Ganesha Factory
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When I was a little girl, Ganesha Chaturthi was very important. We would scurry from house to house to see 21 different idols of Ganesha. We were told by our parents that we would do well in our studies if we succeeded. That may have been their big wish, but for us it was all about getting sweets and kadabu, a very special tasty prasadmade by mothers. So we all dressed up in new clothes, bought to honor the day, and galloped around singing whatever Ganesha songs we knew, even our school anthem.

Of course, not all the sweets made it home. The best ones we ate as soon as we got them. Our excitement knew no bounds. Although Ganesha is worshiped throughout India, Maharashtra specializes in honoring the elephant-headed God of Wisdom. Giant parades with enormous Ganesha idols highlight His annual birthday festival. Smaller clay idols are the most popular image for the average devotee. After worshiping them in the home, they are ceremoniously immersed in rivers or oceans. Years ago, though, families would fashion their own images. Children would hand paint Ganesha's facial features and fancily clothe Him. But now, people say they haven't the time to make the idols. So a commercial industry has sprung

up to replace hand-made ones. I recently visited one such factory near Bangalore.

I met the owner Mr. Muninanjappa, who 25 years ago was a vegetable vendor. He told me his story: "Years ago, I would buy a few Ganeshas and sell them during the festival. Gradually I began to make them myself and, by His grace, I am today a leading manufacturer!" Financed by a national bank, his factory churns out Ganesha idols ten months a year, stockpiling them for Ganesha Chaturthi. Besides clay idol makers, he hires a dozen expert papier-machÃ© artisans four months before the festival to make large parade deities.

Large papier machÃ© idols are custom-ordered by different groups, each calling for very unusual designs to catch the public's attention and hopefully win various competitions that idols are entered in. This year, one group ordered, and got, a Ganesha fighting a dinosaur! Jurrasic Park emotion and Ganesha devotion fuse, I muse. "Papier machÃ© idols are a deviation from tradition," admits Muninanjappa, "but with the demand for elephant-sized idols, we have to make them this way."

He lorries in about 80 truckloads of clay, and this year molded the mountain of red dirt into 100,000 idols. After the clay arrives, an inaugural puja is performed to the formless clay before starting work. Then one special idol is made and worshiped by the factory staff. Only then does large-scale production begin. The fifteen artisans I talked with perform puja to Ganesha every day before and after work. "We have to climb over the idols. At times our feet rest on Him, so we seek

pardon before we start work and before leaving," said Selvan from Salem. Most of the workers narrate that they see and speak to Ganesha from time to time in their dreams. "We get messages if there is something wrong in our work and the next morning immediately we correct it," shared artisan Isairaj.