Preface

Sri Ramakrishna says that there can be as many spiritual paths as there are spiritual aspirants. Extending this further, we can accept as its corollary that there can be as many gods as there are devotees. As long as the central fact, viz., that these gods are the doorways leading to the one Godhead, is not forgotten, polytheism, pantheism, henotheism or 'any-theism' is acceptable. The bewildering variety of the Hindu gods should be viewed from this angle.

An unbiased, if not reverent, study of the Hindu gods and goddesses can convince anyone of the rich symbology they represent. Contemplating on them with a proper understanding of their symbolical significance will help us to be raised to more profound levels of spiritual experience.

In this booklet a humble attempt has been made to unravel the symbolism of Śiva and Gaṇapati as also their different facets. We earnestly hope that it will provide the readers with a basic knowledge of these deities and rouse their curiosity to know about the other deities of the Hindu pantheon also.

Readers who may be interested in a more comprehensive study of the deities of the Hindu pantheon are advised to go through my book, Hindu Gods and Goddesses, published by the Sri Ramakrishna Math, Chennai.
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आ, a-a in master,
इ, i-i in if,
ई, i-ee in feel,
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ऊ, ū-oo in boot,
ऋ, r-somewhat between r and ri,
ॠ, ṭh-th in ant-hill
ऌ, ḍ-d in den
ऌ, ō in godhood
ณะ n-n in under
त, t-t in French
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ठ, ḍh-dh in godhood
ढ, ḍ-d in den
ण, n-n in under
ई, ē in master,
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इ, i-i in if,
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इ, ē in master,
ई, ē in master,
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ॠ, ṭh-th in ant-hill
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ŚIVA

Śiva is the last deity of the Hindu Trinity. He is responsible for the dissolution of the universe. He is the embodiment of tamas, the centrifugal inertia, the tendency towards dispersion and annihilation.

Literally, Śiva is one in whom the universe 'sleeps' after destruction and before the next cycle of creation.

All that is born, must die. All that is produced, must disintegrate and be destroyed. This is an inviolable law. The principle that brings about this disintegration, the power behind this destruction, is Śiva.

Śiva is much more than that. Disintegration of the universe ends in the ultimate thinning out, into a boundless void. This boundless void, the substratum of all existence, from which springs out again and again this apparently limitless universe, is Śiva. So, though Śiva is described as responsible for destruction, he is equally responsible for creation and existence. In this sense, Brahmā and Viṣṇu are also Śiva. It is perhaps this identity that is revealed by some of the stories in the purāṇas. If one story makes Śiva speak from the womb of the infinite pillar of fire to Brahmā and Viṣṇu that they are his own aspects, other stories make Śiva as being born from the brows of an angry Viṣṇu or from Brahmā who was intensely desiring to beget a son.

Though Śiva is often called Rudra, especially in his terrific aspect, whether the two are identical or not has been a subject of discussion and even controversy. Many scholars are inclined to think that the Rudra of the Vedas and the Śiva of the purāṇas and āgamas are two different deities fused intoone at a later date as cultural integration of the two races accepting them progressed. According to these scholars Śiva the pacific deity is a non-Āryan god, 'more ancient' than the Vedic Rudra. Though the 'Āryan conquerors' despised and derided the Śaivas and their Śiva (apparently because of some of their mysterious rituals and practices) as the two races had to live together, rapprochement and consequent cultural reconciliation became inevitable.

Whatever may be the truth of these statements they are irrelevant to our study here, since we are more interested in discovering the significance of the symbology concerned, to enrich our lives.

Śiva is worshipped both in the anthropomorphic aspect and as the Liṅga, the latter being the rule whereas the former is an exception. The most common of his pictures and images shows him as a very handsome youth, white as camphor. His limbs besmeared with ashes are strong and smooth. He has three eyes—the third eye being on the forehead between the eyebrows—and four arms, two of the arms holding the triśūla (trident) and damaru (drum) while the other two are in the abhaya (protection-giving) and varada (boon-giving) mudrās (poses). He has a crown of long matted hair from which flows the river Gaṅgā. He also wears the crescent moon as a diadem. A tiger-skin and an elephant-skin adorn his body as his garments. There are serpents all over his body forming the necklace, the girdle, the yajñopavīta (sacred thread) as also arm-bracelets. There is also a garland of skulls round his blue neck.

