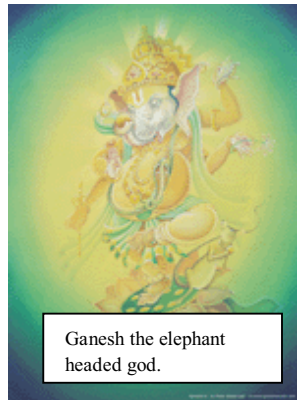


### Man and animal mythologies in Indian Art

The Hindu pantheon has, in a famous example of hyperbole, over 330 million deities. In a sense India is God-intoxicated, there is god everywhere, in all things: within/without, above/below, in the six degrees of separation and in the three planes of existence. There are gods for vegetation, gods for weather, gods for nature, gods for geographical areas, gods for villages, gods for the house, gods in the temples, gods in running water, gods in deepest forest and in icy mountain heights. There is no situation, environment and place that the Indian does not have a god for.

Ganesha (or Ganesha became the after winning a contest the task to race around race like Kartikay did, Parvati, both his father



Many stories head. One tells how Shiva to guard her Ganesha forbid it, at

Shiva restored Ganesha to life and provided him with the head of an elephant, because no other was available. In another story, Ganesha's head is burned to ashes when Saturn is forced by Parvati to look at her child and bless him.

Ganesh) is the elephant-headed god. Lord (Isha) of all existing beings (Gana) from his brother Kartikay. When given the universe, Ganesha did not start the but simply walked around Shiva and and mother as the source of all existence

describe how Ganesha got the elephant Parvati created Ganesha in absence of quarters. When Shiva wanted to see her which point Shiva cut of his head. Later

Ganesha is usually depicted either as a picture or as an idol with the body of a man and the head of an elephant, having only one tusk, the other tusk appearing broken. His unique feature, besides the elephant head, is the large belly practically falling over his lower garment. On his chest, across his left shoulder, is his sacred thread, often in the form of a snake. The vehicle of Ganesha is the mouse, often seen bowing to his lord.

According to the strict rules of Hindu iconography, Ganesha figures with only two hands are taboo. Hence, Ganesha figures are most commonly seen with four hands which signify their divinity. Some figures may be seen with six, some with eight, some with ten, some with twelve and some with fourteen hands.

The pictures and icons of Ganesha are very beautiful with rich glowing colours. I like the icons as they are very tactile.

The physical attributes of Ganesha are themselves rich in symbolism. He is normally shown with one hand in the abhaya pose of protection and refuge and the second holding a sweet (modaka) symbolic of the sweetness of the realized inner self. In the two hands behind him he often holds an ankusha (elephant goad) and a pasha (noose). The noose is to convey that worldly attachments and desires are a noose. The goad is to prod man to the path of righteousness and truth. With this goad Ganesha can both strike and repel obstacles.

His pot belly signifies the bounty of nature and also that Ganesha swallows the sorrows of the Universe and protects the world. The 'pot belly' makes the icon or picture appear very happy and 'cuddly.'

The image of Ganesha is a composite one. Four animals, man, elephant, the serpent and the mouse have contributed for the makeup of his figure. All of them individually and collectively have deep symbolic significance. 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.

The most striking feature of Ganesha is his elephant head, symbolic of auspiciousness, strength and intellectual prowess. The elephant is the largest and strongest of animals of the forest. Yet he is gentle and, amazingly, a vegetarian, so that he does not kill to eat. He is very affectionate and loyal to his keeper and is greatly swayed if love and kindness are extended to him. 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. Ganesha's large head is symbolic of the wisdom of the elephant. His large ears, like the winnow, sift the bad from the good. Although they hear everything, they retain only that which is good; they are attentive to all requests made by the devotees, be they humble or powerful. The 'elephant head' makes the character look out of proportion and therefore I dislike the visual look but find it quite strange.



Ganesha's trunk is a symbol of his bias (viveka), a most important quality necessary for spiritual progress. The elephant uses its trunk to push down a massive tree, carry huge logs to the river and for other heavy tasks. The same huge trunk is used to pick up a few blades of grass, to break a small coconut, remove the hard nut and eat the soft kernel inside. The biggest and smallest of tasks are within the range of this trunk which is symbolic of Ganesha's intellect and his powers of discrimination.

Indian art in the Hindu shrines shows the deities being depicted in different physical forms. The colours are always vibrant and the detail in the paintings appeal to me as well as understanding the symbolism of the artefacts.

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