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GANESHA AS A PARADIGM OF UNIVERSALITY: A STUDY OF GITA MEHTA'S ETERNAL GANESHA

Dr Mamta Bhatnagar

Assistant Professor , Department of English, G.L.A. University, Mathura (UP), India

Email: mamta.bhatnagar@gla.ac.in

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Abstract

Ganesha is one of the most loved Gods of the Hindu culture. The deity has multifarious sides and has become an icon known by many names. Although a lot has been written on Ganesha, Gita Mehta goes a step further by describing not only His characteristics but also deep seated symbolism of his figure as well as harmony of the prevailing contradictions. The world has modernized, but the faith in the deity has not diminished. On the contrary, it appears to have become in line with modernity. The conviction has grown and crossed the national boundaries to enter into the international scene. The present paper attempts to explore the element of universality in the figure and faith of Ganesha as depicted in Mehta's book *Eternal Ganesha*.

Introduction

Gita Mehta's book, *Eternal Ganesha* (2006), commemorates the elephant headed *Ganesha*, the most loved God of the Hindu culture. Besides this, the fiction highlights some of the widespread beliefs pervading Indian society since ages. Lord *Ganesha* has multifarious faiths in India and has become an icon known by many names. The deity represents the power of the Supreme Being that removes obstacles and bad omens and ensures success for his devotees. He is found all over the place in India – “On rickshaws and wedding invitations. On protective medallions and rockets. On cyber cafes and cigarettes....” (*Eternal Ganesha*, 2006. p9). As a deity, *Ganesha* has “super celebrity status” (Melwani, 2015) and he leads every religious or social ritual. Whether it is birth or rebirth, modern religious festivals or ancient Hinduism's secret rites, laying the foundation of building or taking a first step on a journey,

harvesting of crops or signing a business contract, producing a movie or the purchasing of a house – everything starts after invoking *Ganesha*.

Ganesha is universally loved as a symbol of good fortune. His delightful physique captivates the devotees and surpasses the cultural boundaries in India – a land of multiple faiths and cultures besides Hinduism. “Ganesha ..., also spelled Ganesa, also known as Pillaiyar, Ganapati ... and Vinayaka, is one of the best-known and most widely worshipped deities Devotion to Ganesha is widely diffused and extends to Jains, Buddhists, and beyond India” (“Ganesha” 2014). He is supposed to be the guardian of Home, hence, his image is prominently placed above the entrance to ensure that only good fortune enters the house. To further ensure family prosperity, housewives offer him grains or rice and chant: “Thou of the curled trunk and great belly/ Free my family’s path of obstacles and hindrances” (*Eternal Ganesha*, 10). The ritual of offering rice to *Ganesha* can be found even in 3000 B.C. as Gita Mehta reports, “Ancient Indus Valley seals show India’s early farmers worshipped an elephant headed god as the Lord of Farming, his trunk symbolic of the plough, his belly of a bursting granary” (14). His festival is observed during the rains with the hope of abundant crops. Moreover, “Judgment and discrimination are only two aspects of Ganesha’s wisdom. He is the Lord of Learning, encompassing all knowledge” (15). Many people like to believe, if they open a closed text book with a *Ganesha* medal, they will get the topic which will be given in exams. Such acts of deep faith in a deity can give rise to a superstition. For children, *Ganesha* is a God to be loved not feared and his excessive weakness for food means that they themselves can eat a lot of sweets.

Ganesha is the simplest and the most unique of all Indian gods. He is easily accessible and can be made from any substance –chalk, wood, rice, peanuts, matchsticks and even discarded rubber tires. In the humblest hut a *Ganesha* image might be made up of “a simple triangle made of mud with a streak of vermillion on its apex” (*Eternal Ganesha* 16) and a twisted root with a wild flower as an offering is sufficient. In a wealthy home, “an intricately carved *Ganesha* might be clothed in silk garments and wear a jeweled crown on his elephant head” (16). Poor or rich, illiterate or scholar, anyone can invoke him without the help of any priest or intermediary.