Man, being what he is, cannot help super-imposing his own states on his godstoo! Therefore it is but natural for him to conceive of Śiva as a man with family. Pārvatī is his consort. Ganeṣa and Kumāra (also known as Skanda or Subrahmanya) are his sons.
Then there is the large retinue forming a veritable zoo as it were! Nandi, the bull, his mount, Bhṛṅgi, the ṛṣi, with three legs and three arms, the mouse of Gaṇeśa, the peacock of Kumāra as also a host of ghosts, goblins and imps constantly capering round him-form his large retinue.

Though he has his headquarters in the icy mountains, the Himālayas, he is fond of roaming the earth, especially the burial grounds and cremation sites. All this is in perfect consonance with his nature as the Lord of destruction and dissolution.

Before embarking upon the explanation of all this, which is obviously symbolical, it is better to summarise first the various stories about Śiva recounted in our mythological literature:

1. Once Pārvatī, in a playful mood, closed his two eyes. And lo, the entire world was plunged in darkness! To save the worlds from this predicament, Śiva willed a third eye in between his eyebrows, sending forth light, fire and heat. Later on, he opened this third eye-normally kept closed out of infinite mercy for humanity-to burn up Kāmadeva, the Lord of lust.

2. When the celestial river Gaṅgā, which was descending from the heaven to this earth, fell ferociously on Śiva's head out of pride, he just got her locked up there! Only after much prayer and supplication by Bhagīratha (who was responsible for bringing the celestial river down to this earth) and due apologies by Gaṅgā, did he allow her to stream out.

3. When the Kṣīrasamudra, the ocean of milk, was being churned, one of the objects to rise was the cool crescent moon. Śiva seized it and made it his diadem. When the deadly poison Halāhala also rose and started destroying the worlds with its leaping tongues of fire, Śiva gathered it on to his palm and drank it, thus saving the worlds. Pārvatī, getting alarmed about the safety of her spouse, pressed his throat so that the poison could not go down into the stomach! It thus remained in his throat, lending its blue colour permanently to it.

4. Being angered by Śiva whose extra-ordinary beauty had attracted their wives, the ṛṣis of Dārukavana tried to kill him through sorcerous rituals. Out of the sacrificial fire rose a tiger, a deer and a red-hot iron. Śiva killed the tiger and wore its skin, caught hold of the deer with his left hand (which has remained there ever since) and made the iron one of his weapons.

5. Other stories relate to his destroying the sacrifice of Dakṣa, his cutting off, of one of the five heads of Brahmā for having spoken disrespectfully, his destroying the three cities built by the demon Tripurāsura, his killing the elephant demon Gajāsura and wearing his hide, his having granted to Arjuna as a boon the weapon Pāśupatāstra, his having become Ardhanārīśvara to dispel the ignorance of his devotee Bhṛṅgi, his appearing as a pillar of fire to teach a lesson to Brahmā and Viṣṇu, his vanquishing Yama, the god of death, to save his votary Mārkaṇḍeya, and so on.

An attempt can now be made to unravel this mysterious symbology of the Śiva-picture. Śiva is snow-white in colour, which matches wonderfully with that of his abode, the Himālayas. White stands for light that dispels darkness, knowledge that dispels ignorance. He is the very personification of cosmic consciousness. It may appear strange that Śiva who represents tamas (the force of darkness and destruction) is pictured as white, whereas Viṣṇu who represents sattva (the force of light and enlightenment) is pictured as dark! There is nothing strange in this since the opposing guṇas are inseparable. Hence Śiva is white outside and dark inside whereas Viṣṇu is the reverse of it.
The three eyes of Śiva represent the sun, the moon and the fire, the three sources of light, life and heat. The third eye can also indicate the eye of knowledge and wisdom and hence his omniscience.

If the sun and the moon form his two eyes as it were, then the whole sky including the powerful wind blowing in it, forms his hair. That is why he is called 'Vyomakeśa' (one who has the sky or space as his hair).

Tiger is a ferocious animal that mercilessly devours its hapless victims. Desire, which consumes human beings, without ever being satiated, can be compared to a tiger. That Śiva has killed the tiger and wears its skin as his apparel shows his complete mastery over desire.

The elephant being a powerful animal, wearing its skin implies that Śiva has completely subjugated all animal impulses.

The garland of skulls (muṇḍamālā) that he wears and the ashes of the funeral pyre with which he has besmeared his body indicate that he is the lord of destruction. The garland of skulls also represents the revolution of ages and successive appearance and disappearance of the human races.

