

# The Origin of the Ganapati Cult

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## INTRODUCTION

The Ganapati cult is a living reality in India today. It permeates the thoughts, beliefs and aesthetic values of the people. Ganapati is the most popular deity worshiped next to Vishnu, Shiva and their consorts. Unlike some other gods in the Hindu pantheon, his worship has spread through all of the castes of Hindu society. According to Margaret and James Stutley (1977: 92): "In modern times Ganesa is regarded as the personification of those qualities which overcome difficulties. He is the typical embodiment of success in life, and its accompaniments of good-living, prosperity and peace, and hence his images and shrines are seen throughout India. In all ceremonies (except funeral rites) and undertakings Ganesa is first invoked."

Ganapati is the god of wisdom and he is said to have written down the *Mahabharata* from the dictation of Vyasa. As to his appearance, "He is represented as a short fat man of a yellow colour, with protuberant belly, four hands, and the head of an elephant, which has only one tusk. In one hand he holds a shell, in another a discus, in the third a club or goad, and in the fourth a water-lily. Sometimes he is depicted riding upon a rat or attended by one" (Dowson 1968: 107).

These extraordinary features of Ganapati have spurred interest among scholars in tracing the origin of this most revered deity. Various hypotheses have been proposed. First let us analyze some of these hypotheses, before going into detail of the interpretation I would like to make on this subject.

## GANAPATI AS A HARVEST GOD

According to Gupte (1919: 55), some philologists and ethnographers

have tried to trace the origin of the Ganapati cult to the harvest season. They argue that Ganapati was originally called *Mushhak Vahan*, or "rider on a rat." The word "mushhak" means a "thief," and the title "Mushhak Vahan" thus implies that he is a rider on the field rat, the "thief of the field."

The figurative representation of Ganapati as having the head and the snout of an elephant may possibly have its origins in the familiar sight of a farmer carrying a load of cornsheaves on his head, with the lower ears of corn swinging to and fro. The idea, then, of a bumper crop overriding the pestilence of the rats might have been expressed by a god with the head of an elephant pictured riding a rat and also having a round pot-belly (a barn), surrounded by a hooded cobra, the great destroyer of the field rat. According to Gupte (1919: 55): "Conquest is very often symbolised in this manner. Shiva rides the bull he conquered; Krishna dances on the hood of the snake Kaliya whom he vanquished; and so Ganesh rides over the rat he destroys, as Lord of the Harvest. The origin of the gigantic head of an elephant on one side and the little field mouse on the other can thus be accounted for in his figure."

Ganapati is also addressed by the names "Surpakarna" and "Ekadanta." The meaning of *supra* (or *supa*) is "winnowing basket," and *ekadanta* means "one-toothed." This *ekadanta* may thus represent the plowshare. Since both the winnowing basket and the plowshare are necessary for the harvest, both Getty and Gupte conclude that Ganapati's origin may have some link with the harvest (Getty 1936: 3; Gupte 1919: 55).

In conformity with the above hypothesis, Pandit Lachmidhar Shastri (1937) says that the original conception of Ganesha with an elephant-head and riding on a rat was not a deliberate creation of the people's mind. It was the result of a suggestion originating from the known environment rather than a conscious effort on the part of an artist, the spontaneous production of the imagination of an agricultural people. Ganesha is only an appellative name, the highest title of the deity, whose original name must have had to do with the wearing of an elephant head, such as "Gajavadadana" or "Gajanana."

There is also another explanation given for Ganapati's association with the harvest. The rat (*musika*), an animal that multiplies with tremendous rapidity, is perhaps symbolic of fertility and productive power. It is well known that Ganapati's vehicle is the rat, and this association of Ganapati with a rat, and thereby with fertility and productive power, is thereby explained.

Other relevant names of Ganapati are *Gauriputra*, *Vakratunda*,

*Lambakarna*, *Dhumravarna* and *Akhuratha*. As I noted in the introduction, Ganapati is pictured as a short fat "man," of yellowish color and having a protuberant belly, with ears and a tusk from the elephant's head, attended by a rat. It has been suggested that the yellowish color (or *Dhumravarna*) of Ganapati is the color that is characteristic of the cornsheaf. Ganesha, who is the personification of a good harvest, is shown riding on a rat. This illustrates the fact that rats devastate the fields, and that no good crop is possible without the rats being kept under control.

Frazer, in *The Golden Bough*, has recorded a very interesting custom connected with rats (1971: 695-96). In the Indonesian island of Bali, the mice which ravage the rice fields are caught in great numbers and burned in the same way that corpses are burned. But two of the captured mice are allowed to live, and receive a little pocket of white linen. The people then bow down before them as gods, and let them go. From this illustration, Frazer concludes that in primitive religion it is sometimes thought that the object of desire can be attained by treating one or two individuals of the obnoxious species with high distinction while pursuing the remainder with relentless vigor.

The distinction of rats in ancient religions may be further noted in the Old Testament, where in the Book of I Samuel 6 (4-5) it is said that the Philistines were advised by their priests to give a trespass offering of five golden mice. "Make images of your mice that mar the land and you shall give glory unto the God of Israel." In Hindu mythology we also come across such offerings of rats. In the *Katha*, the *Kapisthala* and the *Maitrayana Samhitas* we read that a rat is given as an offering to Rudra and his sister Ambika (who in the *Taittiriya Brahmana* is identified with autumn, or the harvest earth). In later mythology Rudra is identified with Shiva, and Ambika with Parvati, while the rat is the offering to Rudra. In Hindu mythology Ambika is associated with Ganesha, the son of Shiva and Parvati, who is known as *Rudraputra* and *Akhuyana*. Thus the original conception of Ganesha as having a rat as his attendant is complete when he is regarded as the lord of the harvest.

This association of Ganapati with the harvest is further corroborated by the ceremonies performed during the Ganapati festival. At the time of Anata Chaturthi, the statue of Ganapati is consigned to a river or a tank, from which a handful of clay or sand is brought home and ceremoniously thrown into the barn and the grain barrels by the celebrants. It is believed that the presence of this clay or sand will prevent the grain from being eaten by the hungry rats. In some communities the water in which the Ganapati statue is immersed is

then released in the fields, and as soon as it reaches the fields rain is expected (Abbot 1932: 346).

The food offered to Ganapati at the time of worship also associates him with the harvest. During worship Ganapati is offered a broth of sweet rice called "modakas." This is made of rice flour, raw sugar and coconut meat, all things associated with the harvest.

