

# Introduction

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## I. Various Gaṇeśas

Gaṇeśa is often said to be the most worshiped god in India.<sup>1</sup> As the lord of beginnings, he is worshiped by devotees of other Hindu deities — of Śiva, Viṣṇu, the Goddess — either as the initiator of the path to these deities or as the direct road to mundane goals and success. He is also worshiped by some as the primary god (*iṣṭadevatā*). His cult has its own texts, such as the *Gaṇeśa Purāṇa* and the *Śrī Gaṇapati Atharvaśirṣa*, where he is presented as the all-encompassing cosmic deity. Thus, he functions on multiple levels in the hierarchy of Indic gods, from the level of the subsidiary gods to that of the supreme deities, and his worship crosses boundaries among the various sects.

His popularity in India, however, is more than a matter of the sheer number of worshipers in his role as initiator of activities. He is favored with a singular affection. Part of this popular appeal has to do with the way he looks. He has an elephant head and a human body. Usually his body is depicted as short and squat with an enormous belly. Its girth suggests an elephant, but it also can be seen as the body of a chubby child. Gaṇeśa is considered the child of Pārvatī, and usually also of Śiva. When Gaṇeśa is depicted as a child in texts and art, he is shown as participating in cozy domestic scenes with his parents and his brother Skanda.<sup>2</sup> The Indian delight in children and the importance given to the family, seen as well in the popular child manifestations of other Indic gods,<sup>3</sup> afford an attraction to the baby Gaṇeśa. The elephant head seems actually to add to the adorableness of the little Gaṇeśa. From the earliest artistic depictions there has been a tendency to anthropomorphize the head by moving the eyes to the front and flattening the face while the eyes become human, sometimes

complete with eyebrows. This allows for a direct human-to-human reaction, along with the accompanying emotions.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, Gaṇeśa's popularity is multifaceted and widespread. He functions in many contexts other than the three I have mentioned—that of lord of beginnings, cosmic deity, and child of Pārvatī and Śiva. This book is about these multiple contexts, these various Gaṇeśas, and the underlying reasons he could take the forms and perform the functions he did. Wendy O'Flaherty writes that

Gaṇeśa has everything that is fascinating to anyone who is interested in religion or India or both: charm, mystery, popularity, sexual problems, moral ambivalence, political importance, the works. One can start from Gaṇeśa and work from there in an unbroken line to almost any aspect of Indian culture.<sup>5</sup>

Certainly this versatile god reflects in his many contexts a broad range of Indian cultural characteristics. While Gaṇeśa's multiplicity is due to his taking separate and distinct roles, the essays in this book reveal themes that knit together disparate aspects of Gaṇeśa's character. It is foolhardy to say that Gaṇeśa is unique among Indic gods, but it emerges from these essays that Gaṇeśa's popularity stems from hopes and desires he uniquely fulfills, from unique powers and premises attributed to him.

Most interestingly, Gaṇeśa is not only an Indian god. He appears in China by the sixth century, and perhaps as early in Southeast Asia. By the seventh and eighth centuries, Indian texts dealing with Gaṇeśa are being translated by Buddhist monks in China. Likewise, Indian Gaṇeśa texts are translated into Tibetan and introduced into Tibet by monks in the tenth and eleventh centuries. While based on Indian texts and art, Gaṇeśa develops unique forms outside of India, such as the dual Gaṇeśa found in China and popular in Japan. The pan-Asian Gaṇeśa has never been so thoroughly studied as in this book. As we shall see, it was Gaṇeśa in his Tantric guise that became most influential outside of India. This side of Gaṇeśa, little explored in India itself, becomes an important window on an obscure aspect of Indian culture.

## II. Gaṇeśa in Indian Myth

The mythic Gaṇeśa's character and life are developed predominantly in the Purāṇas, a group of texts that date beginning from around A.D. 300 and in which, over the next one thousand years, modern theistic Hinduism took its form. In the Purāṇas, Gaṇeśa is associated with Śiva and his

family: Śiva's wife Pārvatī and his son Skanda. His origin within this familial context is given great stress, particularly in an attempt to explain his having an elephant's head. These Purāṇic origin myths, supplemented by numerous others in regional texts and oral traditions, provide a wide variety of explanations for his form. Many of them have him violently losing his human head after birth, the elephant head being placed on his body as a substitute. In a number of the stories, it is Gaṇeśa's own father, Śiva, who cuts off his son's head. Śiva in these cases usually does not recognize his son because Pārvatī has created him unilaterally<sup>6</sup> and Śiva has never seen him before. Pārvatī's motivation for creating Gaṇeśa without Śiva's participation stems from her longing for a child and Śiva's unwillingness, as an ascetic (who must retain his seed) and an eternally living god (who does not need the *śrāddha* ceremonies upon death), to produce a son. She wants a child due to her loneliness and maternal yearnings, but she also, in these myths, creates Gaṇeśa to guard the door to her inner chamber or bath. It is here, at the access to Pārvatī's sexuality, that Gaṇeśa's attempt to keep Śiva from entering results in the physical confrontation that leads to Gaṇeśa's defeat and death by beheading.

The replacement of the head by that of an elephant takes a number of scenarios in the myths, but often involves Pārvatī's disconsolation and sometimes her threats, and Śiva's consequent surprise at what he has done and his attempt at rectification. The search for a replacement head is something of a scramble, due to the immediacy of the problem, with the head of the first creature that can be found, an elephant, being used. In a reconciliatory gesture, Śiva makes the restored and now elephant-headed Gaṇeśa part of his own family and entourage by appointing him as leader of his army of *gaṇas*. (Thus Gaṇeśa is frequently called Gaṇapati, "leader of the *gaṇas*.")