Śiva is the lord of yoga and yogis. He is often shown as sitting in deep meditation immersed in the enjoyment of the bliss of his own self. The water of the river Gaṅgā represents this. Or it can represent jñāna, knowledge. Since Gaṅgā is highly adored as a great purifying agent, it goes without saying that he whom it adorns, is the very personification of purifying or redeeming power.

The crescent moon stands for time, since measurement of time as days or months depends upon the waxing and the waning of the moon. By wearing it as a diadem, Śiva is showing us that even the all-powerful time is only an ornament for him!

And then, the snakes. The venomous cobras which symbolise death for us adorn his frame in all possible manner embellishing it further. He alone, to whom the symbol of death is a decoration, can gulp down the deadly poison Hālāhala to save the worlds. All this points to one thing: He is Mrtyuñjaya, the conqueror of death! Coiled serpents may also represent cycles of time in the macrocosm and the basic energy-akin to sexual energy- of living beings in the microcosm. So, Śiva is the master of time and energy.

Iconographically Śiva may have two, three, four, eight, ten or even thirty-two hands. Some of the various objects shown in these hands are: triśūla (trident), cakra (discus), paraśu (battleaxe), ḍamaru (drum), akṣamālā (rosary), mṛga (deer), pāśa (noose), daṇḍa (staff), Pināka or Ajagava (bow), khaṭvāṅga (magic-wand), Pāśupata (spear), padma (lotus), kapāla (skull-cup), darpana (mirror), khaḍga (sword) and so on. It is rather difficult to find a meaning for everyone of these items. However an attempt will be made to explain some of them.

The triśūla (trident) being an important weapon of offence and defence, indicates that Śiva is the supreme ruler.

Philosophically it can stand for the three guṇas or the threeprocesses of creation, preservation and dissolution. Hence Śiva, the wielder of the trident, is the master of the guṇas and from him proceed the cosmic processes.

It is said that while dancing the tāṇḍava-nṛtya, Śiva sounded his ḍamaru (small drum) fourteen times, thereby producing sounds like a-i-uṇ, r-lr-k and so on, which are now known as the
Māheśvarasūtras, the fourteen basic formulae containing all the alphabets arranged in the most ingenious manner, facilitating innumerable grammatical processes. Hence the dāmaru represents the alphabets, grammar (the science of language) or language itself. In other words it stands for all words-spoken or written or otherwise expressed—and hence for the entire gamut of all arts and sciences, sacred and secular. It also represents sound as such, the logos, from which entire creation has proceeded. By holding it in his hand, Śiva is demonstrating the fact that the entire creation, including its various arts and sciences, has proceeded out of his will, his play.

If the akṣamālā (rosary) shows that he is the master of spiritual sciences, the khaṭvāṅga (a magic wand with a skull fixed at one end) shows that he is an adept in occult sciences too. The kapāla (skull-cup) with which he drinks blood, is another symbol that points to his all-destroying power. The ḍarpaṇa (mirror) indicates that the entire creation is just a reflection of his cosmic form.

The icon of Śiva is never worshipped as the mūlamūrti (original, installed in the sanctum sanctorum), but only as an utsava-mūrti (the icon used during festivals for taking out in a procession).

Śivaliṅga

As regards the Liṅga, the emblem of Śiva universally venerated, some explanation is needed. Literally Śiva means auspiciousness and Liṅga means a sign or symbol. Hence the Śivaliṅga is just a symbol of the great God of the universe (‘Mahādeva’) who is all-auspiciousness. As already explained ‘Śiva’ means the one in whom the whole creation sleeps after dissolution. ‘Liṅga’ also means the same thing—a place where created objects get dissolved during the disintegration of the created universe. Since, according to Hinduism, it is the same God that creates, sustains and destroys the universe, the Śivaliṅga represents symbolically God Himself.

Whether the Śivaliṅga is a phallic emblem or not, is a moot point. Phallic cults have existed in all countries and in all civilizations. It is quite likely that the phallic cults of an aboriginal civilization were absorbed into Hinduism and the worship itself was elevated to honour the Father-Mother-Principle of creation. This is one view. That it is a remnant of the Vedic yūpastambha, to which sacrificial victims used to be tied, is another view. According to this view, the Hindu temple is a metamorphosis of the Vedic yāgaśālā (sacrificial shed).

That it is an imitation of the Buddhist stūpa is another guess that is sometimes hazarded but not substantiated, since Śivaliṅgas have been found even in the pre-Buddhist civilization of Harappa and Mohenjo Dāro.

Since God is beyond name and form, and since we cannot conceive of an abstract principle like Him, without the aid of concrete symbols, a rounded surface is perhaps the nearest approach to him.