In certain parts of the Ratnagiri District in Maharashtra a special festival in honor of the rat, the favorite conveyance of Lord Ganesha, is generally observed on Bhadrapad Sud 5. It is called "Undir Bi," or "the second day of the mouse." On this day food is offered to an image of the mouse which is worshiped along with an image of Ganapati. The food offerings made to the image of the mouse are taken the next day to the fields and the crumbs are thrown in with the standing crops. It is believed that by doing this the field mice will be appeased and not damage the standing crops (Census of India 1961: 14).

There are also various other rituals which closely associate Ganapati with the harvest. The last sheaf to be reaped has many names. In Kanara it is *ari*, *holigattu* or *benappu*, the last of which is a synonym for Ganapati. A ritual is performed to protect the grain on the floor from the evil or from theft by spirits. As a protection against spirits, in many districts a line is drawn around the pile of grain and chaff with the ashes of burnt chaff. Auspicious designs are drawn with ashes or with turmeric and camphor on the floor as well as on the pile of grain. Similarly, to prevent any decrease in the grain which could be attributed to spirits, the cultivators in the Panch Mahals use ashes to draw the figure of a tree on the pile of grain. In Kandesh they draw the marks of a svastika and of a double triangle, and in Karnatak figures of the sun and moon and symbols of Ganapati.

In Kalwan Taluka, the newly threshed grain is heaped over a plow and a stone representing Ganapati, and a hen or goat is sacrificed and eaten. In another ceremony an *asan* (seat) of grain is always used for *kalasas* (the Indian water pot, pitcher or ewer), installed in all *santi* ceremonies. According to Margaret and James Stutley (1977: 268), it is "An expiatory or propitiatory rite for preventing disease, averting the effect of curses, adverse stellar influences, or the karmic results of bad actions in a previous existence." In all the ceremonies mentioned above the betel nuts and coconuts representing Ganapati are placed on the grain. These nuts also represent the *Saptarsis* or *Navgrah* ("The Seven Seers"; RV X. 130, 7), whom the post-Vedic commentators identify as the seven great rsis individually mentioned in various passages of the Rig Veda. According to the northern tradition, these comprise Atri, Vasistha, Kasyapa, Visvamitra, Gotama, Jamadagni and

Bharadvaja. In some traditions the list varies only slightly, in others considerably. Other names were subsequently added as stellar mythology expanded, and astrology and cosmogonic theory developed.

The *saptarsi* tradition also became associated with the notion of descent (*jati*), not from a single ancestor but from the tribal group or clan (*gotra*), each represented by one of the original "Seven Seers." The notion that the *brahmarsis*, or mind-born sons of Brahma, are the progenitors of the human race, is only faintly discernible in the Veda, though it is clearly enunciated in post-Vedic theory (Stutley and Stutley 1977: 269). Certain images are always placed on an *asan* (seat) of grain on important festivals. Accordingly, Ganapati is placed on grain on the Ganesha Chaturthi. The ritual to Ganapati is one of the most important ceremonies to be faithfully followed at weddings. The newlyweds will worship Ganapati in a betel nut placed on a seat of grain, and the grain and the nut are then tied into the corners of their clothes.

Surprisingly, all of the above rituals are somehow connected with grain. But does this in any way link the origin of the Ganapati cult to the harvest?

#### GANAPATI AS A NON-ARYAN GOD

N. Devaraj Sarma observes, from the researches conducted in the past seventy-five years in Indology by various scientists, that Ganapati as such is not a Vedic deity, but that Rudra and Brhaspati have contributed to the evolution of the later form of Ganesha. Hazara traces the worship of Ganapati-Vinayaka back to an early period; according to him, Ganapati was originally a kind of demon, or a jungle genius. He also mentions that this demon was included in the retinue of the "Great Lord," who along with innumerable more or less malignant spirits, was believed to haunt the mountains and forests. All these spirits were gradually fused into one elephant god, Ganapati, who later also became a remover of obstacles (Chinmulgund 1967: 728).

Thani-Nayagam (1970: 31) agrees with this proposal and says, "Ganesa the elephant-headed demon who was to be appeased at the outset of any function to avert supernatural hindrances, remained such a demon with the Mahayana Buddhists, but with the Brahmanical Hindus he was transformed into the benign god who removes obstacles and who typifies wisdom. The very character of the god as having an elephant-head shows his native Indian, i.e., pre-Aryan origin."

Crooke sees in Ganesha a Dravidian sun god. This opinion has been confirmed by de Gubernatis, who says that Ganesha was originally a Dravidian deity worshiped by the aboriginal populations of India who were sun worshipers. On his rat *vahana* (vehicle), Ganapati

symbolized a sun god covering the animal, which in ancient mythology is a symbol of the night (see Stutley and Stutley 1977: 92).

#### FROM AN ANIMAL CULT

Admitting Ganapati to be a Dravidian sun god, Crooke further adds that Ganapati's elephant head and his vehicle, the rat, indicate that although Ganapati might have been taken over from indigenous mythology, he originally belonged to an animal cult. Getty, in support of this idea, says, "This seems a plausible theory, since his image is found in Hindu temples worshiped in company with the animal *avatars* (incarnations) of Visnu" (Getty 1936: 2). Joseph Campbell (1946: 184) also makes a note that the elephant as a "determinant" placed beneath the anthropomorphic symbols of divine power is a common feature in early Buddhist reliefs in India.

Risley observes that the rat is a "totem" of at least one Dravidian tribe, the Oraons, a fact which points to its early symbolism (1969: 113). But Haridas Mitra is of the opinion that Ganapati was perhaps originally the special deity of the *Ganas*, the wild Aryan tribes which inhabited the desert wastes, mountains and forests of India. These peoples might have been struck with fear by the strength of the wild elephants. Otherwise unable to ward off their attacks and the havoc they caused, these people thus might have begun to worship a guardian (Ganapati) in the form of an elephant. This deity was later affiliated with Pasupati (Sankara) and Bhutapati (Shiva), and when he was admitted to the higher Aryan pantheon various descriptions of his origin were given in the Puranas.

These descriptions doubtless took centuries to grow. As evidence for his position Mitra points out that "Ganesa worship was rather connected with the elephants as known both from *Tantrika* and *Saivagami* texts from West and South India respectively. For the increase of elephants (which were royal beasts, belonging to the king) in the preserves and for the general prosperity of the people, the kings had to perform a ceremony called *Gaja-sampadana* or *Gaja-graha*" (Mitra N.D.: 19-20).

#### OTHER EXPLANATIONS

Przyluski suggests that Shiva and Ganesha were originally one and the same god. According to this theory, Ganapati was another aspect of Shiva and might therefore have been considered identical with Rudra-Shiva, even though he had been introduced into the Indian pantheon as Ganapati, the Lord of the *Ganas* (Mukerji 1932: 83).

