

Ganapati, Birth of a Theriomorphic God: A Historical Interpretation

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ABSTRACT

Ganesha or Ganapati one of the principal deities of the Brahmanical Panchopasana had a non brahmanical origin. Ganesha started his journey as tribal totem cult and later transformed into a agricultural deity. Although he got Brahmanical affiliation but still now several non Brahmanical elements are evident in his cult. The essay will try to delve into the Ganapati cult and show how the religious integration took place in the early medieval India.

Keywords: Ganesha, Ganapati, Vinayaka, Siva, Parvati, Rigveda, Manu Samhita

INTRODUCTION

Ganesha or *Ganapati* was primarily a deity of a tribe or *Gana*, which is evident from his name (*Ganapati* and *Ganesh* literally mean lord of a tribe). The earliest mention of *Ganapati* was made in *Rigveda* (RV 2/213/19). The famous hymn of *Rigveda* refers *gananamtvaganapatimhavamahe*. Undoubtedly the *Ganapati* of *Rigveda* is not same of the later *Puranas*. In the *Rigveda* *Indra* is also severally mentioned as *Ganapati*. Vedic *Ganapati* perhaps was the symbol of the presiding deity of any tribe or *Gana*. The later elephant face of *Ganapati* hints that *Ganapati* was the presiding deity of a tribe which had elephant as their totem. Thus *Ganapati* is the perfect example of religious syncretism as this cult integrated Aryan influence in one hand and non Aryan, so called demonic influence on the other.

In the later Vedic literature mainly *Rudras* are mentioned as *Ganapati*. *Shukla Yajurveda* (11/15) refers that *Rudrasyanapatyammayovurohior Rudra's Ganapatya*(lordship of a tribe) may be joyful. The later connection between *Shiva* and *Ganapati* was seeded in the later Vedic literature. In the *Puranas* *Rudras* were mainly mentioned as attendants of *Shiva*. In the Junwani copperplate¹ of *Maha Shivagupta Balarjuna Rudras* are mentioned as the incarnations of *Shiva*². *Ganapati* was the head of the *Rudras*.

Perhaps the cult of *Ganesha* emerged due to the assimilation of non Aryan and Aryan deities. Alice Getty thinks that *Ganesha* was primarily a *Dravida* deity³.

She further opines that the Sun worshippers of south India worshipped *Ganesha* and the mouse mounted *Ganesha* was earlier a form of the Solar god. The mouse is the symbol of night and this image signifies that the Solar god crossing the night. Although there is no certain evidence which can prove that *Ganesha* was primarily a *Dravida* deity, but as the most of the *Dravida* deities were animal faced and elephant was the largest animal of this region, there is obvious possibility of existence of an elephant faced deity. Alice Getty also thinks that the oldest name of *Ganesha* was *Pillaiyar* which derived from *Dravida* words *Pallu* and *Polla*.⁴ These words actually mean elephant task. The Pali word *Pillak* which also means gateway elephant. In the *Taittiriya Aranyaka* a deity named *Dantin* was invoked (3/7/15), who was perhaps the predecessor of *Ganesha*. In the *Puranas* *Ganesha* was severally mentioned as *Ekadanta*.

However *Ganesha* is severally mentioned in the Vedic literature, although we find no mention of him among the Vedic pantheon. In the later *Smritis* and *Sutras* *Ganesha* has been mentioned as a non Aryan and *Shudra* cult⁵. From the dawn of Indian civilization there was a concept of sacred elephant in the Indian tradition. In the seals and the terracotta figures of Harappan culture there are representations of elephants. Presumably this concept of sacred elephant evolved into the *Ganapati* cult of Brahmanism. Probably as the totem of buffalo transited into the form of *Mahisasura*, in the similar way the elephant totem took the form of *Ganesha*. On the other hand Sukumari Bhattacharyya opines that the elephant totem first took the form of *Gajasura* and then through Puranic story of the slaying of *Gajasura* by *Shiva*, the connection between *Ganesha* and *Shiva* was made⁶. In the Buddhism and Jainism the elephant symbol was quite popular. *Gautama Buddha's* mother *Mayadevi* dreamed of elephant before the birth of Buddha. The symbols of

Bhabishya Buddhas were elephants. The attribute of the second Jain tirthankara *Ajitanathawas* elephant. Several *Yaksas* associated with Buddhism and Jainism were elephant headed. Even *Ganapati* was later adopted in the Jainism as a deity.

