

GANESA: MYTHS OF THE ORIGINS OF HIS ELEPHANT HEAD

Ganesa, also known as Ganapati, is the infamous elephant headed deity that is worshipped throughout the Hindu religion. The worship of Ganesa extends from outside of the temple into the household, where he is a substantial figure (see Chennakesavan 94). Along with his one tusked elephant head is his short, chubby, childlike body with four arms, which all add to his distinct and popular appearance. His life and character are established within the *Puranas* and are dated back as far as 300 C.E (Brown 2). Ganesa's head is his most well known feature, with numerous stories on how it came to be, and what it represents. It is noted that Ganesa's head represents *atman* and his body represents *maya* which signifies the existence of human beings (Canadian Press). There are Puranic stories that declare he was born with his elephant head. However, that would defeat the purpose of the many myths explaining how he obtained his head. Along with those myths are others on why an elephant head was chosen. It is the numerous possibilities that add to Ganesa's maturing cult. The most famous stories of where his head came from deal with: birth, doorstep guarding, battle, laughter and gloating.

The most well known myth is a story from the *Siva Purana*. It begins with Parvati wanting a son, but Siva not wanting to have one with her because of his asceticism. So Parvati created herself a son by rubbing scented oil mixed with powder all over her body. Then Ganesa appeared. Once Ganesa was born, Parvati used him as a doorkeeper while she was bathing and instructed him not to let anyone in the house. When her husband Siva came home and saw a mysterious little boy guarding his house refusing to let him, he engaged Ganesa in a fight and decapitated him. When Parvati came outside after her bath and saw her son lying on the ground headless, she was furious with Siva. She then informed Siva that he was their son. After Siva had realized what he had done, he promised Parvati he would find a new head for Ganesa from

the first thing that came by – which so happened to be an elephant. He then decapitated the elephant and attached the head to the lifeless body of their son and brought him back to life (Brown 76-77). The myth where Ganesa is decapitated by Siva is the most widely-told version of how he came to acquire his unique elephant head (Brown 3).

There are many myths of why an elephant head was chosen over many other possibilities. There is also speculation of which elephant head it was that was given to Siva and Parvati's son. Some speculate that the head is from Indra's elephant, Airavata. In other versions there was an elephant that had just finished copulating as well as an elephant that happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time (Brown 77). The elephant is viewed as a wise animal with a remarkable memory. They are also known to have loyal and trustworthy attributes (Chennakesavan 95). It is believed that by choosing the elephant head for Ganesa, he would be associated with such dignified traits. These qualities would add to his popularity.

Another myth closely related to the first one outlined, is Siva decapitating Ganesa in a battle. The difference in this myth from the previous one is that this time Ganesa is not guarding his mother's doorstep. Instead, he is riding around on his elephant. After Siva has decapitated Ganesa and his elephant in a gruelling battle, Parvati comes outside and notices what just took place. She informs him that he has killed her son, and asks Siva to bring Ganesa back to life. Siva does so by placing the head of Ganesa's elephant on his body (see Brown 77). Like the previous myth Siva is unaware that Ganesa is Parvati's son because he was created without a husband – *vinayaka* (see Brown 75).

Contrary to Siva's asceticism in the previous myths, Siva and Parvati found themselves making love to try to conceive a child of their own. Parvati wanted to have a son who would be the spitting image of Krsna. While the two were in the middle of intercourse, Visnu appears as a

beggar, interrupts their moment and then vanishes. It is at this moment Siva spills his semen all over the bed, and it does not go inside Parvati. Then Visnu reappears and mixes himself amidst Siva's sperm. He then becomes a baby boy – who turns out to be Ganesa (Brown 76). Ganesa was born with the head of a human, and although it is not stated in this myth how his head came to be, there are many more stories on how he may have obtained it. For instance, after Ganesa was born, Parvati may have taken him to other Gods to show him off. A God like Sani.

The most interesting myth is the story of Parvati wanting to show off her son to Sani. Parvati was unaware that Sani was cursed with a medusa-like stare. She insisted that he should take a look at her beautiful new baby boy. Sani's curse consisted of reducing anything to ashes that he lays his eyes upon. Since he knew what would happen he tried to resist looking at Ganesa in order to protect the beautiful baby. After much encouragement from Parvati to look at the child, Sani did so timidly with one eye open in hopes of not harming the baby. Ganesa's head was then reduced to ashes. As Parvati stood there in awe, Visnu flew off to the northwest mountains and found two elephants that had just finished copulating. He cut off the head of one of the elephants and brought it back to Parvati where it was placed it on Ganesa's body (Grimes 70).