Sudhakar Chattopadhyaya considers Ganapati as a reconciliation

of the Shiva and Vishnu sects. He has critically studied a unique copper coin of Huviska, on which there is a figure of an archer standing upright, holding a bow as long as his own height, with the string turned inwards; the coin has an inscription which looks like Old Brahmi for Ganesha. In the *Ramayana*, Shiva is described as *Ganeasalsambhuscca*. In the *Mahabharata*, on the other hand, Ganesa is a name for Shiva, while Ganesvara is a designation of Vishnu. Thus both Shiva and Vishnu claim to be the lord of the divine hosts, and here we find a rapprochement between the two rival sects. The epic contemplates Vishnu in the form of Shiva and Shiva in the form of Vishnu. This reconciliation between the Shaivas and the Vaishnavas possibly took place for the first time during the Kusana age, 140 B.C.–1 B.C. (Allan 1934: 73). Thus we find on a coin of Huviska the figure of Shiva with a *cakra* (wheel) in his hands along with the *trisula* (trident of Shiva) and *vajra* (the thunderbolt). The weapon *cakra* is Vishnu's emblem, and in the hands of Shiva it shows the beginning of the interesting composite icon of Hari-Hara of a subsequent age. Thus when the Shaiva and the Vaishnava sects were growing closer to each other newer conceptions arose to cement their alliance (Sudhakar Chattopadhyaya 1962: 79–83).

According to Stutley and Stutley (1977: 92), "Coomaraswamy regards Ganesa as a folk-godling having affinities with *yakasas* and *nagas*, while Monier-Williams places Ganesa and Skanda at the head of the tutelary village divinities (*grama-devatas*) who, as the controllers of good and evil actions, guard the households." A few other scholars maintain that the origins of this god may be discerned in *Rig Veda* itself, in the descriptions given there of such deities as the Maruts, Rudra, Brhaspati and Indra (Mahadevan 1960: 182).

R. G. Bhandarkar traces the beginnings of Ganapati worship to the veneration given by many Indians to such "imps and evil spirits" as Sala, Katamkata, Usmita, Kusmandaraja-putra, Devayjana and others mentioned in the *Mana Grhyasutra* and *Yajnavalkya Smrti* (1965: 147–50). On the other hand, "Mr. Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya says that *gana* means the people, and Ganesa or Ganapati, lord of the people, was the chief of a clan which had the elephant for its totem and defeated or absorbed another clan which had the mouse or rat for its totem. This explains how a man with an elephant's head became a god, and why he is depicted standing or riding on the mouse or rat" (Spratt 1966: 124).

#### CRITICAL REMARKS

None of these numerous theories proposed by the various scholars

noted above is satisfactory. Haridas Mitra has the following comments regarding the association of Ganapati's origin with agriculture:

Even admitting that Ganesa might have somehow some vague connection with agriculture and harvest, as has been suggested sometimes, it is impossible to agree with the view the Ganesa's elephant head and trunk have their origins in the appearance of a farmer carrying on his head a load of corn-sheaf, particularly when the lower or lowest ears swing to and fro and that if two winnowing baskets, so essential at harvest-time, and the plough-share be added to the bundle, one would get forms of the elephant-head, ears and tooth of Ganesa. It is hardly possible if the primitive Indian people had a well-developed imaginative power to discover such analogies. Such theories which make Ganesa a composite of so many elements must, therefore, be regarded as wildly fantastic (Mitra ND: 20).

Against the hypothesis of Risley, which sees the origin of Ganapati in the totemic worship of the Oraons, Mitra vindicates the view that Ganesha's vehicle the rat might be the totem of the Oraons, but says that it is hardly possible for these primitive tribes to have adopted it so early and from the folk religion of an alien people with whom they were probably often at war (ND: 31).

A scrutiny of the various theories that shows those of R. G. Bhandarkar and Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya seem to be the most logical, but even these lack depth and do not give a full treatment to the subject. In the following pages I shall make an attempt to present an integral approach to the problem, in the light of the disciplines of comparative philology, comparative mythology, linguistics, anthropology and cultural history.

#### AN INTEGRAL APPROACH TO THE PROBLEM

In our attempt to trace the origin of the cult, let us first consider the meaning of the term "Ganapati." This word is composed of two words, namely *gana* and *pati*. The word *pati* means "chief." The Sanskrit word *gana* is derived from the Indogermanic hypothetical root *ger*, meaning "to comprise," or "to hold together or come together."

The word "gana" and the many compounds and derivatives from it are well known in ancient literature, beginning with the *Rig Veda*. Wilson has collected the following meanings for the word "gana": "a flock, a multitude, a troop, a tribe or class, etc." (Wilson 1819). The meanings collected by Monier-Williams (1899) and Macdonell (1893) also agree with the meanings of Wilson. In Indian lexicons, the word *gana* is given as a synonym of *samuha* or *samgha*, meaning

“a gathering together” or “a collection.” On the basis of this Fleet (1915: 138) says that *gana* could also mean “tribe.” Thus we can conclude that the term “Ganapati” could mean a “tribal chief,” or the “head of a group of subjects.”

*Ganapati in the Rig Veda.* Apart from knowing the meaning of the term “Ganapati,” we should also know in what senses this term has been used in different contexts of Indian cultural history. The word “Ganapati” appears the first time in the second mandala of the *Rig Veda*, which is the oldest stratum of the Vedic literature. The text says, “We invoke thee, O Brahmanaspati, thou who art the Ganapati among the *ganas*, the seer (*kavi*) among the seers, abounding beyond measure in food, presiding among the elders and being the lord of invocation; come for thy seat where the yajnas are being performed” (Daniélou 1954: 110).

After this we come across the word “Ganapati” only in the tenth mandala of the *Rig Veda*: “O Ganapati, take thy seat amidst the *ganas*, thou art called the supremely wise among the seers; nothing nearby or afar is performed without thee. O thou possessor of wealth, extol the great and variegated sun” (*RV X*: 112, 9). These are the only appearances of the word “Ganapati” in the *Rig Veda*. We do, however, find the word “gana,” along with its derivatives, no fewer than forty-four times, most of which refer to the group life of the Maruts.

To understand the context in which the term “Ganapati” is used in the *Rig Veda*, it is necessary to look into the nature of Vedic mythology. Can we conclude that the stories in the *Rig Veda* are merely “myths”? Or could the details in the stories have some relationship with the actual way of living during that period?