Śivaliṅgas may be cala (movable) or acala (immovable). The cala-liṅgas may be kept in the shrine of one’s own home for worship or prepared temporarily with materials like clay or dough etc., for worship and dispensed with after the worship or worn on the body as Iṣṭaliṅga as the Vīraśaivas do. The acala-liṅgas are those installed in temples. They are usually made of stone and have three parts. The lowest part which is square, is called Brahma-bhāga and represents Brahmā the creator. The middle part which is octogonal, is called Viṣṇu-bhāga and represents Viṣṇu, the sustainer. These two parts are embedded inside the pedestal. The Rudra-bhāga which is cylindrical and projects outside the pedestal is the one to which worship is offered. Hence it is called pūjā-bhāga.
The pūjā-bhāga also contains certain lines technically called Brahmasūtra, without which the Liṅga becomes unfit for worship.

**Aspects of Lord Śiva**

Comparable to the Vyūhas or emanations of Lord Viṣṇu, is the Pañcānana form of Lord Śiva. Pañcānana or the five-faced one represents the five aspects of Śiva vis-a-vis the created universe. The five faces are respectively Īśāna, Tatpuruṣa, Aghora, Vāmadeva and Sadyojāta. The face Īśāna turned towards the zenith, represents the highest aspect and is also called Sadāśiva. On the physical plane, it represents the power that rules over ether or sky and on the spiritual plane, it is the deity that grants mokṣa or liberation. Tatpuruṣa facing east, stands for the power that rules over air and represents the forces of darkness and obscuration on the spiritual plane. Aghora, facing south and ruling over the element fire, represents the power that absorbs and renovates the universe. Vāmadeva facing north, ruling over the element water, is responsible for preservation. Sadyojāta, facing west and ruling over the element earth, represents the power that creates.

Iconographically, all the five aspects are shown in different ways.

There are several other aspects in which Lord Śiva is depicted or worshipped. These can be broadly divided into the following categories: (1) Saumya or Anugraha Mūrti; (2) Ugra, Raudra or Saṁhāra Mūrti; (3) Nṛtta or Tāṇḍava Mūrti; (4) Dakṣiṇāmūrti; (5) Liṅgodbhavamūrti; (6) Bhikṣāṭanamūrti; (7) Haryardhamūrti or Hariharamūrti; (8) Ardhanārīśvaramūrti.

Peaceful forms of Śiva as also forms showing mercy and grace belong to the first group. The forms showing grace or granting boons to Caṇḍeśa, Nandiśvara, Vighneśvara or Rāvaṇa belong to this category.

All terrific aspects can be classed under the second group. Kaṅkāla Bhairava represents Śiva who cut off the fifth head of Brahmā for having reviled him and who had to wander as a beggar for twelve years to get rid of that sin. Gajāsuravadhamūrti represents him as killing the demon Nīla (an associate of Andhakāsura) who had assumed the form of an elephant.

Tripurāntakamūrti depicts him as destroying by his arrow, the three cities of iron, silver and gold built on the earth, in air and in heaven by the three sons of Andhakāsura who had become almost invincible because of these three impregnable shelters. Śarabheśamūrti pictures Śiva as a Śarabha (an imaginary animal, more ferocious than the lion) destroying the Narasiṁha form of Viṣṇu, a story obviously conceived by the Śaivites to assert the superiority of their Lord over Viṣṇu Kālārimūrti portrays him as vanquishing Yama, the god of death, who wanted to take away the life of Mārkaṇḍeya, a great devotee of Śiva. Kāmāntakamūrti illustrates him as destroying Kāma, the god of lust, by the fire emitted through his third eye. Andhakāsuravadhamūrti shows him as vanquishing Andhakāsura and later on, on supplication conferring on him the commandership of the gaṇas (dwarf attendants). Andhaka became Bhṛṅgīśa.

Lord Śiva is a great master of dance. All the 108 modes of dancing known to the treatises on dancing have come from him. It is said that he dances every evening in order to relieve the sufferings of creatures and entertain the gods who gather in Kailāsa in full strength. (Hence he is called Sabhāpati, the lord of the congregation.)
Only nine modes of dancing are described of which the Naṭarāja aspect is the most well-known. The Naṭarāja icon shows him with four hands and two legs, in the posture of dancing. There is the đamāru (drum) in the upper right hand and fire in the left. The lower right hand is in abhayamudra (pose of protection) and the left is pointing towards the uplifted left foot. The right foot is resting on the demon Apasmāra-puruṣa. The whole image may or may not be surrounded by a circle of blazing fire.