Cross-Cultural Faith

Since he transcends all religious, class and caste barriers, during the early years of the Indian Nationalist movement, *Ganesha* was used to launch a successful challenge to the British Empire. In 1890’s Indians were forced to stay in their homes, “...banned by egregious colonial laws from congregating in public and so the immersion of Ganesha idols took place in the privacy of the home.... Hoping to turn Ganesha’s immersion ceremony into a weapon against the might of imperial power, Tilak called on Indians to take their idols in procession to Chowpatty ... and physically immerse them in the Arabian Sea” (*Eternal Ganesha*, 21). Thousands of Indians came out of their homes carrying their *Ganesha* idols to the place where their nationalist leaders had

asked them to come. The paralyzed British authorities did not interfere fearing a religious riot. Gradually *Ganesha* festival became more political and nationalists made stirring speeches against colonialism waving banners with *Tilak's* slogan, "Freedom is my birthright and I shall have it" (21). This association of *Ganesha* with India's anti-imperialistic struggle makes him an integral part of a patriotic tradition. In independent India, on the same *chowpatty* beach *Tilak's* act of defiance has given birth to a festival celebrated by millions of devotees, attracting hordes of tourists to witness the mass immersion. However, the evidences show that much before *Tilak*, "then a 37-year-old journalist," took a momentous step to popularize the celebration of *Ganesha Pooja*, using it as an influential instrument to fight against the Britishers, "... a *pandal* on the city's Laxmi Road (Pune) used the *Ganesh* festival to foster communal harmony. A rhapsodic moment in 1887 led two Hindus and two Muslims to set up the 'Guruji Talim Mandal,' the oldest in *Ganesh pandal* in the city and, perhaps, the oldest in Maharashtra" (Banerjee, 2014. p18). The author further adds, that at the time of its foundation, "members of the Muslim community actively participated in the rituals of *Guruji Talim*" (18). Thus *Ganesha* also signifies communal camaraderie. This is a unique example of how faith can unite different sects and religions when craftsmen of various communities create their own *Ganesha* image. In the current times of communal riots, such examples strengthen the community bonds. His festival is celebrated all over the world because "Lord *Ganesha* worship enjoys a universal appeal that is rare, unusual and beyond geographical and cultural barriers" (Sadanand, 2019).

Symbolism of His Figure

Ganesha's body symbolizes Maya or illusion of existence. His fat body shows that appearances are deceptive and one must go in deep to attain the truth. Furthermore, Lord *Ganesha's* large belly motivates the people to accept and take in whatever experiences they undergo in life – good or bad. During all the ups and downs of life we must not be disturbed and understand that all experiences are learning experiences and they will take us near God. *Ganesha*, bears the head of an elephant which symbioses wisdom. His large ears heed to all the prayers of his devotees, whether they are meek or influential. In old times, Elephant was regarded as the 'Remover of Obstacles' as he freed the jungles from all the wild animals and unwanted trees and prepared them for agriculture. "Later, as the mount of India's warriors, the elephant became the Protector, a living tank so awesome in battle that Alexander the Great in his campaign to conquer India was so terrified by his first sight of the massed elephants of the Indian king Porus, he sacrificed to his own gods for protection" (*Eternal Ganesha* 45). Nitin Kumar, commenting upon the contrast of affection and ferociousness of an elephant writes, "... he is gentle and, amazingly, a vegetarian, so that he does not kill to eat.... *Ganesha*, though a powerful deity, is similarly loving and forgiving and moved by the affection of his devotees. But at the same time the elephant can destroy a whole forest and is a one-man army when provoked. *Ganesha* is similarly most powerful and

can be ruthless when containing evil” (2000). The acclaimed mythologist, Devdutt Pattanaik also explains that it is significant as *Ganesha*’s head is that of Indra’s elephant, “Indra is the rain-god. The cutting of his elephant’s head marks the end of the rain and the beginning of a great harvest. Incidentally Indra according to Vastu, is lord of the East. Thus while travelling north, the Ganas found a creature of the east, making Ganesha the lord of the north-east, the most auspicious corner of the house, the corner of the gods, the corner of Ishan, who is Shiva” (2008).

For the early philosophers, the significance of the elephant headed God lay in the fact that his trunk curling to the left formed the shape of India’s most sacred word, ‘OM,’ signifying the starting point of the universe. ‘OM’ or ‘AUM’ embodies the essence of eternal faith representing the Trinity and their task:

In ‘AUM’ does Trinity blossom

Creation, sustenance and the final doom;

The cycle of life and birth and death (Sanyal, 2002. p113).