Until the nineteenth century historians proclaimed that all myths were unhistorical and that legendary events like the Trojan war never took place. But archaeologists such as Schliemann confirmed that Homer was not all myth and that the Biblical stories of the Flood and the Tower of Babel were not devoid of a basis in truth (see *Encyclopedia of World Mythology* foreword by Rex Warner). Hence to regard all mythologies and *puranas* as tales told by prattlers is now rightly held to be unscientific. Mythology can help us greatly in understanding the unfolding of civilization, or in understanding various civilized or primitive cultures, or the human psyche itself—the dreams and hopes and fears of man. Myths are at once both a record of ancient man’s world view as well as a testimony to his artistic inventiveness (see Nityachaitanya 1960: 18).

Since myths can be the transposition of natural phenomena (Renou

1972: 14), it is appropriate that we go back to the cultural history of the Vedic people. This will help us understand in what sense the term *Ganapati* is used in Vedic mythology.

The Vedas are the holy books which are the foundation of the Hindu religion. There are four Vedas, and the oldest is the *Rig Veda*. These are among the oldest literary productions of the world (Mehta 1974: 1; Swami Sharvananda 1973: 184), and according to the most generally supported opinion, they were composed between 1500 and 1000 B.C. (Dowson 1968: 345).

The *Rig Veda* hymns are collections of the religious poetry current among the Vedic tribes (Keith 1970: 1). They tell us a great deal of the land in which the Aryans lived, of their tribal organization, their language and literature, their social and economic conditions and their philosophy, religion, moral ideas and art (Jain 1961: 84).

Analyses of the social life of the people of Vedic time by A. A. Macdonell (1905: 153 ff) and D. D. Kosambi (1972: Chapt. 4) reveal that the early Vedic people were organized in tribal groups. These tribal groups had their own chiefs and their own patron deities. The word "gana" was used in Rig Vedic literature to signify this group life of the tribes and their collections of deities.

What, in this context, might have been the meaning of the term "Ganapati" in the *Rig Veda*? As I have noted, the term *Ganapati* is used in two places in the *Rig Veda*, once in the second mandala—which is the oldest stratum of the Vedic literature to address Brahmanaspati—and once in the tenth mandala, much later than the first example, to address Indra. If the word "gana" meant in Vedic literature a "tribe" or a "collection" of people or deities, and "pati" meant "chief," it is logical that "Ganapati" would mean either "tribal chief" or "chief deity." This would suggest that Brahmanaspati and Indra were either tribal chiefs or chief deities in their respective periods of history. To verify these possibilities it is necessary for us to go into the religious history of the Vedic people.

According to R. C. Zaehner:

It is probably impossible for a modern scholar to reconstruct the significance of a "primitive" religion, particularly that of Vedas which seem to take for granted much material the nature of which we can only surmise. To attempt to explain Vedic religion as "nature worship" as was commonly done in the hey-day of Vedic studies in the nineteenth century, failed because so much of the evidence obstinately refused to fit into this narrow frame. Similarly the philological method (now revived by Thieme and others) which would explain the nature of any given deity solely by the etymology of his name, failed in its turn not only because the etymology itself is often doubtful, but also because

a god, like a man, grows and develops into something very much more than his name. More recently attention has been focussed on the ethnological approach which tends to emphasize social trends existing in given societies and to explain the divine society portrayed in myth by analogy with the social structure of the human society of the god's devotees. Thus, for example, the naturalist school saw that the Vedic pantheon could be roughly divided into three classes of gods—heavenly gods, gods of the atmosphere, and gods of the earth. The tripartite classification is accepted by the ethnological school, but it sees the distinction not so much as between heaven, atmosphere, and earth as between the three great classes into which Vedic society seems to have been divided—*Brahmans* (priests), *Kshatriyas* (warriors among whom were included the “kings” or tribal chieftains), and *Vaisays* (the mass of the common people, peasantry, and artisans) (Zaehner 1962: 22–23).

Spencer goes so far as to say that the Vedic gods were the worshiped souls of the dead (Hopkins 1970: 10). Dumézil says that “as far as the Vedic religion and mythology is concerned, the two antithetical yet complementary divine rulers Mitra and Varuna are the representatives of the class of priests, Indra (or Vayu) of that of warriors, and Asvins of that of food producers” (Dandekar 1968: 438).

A deep study of the gods of the Vedic people reveals that Brahmanaspati and Indra could not be tribal chiefs because, “the deities of the Rigveda were mostly personifications of natural phenomena under which the herders had to live” (Bhattacharyya 1974: 30). The following hymn from the *Rig Veda* confirms this idea:

I call upon Agni, first, for welfare;  
I call upon Mitra-Varuna, here, for aid.  
I call upon Night, who brings the world to rest;  
I call upon the god of Savitri for support (Campbell 1962: 174).

Indra, who is the most prominent divinity in the *Rig Veda*, is also an atmospheric god who is often identified with thunder. As such he destroys the demons of drought and darkness, and heralds the approach of the rain so vital to India. In the Veda, the most significant myth which recounts his deeds centers around his slaying of the demon Vritra, who has enclosed the waters (i.e., the rains) and the sun, and who is the very embodiment of cosmic chaos (Dandekar 1958: 13). Through the changing of the praises of these gods by the Vedic priests the gods were persuaded to confer favors on devout Aryans (Pusalker 1937: 137).

Another reason that Brahmanaspati and Indra cannot be tribal chiefs is that “the doctrine of the divinity of the king or of his office

is not found developed in the Vedic age. Only in a solitary passage King Purukutsa is called *ardha-deva* or semi-divine; but that was because he was believed to be the gift of Indra and Varuna to his widowed mother . . . Though kings are mentioned scores of times in the Vedic literature, nowhere else is divinity ascribed to them” (Altekar 1937: 232). Only in the period of the later *Samhitas* will we find a gradually growing tendency to elevate the king to divinity. Hence the gods mentioned in the *Rig Veda*, namely Brahmanaspati and Indra, must be patron deities of the then existing tribal chiefs. That is the reason the poet-priests had for praising the patron gods of their chiefs. According to Hopkins, “even in the earliest period the religious litany to a great extent, is the book of worship of a warrior-class as prepared for it by the priest. Priest and King—these are the main factors in the making of the hymns of the *Rig Veda*, and the gods lauded are chiefly the gods patronized by these classes” (Hopkins 1970: 29).

Thus in the second mandala Brahmanaspati, who is addressed as Ganapati, could be thought of as the chief deity of a particular tribe among the invading Aryans. But later the warrior god Indra seems to have attained the supreme position among the various tribal gods. The lineage of tribal chiefs who had Brahmanaspati as patron deity must have been defeated by a lineage of tribal chiefs who worshiped Indra in that capacity. This is presumably the reason that Indra is addressed as Ganapati in the tenth mandala. This change might have taken place due to the constant in-fighting of the tribal people themselves as well to changes in confederacies.