Even this very abbreviated condensation of a small portion of the Gaṇeśa origin myths shows how rich these stories are in characterizing the god. In the Indian context, Gaṇeśa is the liminal god of transitions: he is placed at the doorway of temples to keep out the unworthy, in a position analogous to his role as Pārvatī's doorkeeper, and he can set up, as he did for his father, obstacles to the successful completion of goals. His parents' ambivalent relationship, founded on the opposing concerns of asceticism and sexuality, places Gaṇeśa in between. He is created by Pārvatī as a result of Śiva's asceticism and refusal to have children, but is annihilated due to Śiva's sexual interest in Pārvatī, only to be restored, transformed, as a bond between the two. He is here fulfilling his transitional role as a means to integrate opposing elements. The Oedipal themes of Gaṇeśa's attraction or attachment to his mother, his attempt to keep his father from access

to his mother, and his confrontation with his father in which part of his body is cut off, invite psychoanalytical probings of psychosexual development.<sup>7</sup>

While the reason Gaṇeśa needs a head is supplied in these myths, the question why it is an elephant's head is not answered. Why not another human head, or the head of an animal other than that of an elephant? The failure of the myths to explain the choice may be best explained in historical terms: the form of Gaṇeśa as an elephant-headed human existed prior to the development of these Purāṇic myths. They thus were dealing with an already existing but etiologically unexplained god. Certainly, Gaṇeśa appears late in Indic literature (say, around the fifth century A.D.). He does not appear, for example, in either the *Rāmāyaṇa* or the *Mahābhārata* (except, for the latter, in a clearly late interpolation).

Much of Gaṇeśa's character is regionally defined, most particularly in the popular mind. This is perhaps best brought out in Lawrence Cohen's essay ("The Wives of Gaṇeśa"), where Gaṇeśa's bachelor and celibate nature (as *brahmacārin*)—the aspect that has been traditionally stressed in the scholarship—is shown to be predominantly a South Indian characterization. It is true that Gaṇeśa is not a womanizer as is his father, Śiva, or as is Viṣṇu in his *avatāra* as Kṛṣṇa, yet in other characterizations he is married and is even said to have children. With the possibility of such regional qualifications in mind, we can finish our composite sketch of Gaṇeśa's mythic character.

Gaṇeśa's cleverness is often contrasted to the slower wit of his more athletic brother, Skanda, as in the frequently told tale (a version is given in Cohen's essay) of the contest between the brothers in which, for a prize that varies depending on the story, Gaṇeśa and Skanda must go around the world. Skanda dashes off, but Gaṇeśa merely circumambulates his parents, arguing that in doing so he is gaining as much merit as one would by circling the earth. His parents, flattered by his devotion and impressed by his cleverness, award him the prize. Gaṇeśa's association with mental agility and learning is probably one reason he is assigned the role as scribe for Vyāsa's dictation of the *Mahābhārata* in the eighth-century interpolation to this text.

Gaṇeśa may have to be brainy to compete with Skanda's brawn. At least Gaṇeśa's body puts him at a certain disadvantage and makes him sometimes a comic figure. Lee Siegel writes that "the elephant-headed god is a dispenser of magic, of surprise and laughter."<sup>8</sup> His rotund form is maintained by his insatiable appetite for the sweet cakes that are a major devotional offering of his worshipers and that he usually holds in his artistic depictions. In another frequently repeated myth, Gaṇeśa has gorged

himself on the cakes until his belly bulges. It is night, and mounted on his rat vehicle, he begins his ride home. The rat becomes frightened by a snake that crosses the road and shies, causing Gaṇeśa to fall, breaking open his distended stomach and spilling the cakes over the ground. This scene is humorous, with the bloated Gaṇeśa tottering on the tiny rat, and his fall causes the moon to laugh. In anger, Gaṇeśa breaks off one of his tusks and throws it at the moon. This act caused the moon to disappear, and while Gaṇeśa restores it, it continues even until today to wax and wane. Gaṇeśa's comic nature is also associated with his role as leader of the playful and naughty dwarf-like *gaṇas*. Further, Gaṇeśa is described as dancing, although the imagery for this form of Gaṇeśa comes predominantly from art rather than from texts. The fat, short-legged god dancing, in clear imitation of the beautiful and manly Śiva, is again humorous.

### III. Gaṇeśa in Indian Art and Ritual

This description of the mythic nature of Gaṇeśa—a child, devoted to his parents (particularly his mother); clever, comic, greedy; the defender of doorways and integrator of opposites—could be much expanded, but in its broad outlines it is a characterization that applies to Gaṇeśa in art and ritual. It is not, however, that in the art of India Gaṇeśa simply illustrates the Purāṇic myths. His images are predominantly iconic in nature, with few of the popular stories ever represented in art. For example, the crucial episodes of Gaṇeśa losing his head or having it replaced by an elephant's head have never to my knowledge been depicted in art. In later Indian painting we have some narrative scenes depicted, but it is not until the twentieth century and under the influence of Western realism that there is an attempt to show Gaṇeśa in the Purāṇic panoramas, usually done in *papier-mâché*, that have become popular in India.