The recitation of ‘OM’/ ‘AUM’ not only provides comfort to a grieved soul but also fills the hearts with devotion and hope for the future. According to the followers of the *Ganpati* cult, “... our cosmos was born with sound of OM resounding through a primeval darkness. As energy escaped from darkness to become light, Ganesha appeared as ... the Dancing Ganesha, dancing the universe into existence Sounding the conch shell until Om vibrated through the galaxies, Ganesha summoned the Trinity – Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva – to their triple tasks: Creation, Preservation, Destruction” (*Eternal Ganesha* 55). *Ganesha* is believed to represent ‘OM’ in the true sense because his trunk forms the sacred syllable. “He is OM-kar, the origin of the universe. He is Vac, the first word. He is the First Cause” (56). Besides this, it is a popular belief that the upper arc in ‘OM’ is the head of *Ganesha*, the lower arc is his stomach while the twirled arc on the right side of ‘OM’ is his trunk. In this way, he is the only Indian God to incarnate creation physically. Moreover, “An elephant’s trunk has the strength to uproot a tree as well as the finesse to pick up a needle. *Ganesha*’s trunk symbolizes the fact that the wise person has both immense strength and fine discrimination” (Ashthana 2008). *Ganesha*’s trunk stands for discretion (*viveka*), the much needed virtue for spiritual growth. The trunk can perform the most gigantic as well as the most modest tasks, hence, it symbolizes *Ganesha*’s wisdom and His powers of judgment.

Another interesting feature of *Ganesha*’s figure is his broken tusk and he is also called *Ekdanta* (God with one tooth). Although Gita Mehta says very little about it, there are several legends behind it. O. P. Jha narrates one regarding *Parsurama* and *Shiva*: Once Lord *Shiva*’s disciple, *Parashurama*, came to visit him and Lord *Shiva* was sleeping so *Ganesha* did not allow *Parshurama* to enter in spite of his request. *Parshurama* became angry and he started clashing with *Ganesha*. When he could not win, *Rama* threw his axe, which *Shiva* had given to him, at *Ganesh* who at once understood that it was his father’s weapon took it on one of his tusks. As a result, his tusk was broken

(2012. Pp 31-32). According to another legend, he threw it at the moon that was making fun of his comic figure when his rat stumbled over a snake and all the sweets burst out of his belly. Still the most popular one says that the great sage Vyasa finally agreed to recite the story of the epic *Mahabharata*, “world’s longest poem,” the narrative “containing India’s mythologies, her histories, her philosophies” (*Eternal Ganesha* 31) on the condition, if *Ganesha* could write it without a halt. *Ganesha* accepting the challenge proceeded for weeks and when the last pen was exhausted, “quick-thinking *Ganesha*, broke off his tusk, dipped it in ink and continued writing” (31). Thus he gifted the *Mahabharata* and the *Bhagwad Gita* to the world.

“Ganesha is always shown with at least one foot touching the ground, indicating his closeness to reality” (*Eternal Ganesha* 65). The sources also convey, “The Lord’s posture with one foot on the ground and the other folded up conveys to us that while we must operate in the world, there must also be a constant alignment with Atman in and through all our experiences. ..., whatever we do, there must be an unwavering focus on our higher spiritual goal” (“The Significance of Ganesha”). His arms are left free to illustrate many philosophical abstractions. Some *Ganesha* scholars imagine Him with six-arms representing six different beliefs of Indian philosophy while others interpret his figure with four arms depicting the four types of life forms – terrestrial, aquatic, amphibious and avian – the base of contemporary zoology. Anyways, *Ganesha* offers a suitable figure for meditation with his many arms which can be viewed as a philosophical pattern. “In one hand he holds a noose symbolizing the bondage of desire. In another, he holds an axe to break the ties that bind men to materialism. The sweets held in a third hand indicate the pleasures of knowledge and spiritual wisdom. His fourth hand is raised in the symbol of enlightenment which comes with liberation from all desires” (*Eternal Ganesha* 71). However, there are other thinkers who interpret his four hands in the following way, “In one hand he holds a lotus, the symbol of enlightenment. In the other hand ... hatchet... karma, ..., the accumulated good and bad of past deeds get cut when enlightenment comes. The third hand holds laddus, ... the rewards of a wise life. Ganesha is never shown eating the laddus. The wise man never partakes of the rewards of his deeds.... The fourth hand is shown blessing the people” (Asthana, 2008).

Coexistence of Opposites

“Ganesha is Shiva’s son and representative. Shiva is Pashupati, or the lord of animals. Ganapati is the foremost of the animals, Shiva incarnate as the ruling principle in the manifest worlds. Both Ganesha and Shiva are Om. Shiva is Om in its transcendent state. *Ganesha* is Om in its state as underlying and ruling all other forces” (Frawley, 2016). *Ganesha*’s figure is a combination of four separate animals i.e., elephant’s head, man’s body, a snake around his tummy and a mouse as his carriage. The four conflicting animals point to the ultimate aim of Hindu spirituality of “finding an over-arching unity in which all apparent contradictions can be contained.... the union of the small with the

great, the microcosm with macrocosm” (*Eternal Ganesha* 72). They also give a very significant message that all the creatures should live peacefully for the benefit of the universe and this is the base of non-violence or *ahinsa*. Diane Saarinen writes, “A human body encircled by a snake connects the elephant to a mouse ... Ganesha incarnates Hindu philosophy’s fundamental law, the unity in diversity that is humanity’s primary duty to maintain” (2006). Some intellectuals interpret that *Ganesha*’s figure expresses man’s closeness to nature and animals and suggests a balance between the two for perfect ecological balance. “The image of Ganesha thus represents man’s eternal striving towards integration with nature. He has to be interpreted taking into consideration the fact that though millenniums rolled by, man yet remains closer to animal today than he was ever before,” views Nitin Kumar (2000).