A scrutiny of Vedic literature shows that from “the earliest times the pantheon is the product of a continual clash and friction, not only with gods of other ethnic groups but among those of various clans and families of the Aryans themselves. Each family seems to have had its weakness for its own god or gods. Those gods who could represent larger segments of life and experience, who could mobilize greater strength and significance, and, later who could annex other gods by virtue of their greater potentialities, grew, while others faced out” (Bhattacharji 1970: 12–13). It is common that the gods of the conquered will yield to the gods of the conquerors. There is no reason for the fact that a one-time supreme deity would vanish while an unknown god rises to eminence other than the fact that the deity of the victorious people has emerged as the supreme god, while that of the defeated is discredited.

The cultural history of the Vedic people shows that the people were divided into many tribes. Each of these tribes was under a king, who was styled the protector (Luniya 1951: 46). These tribal chiefs were

“very quarrelsome” (Barnett 1964: 6), and “The Aryans looked on the king primarily as a leader in war, responsible for the defence of the tribe” (Basham 1954: 35). Many hymns in the *Rig Veda* refer to the battle between one Aryan tribe and another. Sir Leonard Wooley goes so far as to say that “The Rigveda is the epic of the destruction of one of the greatest cultures of the ancient world” (Majumdar 1959: 2-3). Whether or not Sir Leonard is absolutely correct, at least one thing is clear—these tribal chiefs were fighting with one another. According to B. N. Luniya:

As they (the Aryans) advanced in easterly direction, they came into conflict with peoples living in fortified areas (*purās* and *durgas*), under their own kings and chiefs. They are contemptuously spoken of in the Vedas as *Dasyus* or slaves. The *Rig Veda* itself describes a hundred-pillared fort of the enemies that the Aryans had to contend with. The fact that many of the hymns of the Vedas are addressed to the gods for assistance in fighting their enemies reveals to us that the Aryans waged prolonged wars with the non-Aryans. The high god of the Vedas, *Indra* who is described as *Purandara* (the shaker of cities), is stated to have destroyed many cities for the Aryans (Luniya 1951: 43).

Thus we can say that each tribal chief had his own god, and before the war the chiefs used to pray to their gods for success. The war god “Indra” was doubtless the patron deity of a certain tribe. As this tribe defeated the others, its god Indra became the chief god of the victorious tribe. That is why Indra is addressed as “Ganapati” in the tenth mandala of the *Rig Veda*.

An analysis of the history of the god-head of Indra shows that by the end of the Rig Vedic period Indra had become the greatest of the gods, praised in some two hundred-fifty hymns (Berry 1971: 19). But as is also the case with Agni and Soma, the history of Indra is ambivalent. For a long time Indra was regarded primarily as a storm god; later his character of warrior god for the Aryans was emphasized; later still his positive power in recreating order in a disordered world is pushed into the foreground, and Indra is constantly involved in mythological battles. His adversary in battle is usually called “Vrtra,” and Indra’s own stock epithet is “Vrtra-han,” or “Slayer of Vrtra.” But according to Zaehner:

Vrtra (in the neuter) is also used in a more general sense meaning “obstruction, defence” or according to Gershevitch “Vigour.” And so Indra is essentially the “destroyer of (his enemies’) power to resist,” the “destroyer of their vigour.” Vrtra, the “encompasser” is the demon who imprisons the waters, and as such he may be considered to be demon of drought: but he is also the lord of ninety-nine fortresses,

which suggests that he may be a human foe. Be that as it may, the salient episodes of the myth are that Indra smashes the fortresses and slays Vrtra: the waters are released, the sun is made to shine, and Vrtra's wealth in cattle is liberated (Zaehner 1962: 29).

Thus the history of Indra bears witness to the fact that he has gradually raised himself from a lower position to that of supreme god-head.

Apart from the second and tenth mandalas mentioned above, we do not come across the term "Ganapati" anywhere else in the *Rig Veda*. But as I noted earlier, the word "gana," along with its derivatives, is found many times. In most of these cases, the word *gana* refers to the group life of the Maruts.

But who were these Maruts? The Maruts were the sons of Rudra, and the constant companions of Indra. They were handsome young spirits, vigorous, who, according to the *Rig Veda*, numbered either twenty-seven or one hundred eighty. "Like Indra, their leader, the Maruts were alternately gay youths and fearsome warriors and they were valuable allies to Indra when he attacked the demon Vritra, frightening his followers with their war-cries and adept at harrying the cloud-cattle," in the words of Veronica Ions (1967: 17). Thus the Maruts were the constant companions of Indra, and like Indra, were youthful warriors. According to Zaehner (1962: 33), they "are the heavenly counterparts of a young men's tribal confederation or what we would call a commando-group specially attached to the person of the warrior king." The main point of our consideration here is that since Indra is the supreme god to these Maruts, whose group life is called *gana*, it is logical that Indra should be addressed as "Ganapati," which meant the "chief of the *ganas*" in the tenth mandala of the *Rig Veda*.

*Ganapati in the Grihya Sutra.* The only mention of Ganapati besides those of the *Rig Veda* occurs in the *Grihya Sutra*. The date assigned to this sutra is the fifth century B.C. The *Grihya Sutra* speaks of not one Ganapati, but of "Ganapatis," in the plural. After this time the later *Vajasaneyi Samhita*, *Manava Grihya Sutra*, *Yajnavalkya* and the *Mahabharata* all begin to speak of Ganapati as "Ganesvaras" and "Vinayakas," in the plural.

And these "Ganapatis" inspired only dread and contempt in the days of the *Grihya Sutra*. According to R. G. Bhandarkar:

The *Manava Grihya Sutra* declared that when "possessed by these a person pounds sods of earth, cuts grass, and weites on his body, and sees in dreams waters, men with shaved heads, camels, pigs, asses, etc., and feels he is moving in the air, and when walking sees somebody pursuing him from behind." These were not the only misdeeds which

the Ganapati caused. The text describes how because of the Vinayaka or Ganapati "Princes Royal do not obtain the kingdom, though qualified to govern. Girls do not obtain bride-grooms, though possessed of the necessary qualities. Women do not get children even if otherwise qualified. The children of other women die. A learned teacher qualified to teach does not obtain pupils, and there are many interruptions and breaks in the course of a student. Trade and agriculture are unsuccessful" (Bhandarkar 1965: 147).

Thus we see a complete contrast in the nature of Ganapati. In the *Rig Veda* Ganapati was the supreme deity, but here in the *Manava Grihya Sutra* he is considered to be many, and they are all evil or catastrophe incarnate. Why this transformation?