One characterization of Gaṇeśa that is avoided in the myths is his demonic nature. Paul Courtright says that

the Purāṇic texts are uncomfortably aware of the discrepancy between the malevolent, obstacle-creating powers of Vināyaka and the positive, obstacle-removing actions of Gaṇeśa, and they attempt to disguise Gaṇeśa's demon background through the clever use of false etymologies for the name "Vināyaka."<sup>9</sup>

Actually, there are a variety of possible "true" etymologies, or interpretations, for the name,<sup>10</sup> but the Vināyaka form of Gaṇeśa is indeed seen as having a malevolent side, which in some contexts, such as that of Tantric

Buddhism, predominates. Unlike the myths, the earliest artistic depictions of Gaṇeśa appear to partake in this, the dark side of Gaṇeśa. Even after the Purāṇic Gaṇeśa is well defined, in art Gaṇeśa remained predominantly important for his dual role as creator and remover of obstacles, thus having both a negative and a positive aspect.<sup>11</sup> He is usually, therefore, presented as an icon, to be propitiated, and his narrative and mythic character is not particularly developed in art.

Gaṇeśa's earliest artistic depictions are controversial in their dating. Alice Getty, writing in 1936, argued that the earliest images of Gaṇeśa date only to the fifth century, the date at which she suggests the Gaṇeśa cult also began.<sup>12</sup> Since this is also the approximate date at which he appears to have entered the Purāṇic tradition, we have an apparent dovetailing of mythic, artistic, and ritual evidence for his late appearance in Indian religion. Scholars, including Getty, have nevertheless consistently noted surprise at his sudden fully developed appearance at this date, and wondered what his sources might be. Both A. K. Narain and M. K. Dhavalikar argue in their essays that the ultimate source is to be found in elephant worship in the northwestern areas of the subcontinent. Narain ("Gaṇeśa: A Protohistory of the Idea and the Icon") has argued this thesis in detail elsewhere, suggesting that Gaṇeśa (or more precisely, a deity with an elephant's head and a human body) first appeared on an Indo-Greek coin of the first century B.C.<sup>13</sup> But Narain and Dhavalikar ("Gaṇeśa: Myth and Reality") disagree as to the significance and date of the earliest representations of Gaṇeśa in India itself. Narain accepts Getty's fifth-century date, while Dhavalikar (and myself as well in my essay "Gaṇeśa in Southeast Asian Art: Indian Connections and Indigenous Developments") feels some images can be dated much earlier, back to the second century A.D.

The question of when the earliest Gaṇeśa appears is of critical importance, and justifies here a short exploration of some additional artistic evidence. We might ask: When does the elephant-headed therianthropomorphic image become Gaṇeśa? Narain is very careful to separate the various textual and artistic strands that eventually coalesce to produce Gaṇeśa. He feels, for example, that the *vināyakas* who occur in such early texts as the *Mānava Gṛhyasūtra*, characterized as malignant demons who must be propitiated, are quite distinct from Gaṇeśa, although they are eventually going to participate in defining him. Likewise some early artistic depictions of an elephant-headed therianthropomorphic figure, such as Narain's own first-century B.C. coin image, is, while "an incipient Gaṇeśa," not yet Gaṇeśa. The images that Dhavalikar and I believe are earlier than the fifth century, most of which come from Mathurā, are small, independent images. They do carry some of the attributes that we will see

become standard for Gaṇeśa, primarily the bowl of sweet cakes, and some of them have the serpent cord that is also to become a common decoration<sup>14</sup> (see Brown, figs. 5, 6, and 8). But none come from a context in which we can judge their use. There is, however, a relief image carved in a cave at Udayagiri (Madhya Pradesh) that can be dated to ca. 400<sup>15</sup> and can be assessed in the context of the cave's overall iconography.

The Gaṇeśa image in Cave 6 at Udayagiri (see Brown, fig. 7) is located on the viewer's left as he or she enters the shallow porch that precedes the small inner chamber with a Śiva *līnga*. Opposite the Gaṇeśa, on the viewer's right, are two sets of very worn seven mothers (*saptamātrkās*). Other deities—two Viṣṇus, two door guardians, and two images of the goddess Durgā as slayer of the Buffalo Demon (Mahiṣāsūramardīnī)—are on the back wall of the porch. It is difficult to know how these various images were worshiped; the cave curiously combines both Vaiṣṇavite and Śaivite deities, and its very small size would appear to argue against any extensive movement through space by devotees, such as circumambulation that we find used in worship in later Hindu temples.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, Gaṇeśa is clearly spatially paired with the mothers, as worshipers would have passed these deities first as they progressed toward the inner and most sacred area of the cave. The *mātrkās* and Gaṇeśa are in fact going to be associated in art and ritual from this time onward as Gaṇeśa becomes regularly placed at the end of the standardized set of seven mothers. The *mātrkās'* role in Hinduism is, of course, complex,<sup>17</sup> but I wish to stress two points. One is that the mothers and Gaṇeśa were undergoing very similar processes of change from predominantly malevolent to benevolent deities as they both were being adopted into Hinduism at this time.<sup>18</sup> The second point is that both Gaṇeśa and the mothers were deities that had to be propitiated in order not to cause trouble, a notion that, even if put into a positive sense of removing, rather than causing, problems, made them deities to propitiate before worshiping other gods; thus their placement in the cave before other deities. In addition, both Gaṇeśa and the mothers were deities to whom one worshiped for this-worldly success and objectives. Again, their placement at the outer edge of the sacred space is appropriate in the hierarchy of Indic sacred architecture where the mundane tends to be relegated to the outer or the lower sections, the most sacred to the inner or upper areas.