In another version, Siva creates his son Ganesa by his own uncontrollable laughter. After a while Siva becomes jealous of his son and is afraid that he might woo all the ladies. Siva is also worried that he might win Parvati's heart as well. Once he sees that Parvati is falling in love with Ganesa, he places a curse on him (Grimes 70). Siva's curse ensures that Ganesa would be unattractive to women, making it easier for Siva not to be jealous, and for Parvati's heart to remain only to him. Ganesa then becomes elephant headed, grows a chubby belly and has to wear a necklace of disgusting serpents from his neck. It was not for long that Siva was able to

prevent Ganesa from being near the ladies. When Ganesa grew older, he wound up marrying Prajapati's daughters – Buddhi/Rddhi and Siddhi (see Brown 115-119).

Within the *Skanda Purana* there is a very unusual story on how Ganesa's head was obtained. It begins by Ganesa's embodiment of a headless child who is speaking with a sage, Narada. This conversation is from the book *Ganapati: Song of the Self* by John Grimes; it can be found on page seventy.

Narada begins by telling Ganesa "If you have taken this incarnation in order to reveal righteousness, then quickly reveal to all the head that destroys sorrow; and bring joy to the hearts of all Gods." Ganesa replies to the sage by reminding him of a blessing that he had given to King Mahesa 'Your liberation will come through birth in the womb of an elephant, accomplished by Siva's hand'. Ganesa then goes on to say "all this has now come to pass and this one in the womb has a lovely head, honoured by Siva. And he is the one whose head will complete my incarnation".

After this conversation had taken place, Ganesa informed Narada of how he became headless. He began by explaining when he was in Parvati's womb the demon Sindura changed to the form of a breeze, entered her womb, and cut off his head. This event happened in the eight month of his natal life. Ganesa then carries on telling Narada that Mahesa has an elephant head and that he is going to kill him. It was when Mahesa was killed that Ganesa acquired his elephant head (see Grimes 70).

There are many stories on how Ganesa was born, how he lost his head and then where his new head came from. There is also much speculation on why an elephant was chosen over many other things in the world, including the head of another person. The uncertainty of one profound

myth being the reason for his head adds to Ganesa's character. It is these exciting stories that make Ganesa so popular with the Hindus. Ganesa will remain one of the most loved and worshipped household deities within the Hindu religion.

REFERENCES & RECOMMENDED READINGS

- Brown, Robert L (1991) *Ganesh: Studies of an Asian God*. Albany: State University of New York
- Bühnemann, A (2003) *The Worship of Mahaganapati*. Kant Publications
- Canadian Press Newswire (2004) *Hindus around the world are getting ready to celebrate Ganesh Chaturthi, the birthday of the god of success*. Canadian Press Toronto
<www.proquest.umi.com.darius.uleth.ca> ID# 701269181>
- Chennakesavan, S (1980) *A Critical Study of Hinduism*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass
- Courtright, Paul (1985) *Ganesa: Lord of Obstacles, Lord of Beginnings*. New York: Oxford University Press
- Dhavalikar, MK (1991) *Ganesa: Myth and Reality*. Albany: State University of New York Press
- Getty Alice (1936) *Ganesa: A Monograph on the Elephant-Faced God*. Oxford: Clarendon Press
- Getty, Alice (1988) *The Gods of Northern Buddhism: Their History and Iconography*. Dover Publications
- Grimes, John (1995) *Ganapati: Song of the Self*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Krishan, Yuvrai (1996) *Is the Fight Between Siva and Ganesa an Episode of Oedipal Conflict?*
Delhi: Agam Kala Prakashan
- Pathak, A (1998) *Ganesa Birth Story: Pain Led on Orissan Doors*. New Delhi: Ramanand Vidva Rhawan

Related Topics

Airavata
Buddhi

Ganapati
Indra
Krsna
Mahesa
Narada
Parvati
Prakrti
Puranas
Rddhi
Sani
Siddhi
Siva
Siva Purana
Skanda Purana
Vijnesvara
Vinayaka
Visnu

Related Websites to this Topic

<http://www.exoticindiaart.com/ganesha.htm>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ganesh>

<http://www.msu.edu/user/grimesj/ganesha.html>

<http://hinduism.about.com/library/weekly/aa083000a.htm>

http://www.sanatansociety.org/hindu_gods_and_goddesses/ganesha.htm

<http://www.indiaprofile.com/religion-culture/ganesha.htm>

Written by Jessica Thiedemann (Spring 2006), who is solely responsible for its content.