During the Rig Vedic period Indra was "Ganapati" because the tribal chiefs who worshiped Indra as their patron deity were victorious. But by the time of the *Manava Grihya Sutra* the lineage of tribal chiefs who worshiped Indra and related gods as patron deities had begun to lose in battle. As a result of this the positions of Ganapati and related deities were degraded, and they began to be seen as trouble makers and as catastrophe incarnate. This transformation doubtless took place gradually. Vedic mythology clearly indicates that the position of the gods has changed in accordance with the vicissitudes of the cultural life of the Vedic people. Any given god, for example, might be regarded as being sovereign and supreme during a specific time, only to have his position change after a time. These changes occurred because the characters of the gods were in full conformity with the ethos of the period, and changes in the ethos subsequently brought about changes in the positions of the gods (see Dandekar 1968: 438).

Changes in the confederacies also brought about changes in the positions of the gods. According to S. Bhattacharji (1970: 5-6): "Some of the old gods had faded out altogether, some had grown more important while others were less so than before, and many new gods had appeared in the new pantheon. These gods had appeared in the new pantheon. These gods and the changed old gods were worshiped differently." As an example, we have the following:

Most of the Vedic Adityas died out by the time of the epics. We no longer hear of Savitr, Bhaga, Aryman, Daksa, Amsa, Pusan or Martanda. Vivasvat becomes unconvincing, mythologically the Asvins are as good as forgotten, while Varuna changes his character to a great extent. Indra, too, dwindles in power and significance. The Adityas gradually become less powerful. Only Visnu grows, but even he grows as a culture-hero of the Indian people, not as an Aditya (S. Bhattacharji 1970: 7-8).

Thus, because of the changes in confederacies, the supreme position of Indra, who was "Ganapati" at that time, might well have been defamed as a *Vighnaraja* or *Vighness*, terms which mean "the arch mischief maker." The attitude of the Buddhists toward Ganapati also confirms the fact that Ganapati's association with Indra cast him into the role of trouble maker. According to Haridas Mitra (N.D.: 40), "Ganesa was generally styled as *Vighna* 'obstacle,' or *Vighnaraja* 'Chief of obstacles' by the Buddhists. He was the rascally and irascible son of Indra" (see also *Arya-Manjusri-mulakalpa* part III: 53).

A study of the gods of the Brahmanas will throw further light on the above proposition. Such a study has been made by Bhattacharji (1970: 7-8):

From the *Brahmanas* onwards certain gods are spoken of as guardians of certain quarters. A study of this relationship brings out an important fact: Indra and the solar gods rule only one quarter, the east (regarded mythologically as Aditi who gives birth to the Adityas). In sharp opposition the west is ruled by Varuna. Varuna, when included among the Adityas, symbolizes the setting sun and, as such, is more closely allied to the gods and powers of darkness than to those of light. Varuna is gradually absorbed in the Siva-complex and the west is allotted as his quarter. Agni, in the *RV*, is both beneficent and sinister; as Havyavahana he is with the solar gods, as Kavyavahana and Kravyad he is with the gods of darkness. Isana, too, has both divine and sinister bearings. He is a product of the *Brahmanas* and is clearly an intermediary between the gods and the other powers. Rudra is a Vedic god, but with time he comes to take on dark and malevolent associations. Kuvera, his friend, is subdivine, with some links with the camp of the gods through his friendship with Rudra. He is the lord of the Yaksas, who again are a species of *Sondergötter*. Between Rudra and Varuna is Vaya, a god who leans more to the dark gods than to the dwellers in the east. In the south is the region of Yama and the fathers. Yama, too, like Rudra and Varuna was a god like any other god in the *RV* but came to be associated with dark and destructive functions and character from the Brahmanas until in the Puranic age he is almost a malevolent figure. When Yama rules in the south, his subjects are the fathers that is, the dead ancestors. Between Yama and Varuna is the Nairrta Kona, the south-west quarter, where Nirrti rules and where monsters (Nairrtas) dwell.

Analysing the residences of the gods we see that while Indra and the Adityas command only one quarter, the seven other quarters are presided over by gods who somehow oppose the solar forces. What connects the other seven guardians of the quarters is their association with death, decay, destruction and the fathers. This is a vitally important characteristic of the Indian pantheon.

The evidence also shows that Indra gradually became less powerful and significant. Indra's association with Rudra and Maruts, who were considered to be malevolent, might also have contributed in making his identity as Ganapati, who was a trouble maker and catastrophe incarnate. There are also scholars who hold that the origin of Ganapati may be in the descriptions given in *Rig Veda* of such deities as the Maruts, Rudra, Brhaspati and Indra (see Mahadevan 1960: 182). Those who hold this view also believe that Ganesa was originally a deity of malevolent or malignant nature, but that he later underwent a transformation, becoming a more benign deity (Bhandarkar 1965: 147).

*Ganapati in Manu Smṛti and Yajñavalkya Smṛti.* After the *Grihya Sūtra* we next encounter Ganapati in *Manu Smṛti*. Manu instructed that those who performed the *ganayaga* should be excluded from the funeral feasts, but what was this "ganayaga"? According to D. Chattopadhyaya (1959: 131):

Govindaraja, the traditional commentator, interpreted it to refer to the ritual of followers of Ganapati. However, under the influence of the changed attitude to Ganapati, our modern scholars find difficulties in accepting this straight-forward interpretation. They therefore wonder as to what Manu might have really meant. But Manu himself was sharing only the sentiments of his day. A couplet, ascribed to him, describes Ganapati as the deity of the depressed classes, the Sudras, and this in clear contrast to Sambhu, the deity of the Brahmanas, and Madhava, the deity of the Ksatriyas. The Sudras, according to Manu, were entitled to wear only the worn-out clothes and eat only the refuse of food. We do not, therefore, expect him to be reverentially disposed to the followers of Ganapati, the deity of the Sudras. His contempt for ganayaga was thus only logical.

Thus we can see that during the time of Manu Ganapati was considered to be a god of the low castes.

The attitude that the Ganapatis were evil incarnate seems to have persisted for a long time. It is the source of the opinion of Yajñavalkya, separated by many centuries from the *Manava Gr̥hya Sūtra*, that the Ganapatis were trouble makers. While the *Manava Gr̥hya Sūtra* mentions four Vinayakas—Sala-Katankata, Kusmanda-rajaputra, Usmita and Deva-Yajna—the *Yajñavalkya Smṛti* addresses only one Vinayaka, though this one has six names—Mita, Sammita, Sala, Katankata, Kusmanda and Rajaputra (Karmarkar 1950: 137). Yajñavalkya also describes how Rudra and Brahmadeva appointed Vinayaka to the leadership of the Ganas (Mittra N.D.: 20).