While this is not the place to argue fully these ideas, they are substantiated in a surprising context, the Buddhist caves at Aurangabad. At Aurangabad, in Cave 7, the veranda shrines, those first encountered by the worshiper, are on the left dedicated to a very unusual set of six females flanked by a bodhisattva and a Buddha, in clear imitation of the Hindu *sap-*

*tamātrkāś*.<sup>19</sup> The shrine opposite has images of the Buddhist god of wealth and the goddess of children (Jambhala and Hārītī).<sup>20</sup> Jambhala in particular can fulfill some of the functions of Gaṇeśa.<sup>21</sup> But also at Aurangabad is the recently discovered cave located between Caves 5 and 6 that contains as its major icon an image of Gaṇeśa.<sup>22</sup> He is at the center rear of the cave, with the seven mothers with Śiva on his right and Durgā and two Buddha images on his left.<sup>23</sup> Thus we have here again the association of the *saptamātrkāś* and Durgā with Gaṇeśa, as at Udayagiri, but in a Buddhist context. One likely interpretation of this unique cave is that its images functioned, as did these same images at Udayagiri, as removers of obstacles to further worship, but for the site as a whole, as well as a focus for the fulfillment of specifically mundane desires. The Gaṇeśa Cave and Cave 7 date to the second half of the sixth century.<sup>24</sup>

Returning now to the topic of the earliest artistic images of Gaṇeśa and the question of when we can call the elephant-headed images truly Gaṇeśa, we can say that as early as ca. 400 A.D. images of Gaṇeśa functioned in a defined and sophisticated role within temple worship that involved his functions as remover of obstacles, as initiator for further worship, and probably as locus of worldly desires. This is indeed our “real” Gaṇeśa.

In art, Gaṇeśa, like other Indic deities, is frequently given multiple arms and carries attributes. The attributes vary, but perhaps most frequently one sees the axe, noose, sweet cake(s), elephant goad, and tusk. The latter is Gaṇeśa’s own tusk, and the images often show him with one tusk broken off or missing. We have seen how the broken tusk is explained in one myth by Gaṇeśa’s throwing it at the laughing moon. Other myths have Śiva or other deities cutting off the tusk. The cut tusk can be explicated as mutilation or castration, in terms similar to the beheading,<sup>25</sup> but, as with the elephant head, these explanations rely on myths probably created to explain an already existing attribute. The earliest Gaṇeśa images, which tend to be two armed, do not hold a tusk; nor do they appear to have a broken tusk (see Brown, figs. 5, 6, 7, and 8). They hold the sweet cakes, usually placed in a bowl, in their left hands, but the attribute in their right hands varies considerably.<sup>26</sup> By the sixth century, however, there are examples that hold a radish or turnip, and I have suggested in my essay that the tusk may be a misunderstanding of the radish. The radish would have been an appropriate attribute as it was an offering, as were the sweet cakes, to Vināyaka, according to such early texts as the *Yājñavalkyaśmṛti*.<sup>27</sup> Being a tuber, the radish is, like onions and garlic, a food that grows underground and is shunned by Brahmins. It is an apt food for the demonic and later Tantric Vināyaka.

Gaṇeśa's low class origins and clientele have been frequently noted. Alfred Foucher presents him as a "jungle genius" who attempts to rise to respectability with his adoption into Śaivite Hinduism and the Purāṇic myths.<sup>28</sup> He nevertheless retains his primitive heritage. Manu in his *Laws* says Śiva is to be worshiped by the Brahmins, Gaṇeśa by the *śūdras*.<sup>29</sup> There is the notion of Gaṇeśa being the god for Everyman. This is why Bal Gangadhar Tilak chose Gaṇeśa and his annual festival, around which he hoped "to bridge the gap between the Brahmins and the non-Brahmins and find an appropriate context in which to build a new grassroots unity between them"<sup>30</sup> in his nationalistic strivings against the British in the late nineteenth century in Maharashtra. Tilak, and Gaṇeśa worship, were wildly successful. In art, Gaṇeśa images for use by the common people in household shrines are very prevalent, and these tribal or folk images—made in bronze, mud, and plaster—are found throughout India. Even textiles are a popular medium for Gaṇeśa imagery. For example, the embroidered cotton hangings from Gujarat show Gaṇeśa functioning in the household much as he does in the temple. These hangings are designed and sewn by household women; each hanging is usually highly individual.<sup>31</sup> The hanging is worshiped by a bride and groom before their wedding, and then it is installed in the shrine of their new home. Here, Gaṇeśa, worshiped before the marriage is undertaken, is seen as a deity controlling transitions and new states and is then brought into the house to promote auspiciousness and insure future success of the undertaking.

#### IV. Gaṇeśa Outside India

It is difficult even to speak of Gaṇeśa in Tibet, China, Japan, and Southeast Asia without referring to the essays in this book. There has been very little written on the Asian Gaṇeśa, and Getty's book *Gaṇeśa: A Monograph on the Elephant-faced God*, published over fifty years ago, has remained the major reference for the extra-Indian Gaṇeśa. It continues to be a very useful anthology of visual and textual references, despite its early date, but many of Getty's facts, and much of her interpretation, must now be modified. For example, she says in reference to Gaṇeśa images in Thailand (Siam): "Not until the Ayuthian period [1350–1767 A.D.] in central Siam is a Siamese representation of Gaṇeśa to be found which is worthy of study."<sup>32</sup> All of the images from Thailand that I discuss in my essay are, in fact, from before the Ayuthian period.