During the 4th century CE *Ganapati* began to be adored as a Brahmanical deity. In the early phase he was worshipped mainly as *Vinayaka*. In the list of the *Vyantaradeities* of the *Atharvasiras Upanishada Vinayaka* was included. In the *Anusasana Parva* of *Mahabharata* (150/24/25) *Ganesvarand Vinayaka* find mentions ‘*Isvarahsarvalokanamganesvaravinayakah*’. *Vinayakas*, in the *Mahabharata* were the *Pramathas* of *Shiva*, who used to protect the people and abort the dangers. In *Manava Grihyasutras* (2/14) there are references of four *Vinayakas*, namely *Shalakatankat*, *KusmandaRajaputra*, *Usmita*, *Devayajana*. These *Vinayakas* were mainly demigods and if they possessed any one, he began to do some unreasonable acts, had nightmares and was deprived of everything. *Manu* prescribes to perform several sacrifices to free the people from the possession of *Vinayaka*. Another *smriti* text of little later period, *Yajnavalkya Samhita* refers to the six *Vinayakas*, namely *Mita*, *Sammita*, *Salakatankat*, *Kusmanda*, *Rajaputra* and *Devayajana*. *Yajnavalkya* also prescribes the ways of getting rid of these *Vinayakas*. He further mentions them as *Ambikaputras* and which signifies that in this time the *Vinayakas* were adopted as the sons of *Ambika* or *Durga*. The *Vinayaka* was basically a malevolent demigod. In the *Puranas* the *Vinayaka* has been referred as *Vighnaraja*, but it is also said that if he is adored properly he becomes *Vighnavinashaka*. Contextually it may be referred that the father of Puranic *Ganapati*, *Shiva*’s Vedic form *Rudra* was also a malevolent form, who used to spread various diseases. Perhaps the malevolency of *Rudra* was later attributed to the character of *Ganesha*⁷. *Narendra Nath Bhattacharya* shows that through the Puranic story of beheading of *Ganesha* by *Shani*’s glance, this malevolency was transferred to the character of *Shani*⁸. But this association of *Ganesha* with the *Vinayaka*, the connection between the demonic tradition of *Vinayaka* and the Vedic tradition of *Ganesha* was made.

On the other hand *Vighnaraja Vinayaka* got the recognition in the Brahmanical tradition.

In the Brahmanical religion elephant was popular as a mount or *vahana*. *Indra*’s mount was an elephant named *Airavata*. But in the later period when *Indra* had lost his importance and *Shiva* became important, *Shiva*’s son elephant headed *Ganesha* also became popular. Contextually it may be said that the animals like lion or ox were quite popular in Brahmanism from earlier period, but they could not gain popularity like *Ganesha*. *Varahapurana*(23/10/11) refers that from the mouth of *Rudra Kumara* was born, but as *Parvati* became mesmerized by the beauty of *Kumara*, *Shiva* cursed to be elephant faced and pot bellied (*kumara gajabaktramstvampralambajatharastatha*). Thereafter many *Vinayakas*, were born from the body of *Rudra*. All these *Vinayakas* were elephant faced and had complexion like dark cloud (*nilanjana*). There is a different story in *Shivapurana* regarding the birth of *Ganesha*. According to this story *Parvati* created *Ganesha* with mire, and then *Ganesha* had a fight with *Shiva* and during this *Ganesha* was beheaded by *Shiva*’s trident. Later the *Pramathas* of *Shiva* added a elephant head in the *Ganesha*’s shoulder. According to *Devi Purana* (112/10-11) *Mahadeva* created *Ganapati* by churning the sea.

Although we cannot definitely assume that the ancient tradition of elephant worshipping transformed into the *Ganapati* worship. The elephant symbols of the Harappan civilization and the Buddhism or Jainism did not have the similar connotation. Earlier there was a connection between elephant and a goddess of northwest India. Later this goddess came to be known as *Matangi*. *Matangi* was later also included in the list of the *Dashamahavidyas*. It is worth to mention that the *Gajalakshmi* motif in the Buddhist and Jain sculptures has a clear connection with the elephant. Another goddess of the aforesaid *Dashamahavidyagroup*, *Kamala* was changed form of the earlier *Gajalakshmi*. *Kamala* was also consecrated by the elephants. *Alice Getty* is of opinion that *Ganapati* was included in the Brahmanical pantheon as a ‘Harvest Lord’. The task of *Ganapati* actually symbolizes the plough⁹. Thus in the agricultural society *Ganapati* became *siddhidata* and *vighnavinashak*¹⁰. On the other hand *Ganesha* is the perfect example of therio-anthropomorphism in the Brahmanical culture.