As I pointed out earlier, R. G. Bhandarkar traces the beginnings

of Ganapati worship to the veneration paid by many Indians to such "imps and evil spirits" as Sala Katamakata, Usmita, Kusmandarajaputra, Devayjana and others mentioned in the *Manava Grihya Sutra* and the *Yajnavalkya Smṛti*. These creatures are collectively described in both these texts and the *Mahabharata* as "Vinayakas," prone to possess men and women, to cause them to fail in life, and to put obstacles in the way of their performing good deeds (Bhandarkar 1965: 148).

The idea that Ganapati was catastrophe incarnate and a trouble maker is not confined to literary sources. Some of the early sculptural representations of Ganapati depict him as a terrifying demon and indicate his nature and position to have been similar to that found in the Smṛtis noted above. These early sculptures are indeed different from current works; in them his clumsy nudity and total lack of jewelry gives one the impression that he is hardly different from the rank and file (Getty 1936: xix).

A few early images of Ganapati portray his hostile nature both bluntly and directly. In certain Tibetan bronzes Ganapati is found being trampled under the feet of Mahakala, a deity who was supposed to have been the deity of law and order. Figures of Ganapati on stone images found in Bengal portray him under a *padmasana* (sitting posture) of Bhrukuti Tara, and lying under the lotus throne of Parnasavari. In the latter representations Ganapati holds a shield and a sword, indicating that his surrender was not without resistance. According to D. Chattopadhyaya (1959: 133-34):

Ganapati being trampled under the feet of Manjusree is, again, not a piece of very rare sculpture. Probably more significant than all these is an image found of a certain deity called *Vighnantaka*, literally meaning one who destroys obstacles or conquers troubles. Trampled under his feet, Ganapati could only mean the creator of catastrophes.

*Ganapati in the Puranas.* The image of Ganapati as the creator of catastrophes is not to be found in the *Puranas*; here the same Ganapati who was a trouble maker in *Manava Grihya Sutra* and *Yajnavalkya Smṛti* is declared to be the god who sanctions success. The *Vighnaraja*, or "trouble maker," has become the *Siddhidata*, or "bestower of success." Ganapati figures prominently in the *Puranas*, with lengthy sections of texts such as *Brahma Vaivarta Purana* and *Skanda Purana* being devoted to describe his pomp and glory. According to D. Chattopadhyaya (1959: 134):

Hyperboles were freely used. The *Skanda Purana* declared him to be an *avatar* that is an incarnation of God himself. Another text, called the *Ganapati Tattva*, went a step further and equated him to the Upa-

nisadic Brahman, the all absorbing spiritualistic Brahman, the all absorbing spiritualistic reality. At least one Upa-Purana and one minor Upanisad were composed exclusively for the purpose of praising him. These were the Ganesa Purana and Ganapati Upanisad.

This transformation of Ganapati into one who bestows success is also brought into Indian sculptures. Ganapati, once trampled under the feet of heroes, begins to receive costly ornaments and sophisticated decorations.

A scrutiny of the Puranas noted above will show us that the transformation of Ganapati from creator of catastrophes to bestower of success is sudden and abrupt. It appears to have been a deliberate and planned effort on the part of the authors of the texts to give publicity to a newly transformed god. For example, the *Ganesa Stotra* of the *Narada Purana* concludes with these words: "One who copies out this (i.e., the Ganapati Stotra) in eight copies and distributes the copies among eight Brahmanas, is sure to attain immediate success in learning and that by the grace of Ganesa" (D. Chattopadhyaya 1959: 135). Furthermore, the *Ganesa Gita* was written to substantiate the claim of Ganapati's wisdom; in this text Ganesha is made to discuss philosophy. The *Ganese Gita* is the same as that of the *Bhagavat Gita*, except that the name Ganesha is used in place of Krishna.

*The time of this transformation.* There are various opinions regarding precisely when this transformation from creator of catastrophes to bestower of success was made in Ganapati. R. G. Bhandarkar, speaking about the various aspects of Ganapati, says (1965: 148):

That the Vinayakas had come to be objects of faith before the Christian era may be taken to follow from the occurrence to the ceremony mentioned (above) in a Grhysutra. But the one Ganapati-Vinayaka, the son of Ambika, was introduced into the Hindu pantheon much later. None of the Gupta inscriptions which I subjected to an examination on a former occasion contains any mention of his name or announces any gift or benefaction in his honour. But in two of the caves at Ellora, there are groups of images of Kala, Kali, the Seven Mothers or Saktis, and Ganapati. These caves are to be referred to the latter part of the eighth century. So that between the end of the fifth and the end of the eighth century the Ganapati cult must have come into practice . . . .

D. A. Pai (1928: 86) and A. P. Karmarkar (1950: 138) also say that Ganapati worship must have come into vogue during the fifth century.

A careful and comparative study of the iconographic texts characterizing the various types of images of Ganapati also tell us that there

were not many icons of Ganapati before the sixth century (see Upadhyay 1964: 270). From the seventh century, however, Ganapati figures regularly in Hindu sculptures (Martin 1972: 190). According to D. Chattopadhyaya (1959: 138–39):

In Cordington's *Ancient India*, we come across an image of Ganapati in which he appeared in glory and grandeur. This sculpture is assigned to about 500 A.D. and is looked at as one of the earliest in which Ganapati appeared in this new light. Coomaraswamy, too, has pointed to the fact that Ganesa "does not appear in iconography before the Gupta period" and, further, "the figure of Ganesa appears suddenly and not rarely in the Gupta period." Kane has conjectured that "the well known characteristics of Ganesa and his worship had become fixed before the fifth or sixth century of the Christian era."

Thus we can speculate that Ganapati was made into a popular god around the fifth to sixth centuries.

*The reason for the transformation.* Ganapati, a trouble maker and catastrophe incarnate in *Manava Grihya Sutra* and *Yajnavalkya Smṛti*, is transformed into a supreme god in the Puranas, one who helps people avert troubles and attain success. We have seen that this appears to be a sudden and abrupt transformation, as though it were a deliberate and planned effort on the part of the authors of the Puranas to give publicity to this newly transformed god. Why should this have happened? Ganapati surprisingly begins to be depicted as having the head of an elephant, riding on a rat. Ganapati, with his huge body, is riding on a rat which is quite small. Why this contrast?