Gaṇeśa had in Southeast Asia, unlike elsewhere in Asia, a significant Hindu presence. His earliest images and inscriptions date to approximately the sixth or seventh century, and there is evidence in Cambodia

that from this time he had his own temples and perhaps was worshiped, again as early as the seventh century, as the focus of a cult and as an *iṣṭadevatā* (primary god), even earlier than extant evidence shows for the practice in India itself. Also in Cambodia there appears to be a highly unusual form of Gaṇeśa, one with a human head. Indeed, Gaṇeśa was very popular in many areas of Southeast Asia, and continues to be today, and developed interesting local variations, most of which remain to be fully explored. Nevertheless, his Purāṇic forms and nature are rarely encountered in Southeast Asia, either in art or in literature.

Many areas of Southeast Asia shared with Tibet, China, and Japan an interest in the Tantric Gaṇeśa. This is the Vināyaka or demonic Gaṇeśa discussed above. In China he becomes an almost entirely negative force, not causing or removing obstacles, but frequently being the obstacle itself. The Chinese Tantric texts are frequently those brought from India and translated by Indian and Chinese monks in the seventh and eighth centuries. These texts are very explicit in their discussion of the way in which Vināyaka is to be worshiped and in the goals that are thus achieved. They share with the Tibetan Gaṇeśa texts, many of which are translations of Indian texts of the same date, the mundane goals and Tantric ritual used to get them. These can be startlingly explicit:

make a drawing [of Gaṇapati] on cotton with mixed together secretions from an elephant's temples (S. *Gajamada*), blood, and maddening semen. Prostrate, worship, praise, and make prayers to it. Recite the proper *mantra* and admonish him. You will become equal to a Noble One. You must not show this image to everyone. Offer your prayers with radishes and *mantras*.

or

Make a copper Gaṇapati the size of a thumb. Put it in your left hand. Take some milk from the king's woman and pierce it with the elephant's trunk. Think "She truly loves me" and recite the *vidya* of the name. Then she will certainly come.<sup>33</sup>

It is important to note that these are Buddhist texts, written and translated by many of the well-known Buddhist teachers of the time. The author of the lines above, from *The Practice Method of the Secret Commitment of Gaṇapati*, was Canakīrti, and the text was translated into Tibetan by Vairocana and Chos kyi Grags pa. Canakīrti is probably Candrakīrti-pāda, an eighth-century Indian Tantric author, while the Indian Vairocana and his Tibetan colleague, Chos kyi Grags pa, were eleventh-century monks; Vairocana

studied at both Nālandā and Vikramaśīla, among the most famous of Indian monasteries. Obviously, the Tantric Gaṇeśa was a deity of importance for the most renowned monks and was worshiped at the most famous monasteries in India from as early as the seventh and eighth centuries.

These texts tell how Gaṇeśa, usually in the form of an image, is to be worshiped, but they are more manuals than histories, so that we know little about the social or historical dimensions of the Tibetan and Chinese cult from them. In Japan a form of Gaṇeśa, that of two Gaṇeśas embracing, became popular as part of Shingon (Tantric) Buddhism. Usually shown as standing and embracing frontally, the two Gaṇeśas are male and female and are thought of as sexually linked. This form of Gaṇeśa was introduced to Japan as early as the eighth century, apparently from China, where it was also known, but we have little information about it. In Japan, from the seventeenth century on, there are texts that supply actual social and historical evidence of the cult.

The dual Gaṇeśa very much interested Getty, and she discusses the icon, its possible sources, meanings, and uses, at length.<sup>34</sup> But early in her study she wrote that

very little is known of Gaṇeśa in the Tantras and not until more Tantric texts are accessible for study will it be possible to determine the exact position of Gaṇeśa in relation to the other gods who were worshipped in the mysteries, or to find the key to the puzzling Tantric aspect of the Elephant-faced god.<sup>35</sup>

In his interpretation of the dual Gaṇeśa, James Sanford (“Literary Aspects of Japan’s Dual Gaṇeśa Cult”) has the advantage of having access to texts unknown to Getty. While the puzzle of Gaṇeśa’s Tantric form has not been solved in this book, his Tantric occurrence in Tibet, China, and Japan has been greatly clarified by extensive use of new textual sources.

## V. Shared Themes of Gaṇeśa in the Essays

In outlining Gaṇeśa’s character and roles, I have dealt with the god in art, texts, myth, religion, and ritual — in other words, Gaṇeśa as seen from a cultural viewpoint that is intrinsically multidisciplinary. I have had the opportunity to mention in the discussion several of the book’s essays, and my brief overview has been based in large part on these essays. Do the essays in this book present a new view of Gaṇeśa?

One hopes, by looking at Gaṇeśa interdisciplinarily and crossculturally, to approach him in new ways and through new evidence, and many contributors have used previously unanalyzed texts and images in their

essays. For example, Phyllis Granoff (“Gaṇeśa as Metaphor: The *Mudgala Purāṇa*”) examines an extremely complex *Purāṇa* and finds it rich in suggesting the philosophical sophistication that Gaṇeśa worship sometimes took. In her discussion, Granoff attempts to understand the text using the conceptual framework of its ancient authors rather than that of the contemporary scholar. The use of texts that until now were little known by scholars is also stressed, as we have seen, in the essays on Gaṇeśa in Tibet, China, and Japan. These texts, which date beginning from the seventh and eighth centuries, are interesting because they enable us to see a predominantly Tantric Gaṇeśa in contrast to the mythic Gaṇeśa of the *Purāṇas*. Although these are written in Tibetan, Chinese, and Japanese, they are often translations from Indic texts that are now lost, and thus help us to understand Gaṇeśa in India as well as East Asia. Two authors, James Sanford and Christopher Wilkinson (“The Tantric Gaṇeśa: Texts Preserved in the Tibetan Canon”), have incorporated extensive translations of texts in their articles, which will be a valuable resource for other scholars working on Gaṇeśa.