Śiva's dance indicates a continuous process of creation, preservation and destruction. The đamāru represents the principle of śabda (sound) and hence ākāśa (ether), which proceeds immediately from the Ātman and is responsible for further creation or evolution. Fire represents pralayāgni, the fire that destroys the world at the time of dissolution of the world, and hence symbolises the process of destruction. Thus đamāru and fire represent the continuous cycle of creation, preservation and destruction. The other two hands indicate that he who takes refuge at the feet of the Lord will have nothing to fear. The Apasmāra-puruṣa (Apasmāra = epilepsy) symbolises ignorance which makes us lose our balance and consciousness. He is trampled upon by the Lord for the good of the devotees who take refuge.

Several other dancing postures of Śiva like Ānanda-tāṇḍava-mūrti, Umā-tāṇḍava-mūrti, Tripura-tāṇḍava-mūrti and Īrdhva-tāṇḍava-mūrti are also mentioned in the āgamas.

Śiva is as great a master of yoga and spiritual sciences as he is of music, dancing and other arts. As a universal teacher he is called Dakṣiṇāmūrti. Since Śiva was seated facing south (dakṣiṇa = south) when he taught the sages in a secluded spot on the Himālayas, he is called Dakṣiṇāmūrti. He has three eyes and four arms and one of the legs is trampling upon the Apasmārapuruṣa. Two of the arms (the front right and the front left) are in jñānamudrā and varadamudrā poses (showing the imparting of knowledge and bestowing of gifts). The back hands hold the akṣamālā (rosary) and either fire or serpent. He is the very model of the perfect guru. He is surrounded by several ṛṣis eager to learn ātmavidyā (Self-knowledge) from him.

Śiva is said to have appeared as a blazing pillar of fire, of immeasurable size, to destroy the pride of Brahmā and Viṣṇu. Liṅgodbhava-mūrti depicts him as manifesting in the heart of the Liṅga. The image has four arms. Brahmā and Viṣṇu stand on either side adoring him.

The Bhikṣāṭanamūrti shows Śiva as a naked Bhairava, begging his food in the skull cup. It is almost the same as the Kaṅkāla-mūrti.

The Haryardha-mūrti, also called as Harihara and Śaṅkaranārāyaṇa, has Śiva on the right half and Viṣṇu on the left. A fusion of these two aspects into one god is an obvious attempt at a happy reconciliation of the warring cults of Śiva and Viṣṇu.

The Ardhanārīśvara (half man and half woman) form with Pārvatī as the left half represents the bipolar nature of the created world and hence the need to look upon woman as equal and complementary to man.

**Minor dieties associated with Śiva**

There can be no Śiva temple without Nandi, the recumbent bull placed in front of the shrine. Nandi or Nandikeśvara may be depicted exactly like Śiva—with three eyes and two hands holding the
paraśu (battle axe) and mṛga (the antelope). But the other two hands are joined together in the añjali pose (obeisance). More commonly he is shown as a bull-faced human being or just a bull.

The purāṇas describe him as born out of the right side of Viṣṇu resembling Śiva exactly and given as a son to the sage Sālaṅkāyana who had practised severe austerities. Other versions describe him as the son of the sage Śīlāda who got him by the grace of Śiva.

Nandikeśvara, also known as Adhikāra-nandi, is the head of the gaṇas of Śiva and also his vāhana (mount).

Symbolically, the bull represents the animal instincts, especially the sex, and Śiva's riding on it reflects his absolute mastery over it.

Then comes Bhṛṅgi, the sage, who was singularly devoted to Lord Śiva, elevated to the retinue of Śiva's abode. The sage was so fanatical in his devotion to Śiva that he did not care even for Pārvatī, his consort! When Pārvatī merged herself into the body of Śiva and Śiva thus became Ardhanārīśvara, Bhṛṅgi was still so bigoted that he became a Bhṛṅga (= bee) and bored through the centre of the Ardhanārīśvara form to complete his circumambulation! Hence the name Bhṛṅgi. Śiva of course made him realise his mistake.

Virabhadra is another deity associated with Śiva. He is the personification of Śiva's anger manifested during Dakṣa's sacrifice because of the contemptuous treatment meted out to him. Śiva is said to have created him out of a hair plucked out from his head. Virabhadra successfully destroyed Dakṣa's sacrifice and humiliated all the gods who had assembled there.

