

GANESH CHATURTHI: IN HONOUR OF ELEPHANT GOD

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(English Version)

Now that the festive season is here, we can take a glance at Mumbai's Ganesh Chaturthi and Kolkata's Durga Pujas, that offer studies in similarities and contrasts. Where community or sarvajanin celebrations are concerned, Ganesh or Vinayak Chaturthi is 26 years older than Durga Puja. Before there is a bandh in Kolkata on this issue, it is best to mention that there is a clear record about the Chaturthi being celebrated in a collective form in Pune in 1892. Then, came Lokmanya Tilak, who started spreading Ganesh Utsav all over Maharashtra from 1894 onwards. It is interesting that both Mumbai-Pune's and Kolkata's festivals were actually expressions of a strong nationalist sentiment.

Ganesh or Vinayaka Chaturthi is observed in the Hindu calendar month of Bhaadrapada on the fourth day of the brighter paksha. But, while Durga Pujas are celebrated mainly by Bengalis in their own state and in other parts of India and the world, Ganesh Chaturthi is a festival not only in Maharashtra but also all over the Deccan. It is observed in Andhra Pradesh, Telengana, Karnataka and Goa, as also in Tamil Nadu as Pillayar and in Kerala as Lambodhara Piranalu. Shivaji, who ruled till 1680, celebrated this occasion on a grand scale and we find references to Ganesh puja through the next three centuries.

John Murdoch, who compiled descriptions of Indian festivals from the accounts of European observers in the 19th century, mentioned it. "Ganesa, said to be the son of Siva and Parvati or of Parvati alone, is worshipped under the names
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of Ganesa, Vinayaka, Ganapati, Pillayar, etc. He is worshipped in every Hindu home and every school boy begins his lessons with 'Sri Ganesaya Namah'; every Indian book opens with it. Every merchant asks his help before commencing any business. In marriages and every kind of religious ceremonies, Vinayaka is first invoked. "Ganesh's role was also noted in the 19th century by H.H. Wilson who said "A Hindu thinks that if his efforts are a failure this is not due to his own incapacity, but to demoniacal obstruction. The aid of Ganesa, as lord of demons, is therefore sought". This demon term is very interesting because Ganesh, had links with subaltern creatures, called Ganas, not 'demons'. 'Ganas' consisted of the whole range of so-called 'unclean' and short non-Aryan people, ie, Bhootas, Nagas, Yakshas, Pisachas, Guhyakas, Gandharvas, Vidyadharas, Raksha-ganas, Siddhas, Pramathis and others. They were severely vilified by Sanskrit society, but as India moved away from this minority view of life and the strong majority presence was felt and the skills of the darker people were accepted, this toxicity mellowed.

Ganesha is thus a metaphor for the new composite India and the appellation Vighneswar or Vighna-Raja, actually its meaning changed from the "lord of all troubles" to the "remover of obstacles. He is mentioned in the Shiva Puran, the Shanti Parva of Mahabharata and continued, however, to be Gana-isa or Gana-pati, the lord of the tribe of Ganas, never obliterating his origins. Ganesh is, thus, one more of the non-Sanskritic deities to join the Indian pantheon like Kubera, the wealthy yaksha or Hanuman. Most animals deities found their way to holy precincts as 'vahans' of the Gods, but at least three of them are found worshipped in their own right, ie, Hanuman, the snake goddess under different names and the elephant-headed Ganesh. There are a lot of tales about how Parvati's new son lost

his own head in battle and an elephant's head had to fitted in, but the basic point is that this dominant animal of India walked into Devalaya, on the body of a young god. It represents, most probably, a pre-Hindu cult that thus got absorbed into the pantheon. In the ever expanding domain of civilisation in India, where the Kshetra or human settlements kept overpowering the Vana-anchal, the elephant was a major link that moved from the pristine jungle to the urban habitat, and its utility was even more, in both war and peace. It was a symbol of royalty and divinity as in Airavat, the elephant of Lord Indra, or in Maya's dream of a celestial elephant and Buddha's Divine Conception. He was just too powerful to be left unattended.

Exactly a century ago, Charles H. Buck described the community worship of Ganapati thus: "Highly gilded images of this deity, riding on his steed, a rat, are first consecrated, and, after being retained for some days in a building, are carried in procession to a river, or pond, or to the sea, and thrown into the water with parting adieus and good wishes." So contemporary, isn't it? Except, that nowadays Ganesh comes in a staggering variety of styles, postures and poses. Though it has not yet caught up with the crazy ideas of Kolkata, like making idols from broken glass and betel nuts, it is not too far away as many unorthodox ideas are now being tried out.

Like Kolkata, pandals are erected all over the towns and contributions sought from the entire community. Families also install Ganesh in their homes as he is certainly more portable than Durga and her huge family, thus this celebration is both private and public. The Mumbai film industry has certainly played a very colourful role in further popularising "Ganapati Bapa Moriyaa". Dazzling celluloid utsavs have taken Ganapati all over the world and youngsters all over are also

taking part in this value-added cult and the filmi dances. Bollywood songs on Ganesh have been drummed in with a lot of heart-throbbing music, but the best aartis that are still sung in Maharashtra were composed three centuries ago by the poet saint Samath Ramdas.

Though there are lots of explanations on why his tusk is bent on the left or right, and how he broke his tusk (ek danta), but it may be more interesting to move to South East Asia to know more. Thailand still worships him as Phra Phikhanet or Phra Phikkanesuan, derived from Vara Vighnesha and Vara Vighneshvara. In Burma, he is known as Maha Peinne, which is from Pali Maha Winayaka. Sri Lankan Buddhists call him Gana Deviyo, while the Hindus there call him Aiyanayaka Deviyo. But the most interesting fact is his worship in Japan, where he is popularly known as Shoten. In fact, as Benoy Behl says, that the oldest Ganesha temple in the world is the Matsuchyama Shoten in Tokyo, where Ganesha has been worshipped for a thousand years. It is amazing how Ganesha was also interwoven into the Tantric tradition of Japan and how the Japanese pray to him in Sanskrit, with the mantra Om Kri Gyaku Un Swaka.

Just a last word about ‘child-like behaviour’ of Ganesh, like taking up a challenge with his brother, Kartikeya, to discover the “three worlds” and then simply circling his parents because he felt that they were all that mattered in the universe: while the hyper-energetic Kartikeya went on a ‘space mission’ on his peacock rocket. It must be remembered that rivalry between the Shaivait and Vaishnavait cults was rather strong in the ancient and middle periods, which led to skirmishes and while Krishna’s Balagopal version was an instant hit because of vatsalya, Shaivait had, however, no such baby to love. Ganesha filled this gap

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and his big tummy made him all the more endearing. Orientals have never shied away from displaying their large bellies, as it represented wealth and prosperity, like the 'Laughing Buddha' in China and Japan. It is, therefore, now time for us to recognize the so many roles that this Lord of Ganas performed, in so many ages and stages.

Om Ganeshay Namah!