As with previously unanalyzed texts, previously undiscussed visual evidence of Gaṇeśa is a strength of several articles. Maruti Nandan Tiwari and Kamal Giri (“Images of Gaṇeśa in Jainism”) discuss, for the first time since Getty’s book, Gaṇeśa images in Jainism. Their conclusion is that Gaṇeśa images were adopted by the Jains only very late, perhaps not until the ninth century A.D., and always in his positive role as remover of obstacles. In my paper, I focus on visual evidence that analyzes Gaṇeśa in Southeast Asia in an attempt to determine what was adopted from Indian conceptions of the god and what was the Southeast Asian contribution.

While both texts and images are standard categories of evidence used in past studies of the deity, Amy Catlin (“‘Vātāpi Gaṇapatim’: Sculptural, Poetic, and Musical Texts in a Hymn to Gaṇeśa”) uses a type of evidence that is rarely seen in discussions of Gaṇeśa: music. She shows us how music, like art and literary texts, is used in India to express a South Indian Brahmin’s understanding of the god. This understanding relies on an interplay among all three types of “texts” and is constantly reinterpreted in performance, in a process analogous, perhaps, to that in which Gaṇeśa is reinterpreted through history, for different communities, and in different geographical regions; there is no one Gaṇeśa. Her essay exemplifies the fruitfulness, perhaps even the necessity, of an interdisciplinary approach to Gaṇeśa.

New evidence, new translations, new approaches are all strengths of the essays in this book, but do they form a new conception of Gaṇeśa? Is there, in fact, any coherence to the picture of Gaṇeśa that we get from the

various approaches, cultures, and time periods that are dealt with in these essays? Five themes seem to define Gaṇeśa in these essays: Gaṇeśa's practical role, Tantric nature, dual positive/negative character, adaptability, and transformative power. These do not, of course, define a completely new conception of Gaṇeśa, but they do amplify, and frequently modify significantly, our understanding of the god.

### *Here and Now*

Gaṇeśa worship is unapologetically concerned with success. The goals of the worshiper are practical and this-worldly, and there is stress put on the mechanics of ritual that will produce the desired results. Thus, extensive ritual manuals were produced to guide the worshiper (some of which are explored in detail for the first time by several of this book's authors). The practical, materialistic orientation of Gaṇeśa reflects his historically original nature, as Vināyaka, and it is as a means to mundane success that he became popular outside of India. Gaṇeśa's second role in India, as a member of Śiva's family, is to my mind a product of the myth-making of the Purāṇas and, from artistic evidence, begins only from around the sixth century A.D., when Gaṇeśa begins to associate himself with Śiva, as at Bādāmi Cave 1 and Elephanta. It is likely that the late adoption of a mythic role for Gaṇeśa is a reason why he does not appear in the epics, such as the *Mahābhārata*, where he would have been classified as one of the *vināyakas*, who, like the *yakṣas*, are mentioned as much by class as by name. One thing is clear: his mythic role never became popular outside of India.

It is possible to see the absence of his Purāṇic identity in East Asia as in part due to this role being Hindu and thus never spreading outside India with Buddhism. Nevertheless, even in Southeast Asia, which had a strong Hindu face, the mythic Gaṇeśa never became popular.

The analysis of Gaṇeśa's role in Buddhism is a particularly helpful aspect of this book, especially as it is rarely developed in other studies of Gaṇeśa. Most generally, Gaṇeśa in the Hindu context is perceived as a positive force, while in the Buddhist he is negative. One need only read through Cohen's paper to sense with what affection Gaṇeśa is regarded by contemporary Hindus in India. And while his informants saw Gaṇeśa associated with a variety of goddesses in ambiguous relationships of both son to mother and husband to wife, they clearly felt these relationships were fruitful and sustaining. Cohen suggests, in fact, that this duality of relationship is "central and perhaps essential to the social construction and psychosexual maintenance of Indian masculinity." Granoff shows us perhaps the ultimate reflection of Gaṇeśa's positive image in the *Mudgala*

*Purāṇa*, where forms of Gaṇeśa are used as a frame on which to order sophisticated commentary on understanding reality and the process of creation.

