

Ganesa, the son of Lord Siva and the Goddess Parvati, is known to Hindus as the Remover of Obstacles. He is the much loved, elephant headed, pot bellied deity with a penchant for sweets. He is one of the gods propitiated by students seeking assistance with their studies. Ganesa is known by many other names: Ganapati (Lord of the Multitudes), Vinayaka (Remover of Obstacles), Ekadanta (Single-Tusked One) and Gajanana (Elephant-Headed One) (Grimes, 41) just to name a few. He was Vyasa's scribe when Vyasa dictated the epic *The Mahabharata*. He is best known as the guardian of Parvati's private chamber, where his duties resulted in his receiving his elephant head. It was in a similar situation that his tusk was broken too, while he was guarding the door to his parents' private chamber.

While there are a few stories of how Ganesa's tusk came to be broken or severed, the most common one says that Ganesa received his broken tusk during a fight with Parasurama (one of Visnu's *avatars*), while he was guarding the door for both of his parents, who were inside making love (Courtright 74). Parasurama was a great warrior of Siva's, and had just returned victorious from war, having fought successfully against the demons, using an axe bestowed upon him by Siva. Siva had given Parasurama the axe with the caveat that it not be used in vain. When his attempt to enter the palace and the bedroom of Siva and Parvati was rebuked by Ganesa, Parasurama grew angry and the two exchanged words. Parasurama's words were angry, while the words of Ganesa, as set out in the *Brahmanda Purana* and the *Brahmavairvarta Purana*, were even toned and matter of fact. Ganesa simply informed Parasurama that his parents Siva and Parvati were inside engaging in intercourse and that the entry by anyone would be most improper. Parasurama, offended at being reminded of the applicable *dharmic* obligations of the situation, grew more and more angry, and attempted to push past Ganesa, dismissing him. Ganesa jumped in front of him, blocking his way.

Further argument ensued at this point, and Parasurama raised the axe as if to throw it at Ganesa. Ganesa, seeing this, seized Parasurama with his trunk, "lowering him down through the seven regions of the world and finally down to the ocean at the innermost part of the earth until Parasurama became so frightened he wanted to

die” (Courtright 75). Ganesa then raised Parasurama back up and set him back down on the ground. Due to his very frightening experience, Parasurama mistakenly thought Ganesa had defeated him. When he realized that he was standing once again before Ganesa in front of Siva’s palace, he flew into a rage and threw Siva’s axe at Ganesa. Ganesa, not wanting the axe to be thrown in vain, took the blow of the axe blade in his left tusk, severing it and causing it to fall to the ground. When the severed tusk struck the ground “all the worlds shattered and trembled with fear” (Courtright 25). The God Skanda (Ganesa’s brother), who had been sitting guard along with Ganesa when Parasurama had approached, as well as others present during this altercation, had created such a commotion that their noise in addition to that of the falling of the tusk drew Siva and Parvati from their chamber. Parvati, protective of her son whom she noticed had been injured, provided Siva with an angry redress for not immediately jumping to Ganesa’s defence, accusing him of having a preference for Parasurama over that of his own son. She seethed at Siva that “virtuous people take better care of their slaves than you do of me” (Courtright 76). At this, Siva said nothing. Parvati then took her children and left, still angry that Siva has once again rejected his own child.

Parvati’s anger at Siva, and Siva’s quiet acceptance of that anger may provide some insight into the ideal that women possess their own power in Hinduism. This would fall in line with other power-possessing Goddesses such as Kali, Tara or Sakti.

Another story of how Ganesa lost his tusk begins with Ganesa receiving many *modakas* (sweet, steamed coconut-poppy seed dumplings) from his devotees one evening. He ate so many of them that his belly grew very large and bloated. As Ganesa set off home, riding his mouse mount (*musika*), a snake slithered across his path. At the sight of the snake, Ganesa’s mount drew back in fear, causing Ganesa to fall to the ground where his sweet-filled belly broke open and all the sweets rolled out onto the ground. Ganesa got up, picked up his scattered sweets, and placed them back in his belly. He then killed the snake and used it to tie his belly closed.

