Ganesha
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Ganesha

Lord of Beginnings Remover of Hurdles

Tanuja, Yamuna At the start of any project, prayers are offered to Vignesvara, the Lord of Beginnings. It is in keeping with the Hindu tradition to seek the help of this benevolent God to remove all hurdles and bless the project. From among thousands of verses that appeal to Lord Ganesha, two will be presented here as invocation. Both are translated from the Sanskrit.

"Let the Lotus Feet of Lord Ganesha, from whom scriptures sprout, confer on us unmixed blessings. Like thunderbolts, let them shatter away hurdles that are heaped like mountains."

"Night and day, let us worship this God with the face of an elephant. He brings joy to Parvati, the daughter of the mountains; Her face lights up just as the lotus blooms with the rising sun. He has a single tusk and rewards us with many blessings."

Ganesha Scholars

Ganesha is one of the most popular of the Hindu Gods and much has been written about him in the ancient Vedas and Upanishads, in the Puranas and in numerous stories that are part of written and oral traditions. There is currently an enormous amount of scholarly work that has attempted to examine Ganesha in all his aspects and from every conceivable angle. The scholars come from a wide range of disciplines. Typically, the following are some of the questions they ask: "When did Ganesha emerge as a God of the Hindus?" "Was He an Aryan God or was He originally a Dravidian God later assimilated by the Aryans?" "How and when did Ganesha acquire all the attributes by which He is known today?" "How can we resolve the differences in the details of the Ganesha stories scattered in works of

varying antiquity and belonging to different traditions?" "How does Ganesha relate to other Gods of India and elsewhere in the world?" "Is the Ganesha 'myth' linked to deep and hidden human emotions and urges?" "Do the stories of Ganesha portray the tension among humans - among fathers, mothers, sons, brothers?" "What is the underlying philosophy of Ganesha worship and all associated rituals?"

While all the questions posed above may be burning issues for scholars, they are hardly relevant to devotees. To them Ganesha is a real, benign presence, not an abstraction. He is the Lord of Beginnings. No work can succeed that does not start with a prayer of appeal of help to this kindly Deity. Whether or not Ganesha was a sectarian God in the past, he is almost universally worshipped today by all devout Hindus. In southern India, for instance, thousands of temples have been dedicated to Ganesha and newer ones are constantly springing up. Many of these temples are nothing more than little stone murthis of Ganesha installed under trees with no enclosures. The devotees long for Ganesha's benevolent presence everywhere, within reach - on the road, near places of work, near schools, hospitals, wherever there is significant human activity. Deep within everyone lurks the recognition that things can go wrong and that the outcome of one's actions is governed by a larger scheme of things - beyond one's own wishes and immediate concerns. So it is that devotees turn to Ganesha for guidance and help.

The Story of Ganesha

In a popular story, a young boy was created by Goddess Parvati from rubbings from her limbs. The boy stood at the threshold, guarding the privacy of his mother. Lord Siva sought entrance to His wife's quarters, but was barred by the boy. Annoyed, Lord Siva beheaded the youthful guard. Parvati was in anguish over the loss of her son. So God Siva restored him to life - with the head of an elephant. The son became Ganesha (Lord of the Assembly) and Vignesha (Remover of Hurdles). He is known as Gajanana (Elephant-Faced) and Vinaya (Leader). Before composing the great epic Mahabharata, the sage Vyasa prayed to Lord Ganesha, who agreed to be his scribe. Ganesha used one of his own tusks to write the verses as they were dictated by the sage. Ganesha is worshipped as Ekadanta (One-Tusked). Ganesha is fond of sweet modakas. He has a pot belly and is known as Lambodhara (with a distended belly). Ganesha has chosen the mouse for his vehicle and hence is known as Mushikavahana.

Among many other variants of the story of Ganesha some will be mentioned here for illustration.

Creation: (1) Ganesha is created by Siva. (2) He is created by both Siva and Parvati.

His elephant head: (1) Ganesha is born with an elephant head. (2) The loss of his original head is due to Saneesvara (Saturn). (3) Ganesha's head belonged to famous elephants - Airvata (Indra's mount), Gajendra (who was rescued from the jaws of a crocodile by Vishnu) or Gahasura (killed by Siva).

His tusk: (1) Ganesha lost one of his tusks when it was hit by Parasurama's axe. (2) Ganesha pulled one of his tusks to kill Gahasura - who became a mouse and a mount for Ganesha. (3) Ganesha pulled his tusk and hit the moon for making fun of him.

His consorts: (1) According to traditions in most of South India, Ganesha is a bachelor. (2) Sometimes, Ganesha is a worshipped with two wives, Siddhi and Buddhi.

The well-known Ganapathi Hymn of the Rig Veda, now associated with Ganesha, is said to have been originally associated with Rudra. Cam, often translated as "group" or "assembly" is used to denote divine beings serving Siva.

The Deeper Significance

Prayers addressed to Ganesha often represent him as the first principle - the Pranava, the mystic syllable, AUM. The form in which Ganesha is worshipped, with the face and trunk of an elephant, is believed to resemble the syllable AUM as it is written especially in the South Indian script of the Tamil language. He is thus known as Pranavasvarupa (in the nature or form of the Pranava). The theme of creation, sacrifice, restoration and final elevation to a glorious state, as in the story

of Ganesha occurs again and again in Hindu Puranas in so many different contexts. It is no surprise that such stories are often treated as allegories.

Devotees, however, are not concerned with the wide-ranging conflicts in the details of the Ganesha story and their varied interpretation. Coupled with a simple faith, the beautiful rituals that are part of the worship of this helpful Deity are all that they need to face a seemingly rough world beset with uncertainties.

Benediction

This article will now conclude with a song in Sanskrit by the great composer Muthuswami Dikshitar, who lived during the eighteenth century. This song, a prayer to Lord Ganesha, describes most of the attributes by which he is known and worshipped today.

"He, the elephant-headed one, awards to his devotees fulfillments of every kind. The Gods Brahma, Indra and Vishnu, worship him with praise. The shore of the sacred Kamalalaya is where he dwells. His hands are tender and lovely. He is the elder brother of Subramaniya. He is known as the Pillaiyar (noble son) who attracted gold. He wears white silk around his limbs. The moon decks his forehead. His belly is enormous. He wears a black flower. He holds the noose, the sweet modaka and the goad. He is the boat that can take us across the ocean of life. He is the root and substance of all things. He is the embodiment of bliss. His body shines like a thousand suns. He rides the mouse and is accompanied by Gods who sing his praise. May this God Ganesha protect us."

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