### *Tantrism*

On the other hand, the depiction of Gaṇeśa in Buddhism is usually that of a demon whose malevolent nature is to be propitiated either to avoid harm or to direct the harm toward an enemy. Lewis Lancaster's paper ("Gaṇeśa in China: Methods of Transforming the Demonic"), for example, shows us that Gaṇeśa was consistently considered a negative deity in China. This is, according to Lancaster, the Tantric Gaṇeśa. Based on the papers by Wilkinson, Lancaster, and Sanford on Gaṇeśa in Tibet, China, and Japan, the Buddhist Gaṇeśa is Tantric in nature. Undoubtedly, it is mainly in this guise that he entered Buddhism. Nevertheless, the Tantric character of the Buddhist Gaṇeśa — that of a malevolent spirit who demands propitiation in the form of offerings and ritual in order to avoid harm — is shared by the deity's earliest form as a *vināyaka*. The view that what we call "Tantric" is a later label for a constellation of early Indian religious practices that stretch back perhaps to the Indus Valley civilization is given a strong boost by this analysis of Gaṇeśa's nature.<sup>36</sup>

### *Positive/Negative*

We might, therefore, see Gaṇeśa as almost two separate deities, the negative Gaṇeśa, who takes both an earlier form as a *vināyaka* and a later Tantric form, which is the predominant type of Gaṇeśa adopted into Buddhism, and the positive Hindu Gaṇeśa, a creation of the mythmakers who are producing Purāṇic Hinduism. It can be argued, however, that Gaṇeśa's positive/negative personality can also be seen as two sides to the same deity, rather than as aspects of two "separate" deities. But it is important to realize that Gaṇeśa does not so much have a split personality, such as we might find with Śiva, whose benign or horrific and ascetic or lover forms are difficult to integrate, as he has a *modus operandi* that has negative and positive aspects. Gaṇeśa participates in a worldview in which goals are achieved by overcoming obstacles. As lord of obstacles, Gaṇeśa controls their existence, through either creating them himself or allowing those already there to exist (which is negative) or by not creating them or removing those already there (which is positive). My point is that this in itself is not a matter of Gaṇeśa's character as much as the nature of his praxis. One must consider his intentions, and perhaps the worshiper's expectations, to judge Gaṇeśa as either negative or positive. If we do this, I

think there is again a clear split between the Purāṇic Gaṇeśa, who is expected to aid the worshiper in his tasks (for example, the Gaṇeśa whose image honors the shrines of businesses throughout India), and the Gaṇeśa who is expected to be dangerous, difficult, and deceptive (for example, the Gaṇeśa with whom Tankai fought most of his life, as outlined in Sanford's essay). While goals can be achieved through both, and their basic method of removing obstacles is the same, one is predominantly positive, the other negative.

Gaṇeśa is called "Vināyaka" in the seventh- and eighth-century Chinese texts (most of which were originally written by Indian monks) used by Lancaster in his essay, where Gaṇeśa's negative nature transforms him into a demon who must be controlled and is thus the object of the worshiper's spells and rituals in an attempt to drive him away.<sup>37</sup> Gaṇeśa in this case is not worshiped to control obstacles, but is himself the obstacle that must be removed. This appears to be the original nature of the deity, and Dhavalikar suggests in his paper that Gaṇeśa was "first the obstacle-creator (*vighna-kartā*) and later became the obstacle-avertter (*vighna-hartā*)." He does not specify exactly when this transformation came about, but implies that it is around the sixth century and is responsible for his admission into the "hierarchy of major divinities." It is not, however, that Gaṇeśa gave up one role for the other, but that the earlier obstacle-creator role continued on, defining particularly his Tantric and Buddhist forms as a demon.

### *Adaptability*

In fact, Gaṇeśa's character, whether Purāṇic deity or Tantric demon, was never narrowly defined. His diversity of form, variability of nature, and ambiguity of relationships are stressed in some way in all the essays and are features I have termed, in the context of this book's crosscultural and interdisciplinary focus, "adaptability." I mean by this Gaṇeśa's mutability, which allowed him to adapt to a variety of contexts. Within India itself, Cohen shows how important regional differences are in the perception of Gaṇeśa, and then how, even within regions, each individual's own perception of the god often varies dramatically. Indeed, the various viewpoints are often in conflict within the same individual, producing an ambiguous picture of Gaṇeśa, but one that I would argue adds to his adaptability within a variety of contexts. Even in the Purāṇas themselves, as Ludo Rocher ("Gaṇeśa's Rise to Prominence in Sanskrit Literature") points out, the portrait of Gaṇeśa is inconsistent and multiform. And the one aspect of Gaṇeśa that we might think is by definition immutable, his elephant head, is in fact done away with in some Southeast Asian sculpture where he takes a fully human form.

## *Transformative Power*

Gaṇeśa's constantly shifting character, incorporating sometimes opposing traits, fits, of course, with his combined negative/positive nature. The incorporation of conflicting characteristics is an example of his transformative power, a capability that most fundamentally, in my opinion, defines the special nature of the god and goes far to explain his popularity. Gaṇeśa transforms either by synthesizing disparate elements or by mediating among them; in either case, he acts as a linkage through which relationships can be reordered and changed. The god's abilities to mediate, synthesize, and transform are discussed in almost every paper in this book. Sanford shows how the embracing dual Gaṇeśas in Japan are interpreted as combining opposites. Granoff argues that Gaṇeśa in the *Mudgala Purāṇa* is above all a visual symbol for synthesis: "Gaṇeśa, in having both elephant head and human body, stands as a perfect symbol for the concept that reality is always a combination of seemingly disparate building blocks or constituents." Cohen speaks of Gaṇeśa as mediator between the material and divine worlds and as facilitator of the new relationship formed during weddings. Wilkinson translates texts that give Gaṇeśa the power to transform non-Buddhist things into things Buddhist. Gaṇeśa's liminal roles as door guardian and as lord of beginnings have already been mentioned. All of these examples, and many more that could be added, show Gaṇeśa being used as the means to bridge transitions and make changes, a capability that gives him a powerful and unique position among Indic deities and makes him attractive outside normally restrictive religious and cultural boundaries.