While all this was going on, the moon was watching, amused. When Ganesa's belly split open and the sweets rolled out all over the place, the moon laughed out loud at Ganesa's predicament. Ganesa, one must remember, is often viewed as a child deity. Therefore, given his childlike status, it should come as no surprise that Ganesa grew angry, throwing a temper-tantrum at being the subject of the moon's laughter, so angry in fact, that he plucked out his tusk and speared the moon through, causing darkness across all the land. It was not until the gods pleaded with Ganesa to restore the light of the moon that he did so, however, "only on the condition that the moon gain and lose its light by waxing and waning each month" (Courtright 81).

Ganesa's removal of his own tusk is not restricted to just the story of his anger with the moon, he also removed it in his occupation as scribe to Vyasa. While he was transcribing the Mahabharata for Vyasa, his writing instrument broke, and without hesitation, he broke off one of his tusks and continued writing in accordance with the deal between the two that Ganesa would be Vyasa's scribe so long as he would write without ceasing, and that Vyasa would dictate continuously (Grimes 76).

There has been some speculation by anthropologists and others, which suggests that Ganesa's tusk is possibly representative of a lingam, especially so due to Ganesa's paternity from Siva, who's virility is embodied in his phallic emblem (Courtright 111). Further, it has also been suggested that it was an agent of Siva (or even Siva himself), who removed Ganesa's tusk for the purposes of quasi-castration in order to jealously prevent Ganesa from approaching Parvati in an incestuous fashion, the quasi-castration having left Ganesa sexually ambiguous (Courtright 117). This would not be entirely unreasonable given the theme of Ganesa and Parvati's close relationship throughout the myths. If it were the case then, that Siva was attempting to prevent Ganesa getting too close to Parvati by making him asexual, it would serve to further support the apparent continual denial of Ganesa by Siva which is evident throughout a great deal of the Ganesa myths. Siva is seen to act in either indifference or violence toward Ganesa, for example, by cutting off his

head at the entrance to Parvati's chamber, demanding, "don't you know who I am?" or seemingly taking Parasurama's side when he cuts off Ganesa's tusk with the axe Siva had bestowed upon him.

One cannot help but feel sorry for Ganesa while reading his stories as he always seems to be on the receiving end of one misfortune or another, such as being beheaded by his father, having his belly split open and all his sweets falling out, or losing his tusk to a great warrior who is favoured by his father over him. However, given the necessity of balance in Hinduism, Ganesa likely must experience his obstacles before he can remove them.

Scholar and author John Grimes eloquently summed up Ganesa when he said: "Ganapati is a child, a god, an elephant, a *siddha*, four armed, and an enigma. He does exactly as he pleases. He is free. He is seen, but he is the seer. He sees what cannot be seen. He can be known, but he is the knower. He knows, but he knows nothing. His secret is that he is himself. His secret is that he is you. His secret is *tat tvam asi*" (Grimes 63).

References and Recommended Readings:

Brown, Robert L (1991) *Ganesh: Studies of an Asian God*. Albany: State University of New York

Courtright, Paul B. (1985) *Ganesa: Lord of Obstacles, Lord of Beginnings*. New York: Oxford University Press

Grimes, John A. (1995) *Ganapati: Song of the Self*. Albany: State University of New York Press

Krishan, Yuvraj (1999) *Ganesa: Unravelling an Enigma*. New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Limited

Michael, S.M. (1983) *The Origin of the Ganapati Cult*. Asian Folklore Studies, 42 no 1 1983, p 91-116

Seth, Kailash Nath. (19--) *God & Goddess of India*. New Delhi: Diamond Pocket Books Pvt. Ltd.

List of Related Terms:

Brahmanda Purana

Brahmavairvarta Purana

Ekadanta

Ganesa Gita

The Mahabharata

Musika

Parvati

Parasurama

Siva

Siva Purana

Skanda

Vyasa

Noteworthy websites related to the topic:

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

<http://hinduism.about.com/od/lordganesha/a/ganesha.htm>

http://www.himalayanacademy.com/resources/books/lg/lg_ch-10.html

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

<http://www.lotussculpture.com/parvati1.htm>

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

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