+of+ganesha+moon&hl=en&sa=X&ei=4g6UVJOmFMTkuQT7voLQCQ&ved=0CBsQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=moon%20&f=false>.

[55] Jagannathan, T. K. *Śri Ganesha, Elephant-headed God of Mangalam: The God Worshipped by All including Brahmā, Vishnu, Mahesh*. New Delhi: Hindoology, 2009. *Google Books*. Web. 19 Dec. 2014.
<https://books.google.co.in/books?id=-tHyd3aTbIYC&pg=PT132&dq=aum+ganesha&hl=en&sa=X&ei=SReUVM_8JJKfugSAq4CICQ&ved=0CB0Q6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=aum%20ganesha&f=false>.

[56] Mundkur, Balaji. "The Enigma of Vaināyakī." *Artibus Asiae* 37.4 (1975): 291-302. *JSTOR*. Web. 19 Dec. 2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3250234>.

An interesting thing to note would be that a female form of Ganesha exists which is known as Vinayaki or Ganeshvari, an elephant headed Hindu goddess. Despite her mythology and iconography being undefined, she is a definite *Matrika* goddess, as a Brahmanical consort of Ganesha because of her elephant headed appearance.[57]

However, apart from Vinayaki, Ganapatyas individually worship all other forms of Ganesha, focussing on some specific forms like the Ucchista Ganesha or the Urdhava Ganesha or the Lakshmi Ganesha, depending on what sort of blessing they hope to get. By following the tantric way of living, the Ganapatyas worship Ganesha as the Supreme Lord, to ask for his help to purify things, rectify mistakes, sacrifice themselves or get his blessings before starting something new.[58] In conclusion, as humble were the beginnings of this half human - half animal deity, it was the same humble beginnings that lead to the rise of such a massive following in current times, as without appealing to the lower parts of society, there would have been no way the Ganesha cult would have gotten to where it is today as one fifth of the *Panchayatana Puja,* affecting so many people all across the world.

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[57] Pattanaik, Devdutt. "Vinayaki." *99 Thoughts on Ganesha:*. Mumbai: Jaico Pub House, 2011. N. pag. *Google Books*. Jaico Publishing House. Web. 19 Dec. 2014.
<https://books.google.co.in/books?id=Wh22qvzQuowC&pg=PA20&dq=vinayaki&hl=en&sa=X&ei=4x eUVPH1BMu3uQSGhoDwCQ&ved=0CCAQ6AEwAQ#v=onepage&q=vinayaki&f=false>.

[58] From the Editors of Hinduism Today Magazine. "Adopted by the Elephant God." *What Is Hinduism?: Modern Adventures into a Profound Global Faith*. Kapaa, HI: Himalayan Academy, 2007. 189-91. *Google Books*. Imalayan Academy Publications. Web. 19 Dec. 2014.
<https://books.google.co.in/books?id=9XC9bwMMPcwC&pg=PA190&dq=what+is+ganesha+worshipp ed+for&hl=en&sa=X&ei=UhiUVLK2HIKdugTBqILgCQ&ved=0CCEQ6AEwAQ#v=onepage&q=wha t%20is%20ganesha%20worshipped%20for&f=false>.

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