Gaṇeśa is not easily defined. He contains within himself a variety of personalities and characteristics. Yet, like the seemingly ludicrous amalgam of elephant head and human body, their compresence somehow manages to appear natural. The essays in this book add significantly to our understanding of Gaṇeśa's multiform personality, of the human processes that have produced it, and of the human needs that underlie its integration.

## NOTES

1. Stella Kramrisch, *Manifestations of Shiva* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1981), 74.
2. For paintings of the family see Kramrisch, *Manifestations of Shiva*, nos. P-39, P-40, P-41.
3. One thinks most immediately of the baby Kṛṣṇa.

4. The phenomenon is of course well known with children's stuffed animals, such as the worldwidely adored teddy bear, as well as animated cartoon animal characters like Mickey Mouse.

5. Wendy O'Flaherty, "Preface," in *Gaṇeśa: Lord of Obstacles, Lord of Beginnings*, by Paul B. Courtright (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), vii.

6. Śiva as well creates children himself, most particularly Skanda, when he spills his semen into the mouth of Agni, who in turn, unable to hold its heat, discharges it into the Ganges River, which in turn throws the embryo onto the bank, where the child is finally raised by the six Kṛttikās. Śiva and Pārvatī are seen as never having children through intercourse. See the various discussions of this motif in Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *Śiva: The Erotic Ascetic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973).

7. See particularly Courtright, *Gaṇeśa*.

8. Lee Siegel, *Laughing Matters: Comic Tradition in India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 13.

9. Courtright, *Gaṇeśa*, 134.

10. Narain explores these in detail in his essay. He suggests that the word comes from *vi* > *ni* (= *nayati*), "to lead or take away," which agrees with Courtright, yet Narain interprets this as meaning to take or lead away obstacles, while Courtright says it means to "lead people astray and place obstacles in their paths." Compare Courtright, *Gaṇeśa*, 131–32.

11. Gaṇeśa has two other popular names that explicitly state these: Vighnakartā ("producing obstacles") and Vighnahartā ("removing obstacles").

12. Alice Getty, *Gaṇeśa: A Monograph on the Elephant-faced God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1936), 25 and 10 (respectively).

13. A. K. Narain, "Iconographic Origins of Gaṇeśa and the Evidence of the Indo-Greek Coinage," in *Orientalia Iosephi Tucci Memoriae Dicata, Serie Orientale Roma* 56, no. 3 (Rome: Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1988), 1007–19.

14. The snake belt is explained in the myth given above as the snake that caused Gaṇeśa to fall off his rat being used by the god to tie up his split stomach.

15. The dating is made in connection with an inscription; see discussion in my essay, *infra*.

16. There is, however, the question of whether there was a built structure attached at one point to the front of the cave that is now lost.

17. See Katherine Anne Harper, *The Iconography of the Saptamatrikas: Seven Hindu Goddesses of Spiritual Transformation* (Lewiston, NY: Mellen Press, 1989).

18. Harper, *Iconography of the Saptamatrikas*.

19. The identification of these standing female figures is problematical. They may represent on some level the six *pāramitās*. There are other interpretations; R. S. Gupte, for example, identifies them as the "Śaktis of the Dhyani Buddhas." See R. S. Gupte, "An Interesting Panel from the Aurangabad Caves," *Marathwada University Journal* 3, no. 2 (1963):59–63.

20. For illustrations see Carmel Berkson, *The Caves of Aurangabad: Early Buddhist Tantric Art in India* (New York: Mapin International, 1986), 115, 116, 118, 119, 120, 121.

21. Jambhala (or his Hindu equivalent, Kubera) and Gaṇeśa are sometimes placed together with a female figure, possibly Śrī-Lakṣmī. See, for example, Getty, *Gaṇeśa*, 33.

22. The cave had been completely hidden by a fall of the escarpment above it.

23. For illustration see Berkson, *The Caves at Aurangabad*, 226, 227, 228.

24. It might be mentioned that a small Gaṇeśa occurs on the doorframe at Cave 3 at Aurangabad, which dates to the second half of the fifth century.

25. See, for example, Courtright, *Gaṇeśa*, 74–90, 117, etc.

26. For example, the Gaṇeśa that Getty illustrates as the “earliest” image and that has thus been subsequently cited by many scholars, holds what is probably a citron (*matūluṅga*), based on comparison to other early images, such as Brown, fig. 6. It definitely is not a tusk. (See Getty, *Gaṇeśa*, Pl. 2a.)

27. See references in Brown, *infra*.

28. Foucher, “Introduction,” in Getty, *Gaṇeśa*, xv–xxiii.

29. Monier Monier-Williams, *Brahmanism and Hinduism* (London: J. Murray, 1887), 221n; quoted in Getty, *Gaṇeśa*, 2.

30. Courtright, *Gaṇeśa*, 233.

31. See, for example, J. LeRoy Davidson, *Art of the Indian Subcontinent from Los Angeles Collections* (Los Angeles: Ritchie Press, 1968), fig. 199.

32. Getty, *Gaṇeśa*, 47.

33. Quoted from Wilkinson, *infra*.

34. Getty, *Gaṇeśa*, 78–87.

35. Getty, *Gaṇeśa*, 9.

36. See Thomas McEvilley, “An Archaeology of Yoga,” *RES* 1 (Spring 1981):42–77.

37. Any question whether Gaṇeśa’s origins can be found with the *vināyakas* is, I think, answered by his later association with them in these Tantric texts, a fact that is not apparent when only his Purāṇic form is discussed. Nevertheless, see Narain’s discussion, *infra*, for a different point of view.