The explanation of the origin of Ganapati in the Puranas is confusing and contradictory. The *Siva-purana* says that the origin of Vighnesvara was different in different aeons of creation; the *Skanda-purana* ascribes the birth of Ganapati to Parvati alone; the *Linga-purana* says that one of Siva's *amsas*, that is a part of Siva's power, took the shape of a handsome being and was delivered out of the womb of Parvati. The *Matsya-purana* is of the opinion that while Parvati was bathing she formed the oil, ointments and impurity that came from her body into the figure of man, and then gave life to it by sprinkling it with the water of the Ganges (see Rao 1968: 35–67). Still another story goes that Parvati took the unguents she had annointed herself with and mixed them with the impurities of her own body, went to the mouth of the river Ganga and made the elephant-headed *raksasi* (ogress) Malini drink the mixture; as a result of this Malini conceived and gave birth to a child which was eventually taken away by Parvati (D. Chattopadhyaya 1959: 137). In the *Suprabhedagama* Siva explains the reason

that Ganapati has an elephant head:

I, in the company with Parvati once retired to the forest on the slopes of the Himalaya to enjoy each other's company, when we saw a female elephant making herself happy with a male elephant. This excited our passion and we decided to enjoy ourselves in the form of elephants. I became a male elephant and Parvati a female elephant and we pleased ourselves; as a result you were born with the face of an elephant (Getty 1936: 9).

Why this confusion and contradiction in the Puranas regarding the birth of Ganapati?

One possible reason may be as follows. I have already pointed out that in *Rig Veda* Brahmanaspati and Indra are both addressed as Ganapati, and were the supreme gods during their respective periods of history. I have also noted that this supreme position once claimed by "Ganapati" might have been changed to that of "Arch-mischief maker" by dint of changes in the political and military confederacies of the time. Now the identification of Ganapati as mischief maker persisted for a long time, but by the time of the Puranas we might assume that the tribal chiefs who worshiped this defamed Ganapati as their patron deity had established their own superiority by victories over the other tribal chiefs. It is possible that the victorious chiefs had the elephant as their totem, and the defeated ones had the rat as theirs. Thus the fact that Ganapati is depicted as having a human body and an elephant head, and as riding a rat, might have evolved to symbolize the victory of the chiefs who worshiped him and who had an elephant as their totem.

An analysis of the Ganapatis mentioned in the texts *Manava Grihya Sutra*, *Yajnavalkya* and *Marabharata* reveals that these Ganapatis had different animal appearances. The Tantrika literature indicates that some of the Ganapatis had the emblem of the bull, and others the emblem of the snake. Hence there is every possibility that the specific Ganapati who was the "Arch-mischief maker" of the time had the emblem of the elephant. It is also clear that each tribal group had its own patron god, and that these were represented either as natural forces (wind, thunder, etc.) or as animals. It is an accepted phenomenon that gods of the conquered yield their positions to the gods of their conquerors. Hence it is natural to assume that once those tribes who had Ganapati as patron were victorious they would have raised their own patron deity to a high status.

This must then be the reason that the Ganapati seen as the "Arch-mischief maker," to whom, as we have seen, all manner of chaos was attributed, suddenly in the Puranas becomes the "bestower of success"

and is even declared by the *Skanda Purana* to be an *avatar*, or an “ incarnation ” of God himself. This is further the reason that this transformation appears sudden and abrupt, giving us the impression it was a deliberate and planned effort on the part of the writers of the Puranas to give publicity to this newly transformed god. Keeping this background in mind we can understand why the *Ganesa Stotra* of the *Narada Purana* concluded with the words, “ One who copies out this [i.e., the Ganapati Stotra] in eight copies and distributes the copies among eight Brahmanas, is sure to attain immediate success in learning and that by the grace of Ganesa.” This is nothing less than publicity for a newly transformed Ganesha. Many stories had been composed to explain Ganapati’s elephant head, and that is the reason most of these stories are contradictory and confusing.

There is some historical evidence in ancient India to support the above thesis. According to D. Chattopadhyaya (1959: 143), “ Kosambi has suggested that the later Kosalan coinage, when arranged in chronological order, reveals the history of the gradual establishment of the Matanga (elephant) dynasty.” We hear too of the rats of the Musikas in ancient India, but we never hear of them as having established any state power: “ Rather, we hear of them as being one of the peoples vanquished by an early state power. Strikingly again, this story of the Musikas being vanquished is to be found in the famous Hasti-gumpha (elephant cave) inscription of king Kharavela of Kalinga ” (D. Chattopadhyaya 1959: 144). A scrutiny of Indian history reveals that Mousikanos (lord of the Musikas) had his capital in Alor (Sukkur district). History also tells us that he was subjugated by Alexander (see Tripathi 1967: 139). We also hear of a king called Kharavela, who lived during the third quarter of the first century B.C. and attacked the city of Musikas (Tripathi 1967: 200).

So, in ancient Indian history we have evidence of the existence of dynasties with elephants and rats as their emblems, and we know that the elephant dynasty was victorious and the rat dynasty was vanquished. There is, therefore, nothing intrinsically impossible about the proposition that an elephant-headed god, Ganapati, was depicted as the rider of a rat. This also reflects the phenomenon that the gods of the conquered yield to the gods of the conqueror.

Once Ganapati established himself as a popular and accepted god of the people, he was soon able to exalt himself within the hierarchy of gods and goddesses. By the tenth century an independent sect commonly known as the Ganapatya comes into being. The cult of Ganapati assumed a unique position in Hinduism mainly because of the influence of Saktism. The Ganapatyas popularized their god by

setting up the cult of the Sakti-Ganapatis with various representations—Ucchista-Ganapati was four-armed and red; Maha-Ganapati was ten-armed and red; Urdhva-Ganapati was six-armed and white.

The various names such as Ekadanta, Surpakana, Gauriputra, Gajanana, Vakratunda, Lambakarna, Dhumravarna and Akhuratha were given him to portray his dignity. The followers of Ganapati also developed their own philosophical system, called *Ganapati Upanisad*, which is the eighty-ninth among the one hundred eight Upanisads. The *Ganapati Upanisad* opens with a mantra in adoration of Ganapati and a prayer seeking his protection, and after expounding his All-Atmic character, the eight-syllabled Ganesi Vidya, the Ganapati Gayatri and the Mala-mantra, it winds up with a narration of the various fruits obtainable through the special practice of the *mantra* (prayer), ultimately leading to the remaining as the supreme sentience alone, devoid of all things apart from it. The concept of Maha-Ganapati (Great Ganapati) developed along with these philosophical systems.

According to Mitra (N.D.: 68):

Maha-Ganapati was an Exalted God-head—with the weapons of defence and offence;—offering boons of Blessing and Protection: Means of sustenance and delicious foods, wealth, knowledge and ultimately divine illumination. His attributes, weapons and postures symbolise his eminent nature and also the diversified all-comprehending character.

Once the Ganapatyas grew in number they began to wear on their forehead a distinguishing mark of a red circle. They looked on Ganesha as a supreme deity, superior to Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. As time went by Ganapati was identified as the god of good luck and of all fortune.

This popularity of Ganapati continues to exist even today among the masses of the people in India.

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