The four animals that constitute *Ganesha* are often used as a guide to spiritual development. His trunk may curl into ‘OM,’ the highest form of consciousness, yet he rides on a mouse which indicates the lowest form of consciousness, the ego. To some devotees, his mouse symbolizes a thief that wanders in the shadow of the involuntary longings, gnawing at the tranquility of the inner self, and *Ganesha*’s domination over it represents “the conquest of egoism and the self-annihilating power of desire” (*Eternal Ganesha* 77). Some *Ganesha* followers believe that *Agni*, the sacrificial God of Hindus, once disguised himself as a mouse. As the fire kindles inside the earth, burns on the ground and rises to the heaven as smoke, “... Agni is considered the mediator between the three worlds of ignorance, materialism and enlightenment.” (77). According to another myth when all the gods offered *Ganesha* presents, the earth herself gave him a mouse to carry him into the heart of the Earth’s innocent secrets. This myth suits modern India where *Ganesha*’s mouse is fast becoming a popular vehicle for accessing knowledge. The Lord of New Beginnings is now known as an emblem for a new era when India emerges as a ‘Super Power’ through her speedy development in information technology. If Indians achieve this, they will be riding *Ganesha*’s mouse. “The meek mouse,” as *Jayalalita*, Indian political leader, once remarked, “which has a special place in the Indian psyche, revered as the vehicle of Lord *Ganesha*...today stands reincarnated, powered by Pentium.... Today, governance stands reinvented as e-governance, at the click of the ubiquitous mouse” (81).

Spiritual Significance

To Gita Mehta, the serpent binding *Ganesha*’s belly offers entrance to the vast energy field of the universe accessed through *Kundalini Shakti*. *Kundalini* has been called the serpent power. *Kundalini* means coiling and *Ganesha*’s serpent represents the coiled and latent psychic energy which every individual seeks to have union with the undifferentiated universal energy. To activate this energy as well as to experience pure consciousness, every illusion of individual separateness must be dissolved through strong mental and physical discipline. Awakening the ‘*kundalini* serpent’ is the supreme goal of those who practice *Kundalini* Yoga. Their teachers have devised the techniques

necessary to release the force described in their ancient text, the *Yoga Kundalini Upnishad* as:

The divine Power,
Resting half asleep
Like a snake coiled round upon herself

At the base of the body. (*Eternal Ganesha* 85).

Yoga books classify seven *chakras* or centers of energy in the human body mounting from the base of the body, to the skull. According to Gita Mehta, “The famous lotus position of Yoga...is the primary position of meditation because in this position the spine is closest to the earth, This first energy center at the base of the spine is the Muladhara Chakra meaning the root chakra, and its power is controlled by Ganesha” (91). When the first chakra is set in motion, the serpentine energy of *Kundalini* begins its ascent. Once the power of *Kundalini* is awakened, it twirls upwards through the spine, setting off each energy center until it explodes into the core of the pineal gland which *Tantric* mystics call the Third Eye. The Third Eye releases the concentrated column of energy through the crown of the skull and the person feels the self dissolved into a thousand-petalled lotus of light. In this state, individual consciousness merges with universal consciousness where the *Yoga Kundalini* says, “all illusions of separateness dissolve and That alone remains which is soundless, formless, and deathless, which has neither beginning nor end, which is without decay” (91). Lord *Ganesha* is the presiding deity of the *Muladhar Chakra*, the seat and foundation of *Kundalini* power and the resting place of the coiled serpent. Without his blessings the serpent or *Kundalini* power cannot be roused.