In different periods several forms and names of *Ganesha* became popular. In the nomenclature of *Ganesha* there is a clear influence of non-Aryan influence. In the *Svargavargachapter* of the *Amarkosha*, *Ganapati*’s different names and forms have been referred – ‘*vinayakavighnarajadvaimaturaganadhipa/ apyekadantaherambalambodaragajanana*’¹¹. Twelve names of *Ganapati* have been mentioned in the *Sristikhanda* of *Padmapurana*(63/29-30)- ‘*Ganapatirvighnarajolambodaragajanana/ dvaimaturshcaherambaekadantoganadhipah*’. The *Ganesha Khanda* of the *Brahmavaivarta Purana* (44/85) mentions to the eight names of *Ganesha* – ‘*ganeshamekadantancaherambamvighnanayakam/ lambodaraschekadantahsurpakarnovinayakah*’.

Like the various names of *Ganesha* there are several forms of this elephant faced god. In several sources there are mentions of the forms of *Ganapati* like *Mahaganapati*, *Heramba*, *Haridraganapati*, *Biriganapati*, *Siddhaganesha*, *Shriganapati*, *Cauraganapati*, *Prasannaganapati*, *Nrityaganapati*, *Uchhistaganapati* etc.

Among the forms of *Ganapati* undoubtedly the most popular is the *Mahaganapati*. According to the text *Saradatilaka*(13/35-38) *Mahaganapati* is three eyed, ten armed, red complexioned and embraces his female consort. In his ten arms he carries respectively mace, bow, trident, discus, lotus, betel leaf, utpal, paddy, his own tusk and a jar

full of gems. In another verse of *Saradatilaka*(10/79) *Mahaganapati* has been referred as white as pearl (*muktageauram*). *KrishnanandaAgambagishin* his *Tantrasara* (13/86) described *Mahaganapati* as four armed, who carries sugarcane, varada mudra, pasha and goads respectively in his four arms. *Mahaganapati* was the deity of prosperity.

Another form of *Ganapati* was *Heramba*. *Heramba Ganapati* transited from the goddess *Matangi*. According to *Saradatilaka*(13/107) *Hermbais* five headed and five complexioned viz. pearl, gold, blue, white like *kunda*flower and vermilion red (*muktakancananilakundakumkumacchai*). There was a tradition of buffalo sacrifice in the presence of an untouchable woman during the worship of *Heramba*.

We find the mention of *Haridra Ganapati* in the *Tantrasara* (*haridravymcaturvahumharidravasananamvibham/pasankusadharam deva modakyadandamebaca*). According to *Naradapancharatra*(10/4) *Parvati* created *Ganapati* with turmeric, and perhaps this story hints to the origin of *Haridra Ganapati*. *Saradatilaka*(13/13) and *Kalika Purana* (79/94-97) mentions about *Biriganapati*. *Biriganapati* is red complexioned as *Mahaganapati*. He is two armed and he carries goad and human skull full of wine in these. One may assume that he had a connection with the tantric cult. *Kalika Purana* (79 – 98) refers to the *Siddha Ganapati*. *Siddha Ganapati* mounts on a mouse, four armed and wears sacrificial thread made by snake. *Siddha Ganapati* graces with intelligence and prosperity. *Saradatilaka*(6/41) further mentions of *Shri Ganapati*, who is four armed and carries *Shri* or *Lakshmi* in his lap. Among the different embodiments of *Ganesha Cauraganapati* is considered as the most negative. *Mahanirbana Tantra* (3/119) has the description of *Cauraganapati*, and it is said that a thief has to adore *Cauraganapati* ten times before he proceeds to steal. *Pranatosini Tantra* (3/2) also refers to *Cauraganapati*. *Mantratantrakaram* mentions about *Prasanna Ganesha* (*raktambaramsakaladuhkhaharamganesam/ dhyayetprasannamakhilabharanabhiramam*).

Prasanna Ganapati brings joy and he is as bright as sun. *Ganesha's* another form is *Nritya Ganapati*. Perhaps this form of *Ganesha* derived from the *Shiva's* *Nataraja* form. The most fierce form of *Ganapati* is the *Ucchista Ganapati*. This is the Tantric form of *Ganesha*. *Shankardigvijaya*(357-358) text has the description of this form of *Ganapati*¹². *Ucchista Ganapati* is four armed, three eyed, mounts on *mahapitha* and drinks wine with his trunk. He embraces his *shakti*, who seats in his left side. The worshippers of *Ucchista Ganapati* marked the symbol of tusk in their forearms with red hot iron rods.

Dr. Anita Raina Thapan in his famous book *Understanding Ganapati: Inside into the Dynamics of a Cult* shows how in the post Gupta period the cult of *Ganapati* became quite popular¹³. According to her during this period the western India experienced an urban decay and that paved the way of emergence of an agricultural society. In this agricultural society the agricultural god *Ganapati* became usually popular. *Ganapati* was not only popular among the farmers but also became popular as *Siddhidata* among the traders. Since this period *Ganapati* became the supreme cult in the Maharashtra and Gujarat area. Even *Ganapati* was adopted in the Brahmanical culture as well.

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