This is mythological interpretation but R. K. Sanyal presenting a scientific analysis of the same process, correlates the *Muladhar Chakra* to the deepest level of unconsciousness. According to his belief, “...the deepest level is the “muladhar chakra” which is the ultimate bottom level of the unconscious where the primordial knowledge associated with creation and its initial purity, is enshrined in the energy form called ‘Kundalini’ ” (2002. p127). He locates it as situated “at the base of the spinal cord...” (127). Leaving aside the interpretation part, the process is a technique of the field of meditation and the sages from the past have reported about having this blissful experience. In the words of Swami Vivekananda, “Within there is the lion – the eternally pure, illuminated, and ever free Atman; and directly one realises Him through meditation and concentration, this world of Maya vanishes. He is equally present in all; and the more one practices, the quicker does the Kundalini (the ‘coiled-up’ power) awaken in him” (2005. P 65).

The chapter entitled, “Ganesha Miracle” narrates the internationally famous mesmerizing incident of drinking milk by *Ganesha* that took place on September 21, 1995. Indian Rationalist Society tried to resist but “within seventy two hours the international press began reporting an even more astounding development. The miracle had jumped national boundaries. Now Hindu idols around the world were consuming milk by the gallon” (*Eternal*

Ganesha 101). Many people assumed a new god had been born to save the world from wickedness. However, there is little evidence that the world has become better since September 1995. Gita Mehta feels, the Indian Rationalist Society, should not dismiss “Indians as gullible fools” nor should believe in “idols drinking milk” rather they “should have urged Indians to use a little Prudence and Discrimination (the two wives of *Ganesha* – *Ridhi and Sidhi*) when faced with paranormal disturbance” (107). In India, such incidents depend on individual faith.

According to Gita Mehta, ‘*Ga-Na-Esha*’ the last syllable – ‘*Esha*’ – of *Ganesha*’s name means lord. “The first syllables Ga and Na mean the entrance and the goal; an entrance to the world of learning, the wisdom that is learning’s goal” (*Eternal Ganesha* 125). Together they become ‘Gana’ or category, identifying “Ganesha as the Lord of Gana, the Lord of Categories” (125). A *gana* is a genetic code for knowledge. ‘*Esha*’ means lord, ruler or master “As the Lord of Categories, the Lord of Connections, *Ganesha* provides the tools of recognition without which there is no understanding of cause and effect, there is no speech, there is no consciousness” (125). The grammarians recognize him as the power of language because he is the first word. Mathematicians find him as the power of numbers as he is the first cause. Philosophers respect him as the power of thought as he is the first principle – consciousness. Well known as “the patron of grammarians,” Ganesha is particularly acknowledged for his literary and educational activities. There is no surprise that “manuscripts and printed books often begin with the auspicious formula, ‘*Sri-Ganesaya- namah*,’ meaning “Reverence to Lord Ganesa”” (Basham, 2003. p315).

Conclusion

The *Sanatan Dharma* of India is not known for an unending search for higher divinity rather for a higher consciousness, a self recognition, a self that recognizes the unifying principles of all life known as *Brahma*. Gita Mehta says, “What I love about Lord Ganesha is that he symbolizes the greatness of Sanatan Dharma. The best thing that happens to you is that he forces you to explore yourself, the greatness within you” (cited in Melwani, 2015). Mehta feels that by giving the “tools of comprehension, by replacing worship with awareness, Ganesha has enabled his devotees to reach that higher consciousness, that Unifying Principle, and sub-merge their individual egos in the greater self of the Brahman” (*Eternal Ganesha* 125). Perhaps for this reason *Ganesha* always looks amused and he reveals that divinity is not to be found in gods. Divinity, if exists at all, is to be found in self.

Eternal Ganesha – “a healthy dose of inspiration” (Saarinen 2006) – is, thus, a virtual celebration of the wonderful, delightful God who is universally loved for his benign interactions with the human affairs. *Ganesha*, is the Lord of Beginnings and the Destroyer of Obstacles as well as a great inspirer. He awakens our spiritual knowledge and guides us on the right path. His delightful

form which juxtaposes four animals – an elephant head, big bellied man’s body with multiple arms, girdled by a snake and riding a mouse – enchants the faithful and transcends all cultural barriers as well as suggests that opposites can live peacefully. Indeed, *Ganesha* represents hope, optimism, good will and some healthy self-indulgence. His nobility reminds us that spiritual awareness is not at odds with the good life. With his vital virtues, wisdom, judgment and discrimination, *Ganesha* constantly reminds people to use them in such critical situations and solve the moral, ethical and psychological dilemmas judiciously. As an embodiment of ‘OM’ the sacred Hindu syllable and *Sanatana Dharma*, *Ganesha* inspires people to search divinity in self. *Ganesha* also professes that spiritual awareness is not negated by good life. In the current era of modernization, “Lord Ganesha is frequently associated with entrepreneurial spirit and the spread of his popularity outside India is attributed to the commercial contact between the country with its neighbours ...” (Chowdhury, 2017).

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