He is usually shown with three eyes and four arms holding bow, arrow, sword and mace. He wears a garland of skulls. The face is terrific. Bhadrakālī, his counterpart created by Pārvatī, is sometimes shown by his side. Śiva temples may have a small shrine dedicated to him, located usually in the south-east.

Next comes Caṇḍeśvara, a human devotee raised to the status of a deity, by Lord Śiva because of his intense devotion. He is a fierce deity holding weapons of war and destruction like the bow, arrow, trident, chisel, noose and so on. Though independent shrines dedicated to him are not uncommon, he is usually installed in every Śiva temple in the north-eastern corner, facing south. Devotees believe that he can act as a messenger and mediator interceding with the Lord on behalf of the devotees. Hence supplication before him is a duty of every devotee visiting the Śiva temple.

Other attendants of Śiva are the gaṇas, also known as pramathaganas or bhūtagaganas (demigods or malignant spirits). If they are not propitiated, they can do harm.

GANAPATI

Gaṇapati or Gaṇeśa, also known as Vināyaka, is perhaps, the most popular of the Hindu deities worshipped by all sections of the Hindus. No undertaking, whether sacred or secular, can get started without first honouring and worshipping him. This is understandable and highly desirable, since he is said to be the lord of obstacles (Vighneśvara or Vighnarāja). However, what is not understandable and certainly not very agreeable is his repulsive origin and grotesque form! Even for those who admire Lord Śiva's skill in the surgical art of head-transplantation, it becomes rather difficult to admire the end
product! Once we successfully manage to delve into the mysteries of this symbolism, our repugnance will give rise to respect and respect to reverence and worship.

Notwithstanding the fact that the Gaṇapati referred to in the famous Ṛgvedic mantras, gaṇānāṁ tvā gaṇapatiṁ havāmahe..... (2.23.1) and vi ṣu sīda gaṇapate.... (10.112.9) and the Gaṇapati we worship today are strangers to each other, all unbiased scholars agree that the seeds of the Gaṇapati concept are already there in the Ṛgveda itself. In the subsequent centuries, this concept has passed through the mills of the epics and the purāṇas to produce the Gaṇapati as we know him today. In any community, the development of the concept of God and the modes of His worship are as much the products of geographical, historical and cultural factors as of mystic experiences and spiritual realizations of the highly evolved persons. It is quite reasonable to suppose that the ‘Gaṇapati- Brahmaṇaspati’ of the Ṛgveda gradually got metamorphosed into the deity, ‘Gajavadana-Gaṇeśa-Vighneśvara.’

The Ṛgvedic deity ‘Gaṇapati-Brahmaṇas-pati’-also called as Bṛhaspati and Vācaspati- manifests himself through a vast mass of light. He is golden-red in colour. The battle-axe is an important weapon of his. Without his grace no religious rite can succeed. He is always in the company of a group (gaṇa= a group) of singers and dancers. He vanquishes the enemies of gods, protects the devoted votaries and shows them the right way of life.

Another class of Ṛgvedic deities, known as the Maruts or Marud-gaṇa, described as the children of Rudra, also have similar characteristics. In addition, they can be malevolent towards those who antagonise them and can cause destruction like the wild elephants. They can put obstacles in the path of men if displeased and remove them when pleased. They are independent, not subject to anyone's sovereignty (arājana = vināyaka).

A perusal of these two descriptions will perforce lead us to the obvious conclusion that Gaṇapati is the metamorphosed form of Bṛhaspati-Marudgaṇa deities. There is nothing strange in this, especially if we can recognize the transformations that have taken place among the various Vedic deities, as they were gradually absorbed among the gods of the later Hindu pantheon. The once all-important and all-powerful Indra was demoted to the rank of a minor deity ruling over one of the quarters. His lieutenant Viṣṇu was elevated to the central place in the Trinity. Rudra, the terrible, became Śiva the auspicious. Many other deities like Dyaus, Aryaman and Pūṣan were quietly despatched into oblivion!

Despite the fact that Gaṇapati is a highly venerated and all-important deity, his `head' has often been a mystery for others. No doubt, our purāṇas have easily 'solved' this problem, each in its own way. But this has satisfied neither the layman nor the scholar.

It will be extremely interesting to bring together, though in brief, all the stories about the origin of this wondrous deity:

1. At the request of the gods who wanted a deity capable of removing all obstacles from their path of action and fulfilment, Śiva himself was born of the womb of Pārvatī as Gajānana.

2. Once Pārvatī, just for fun, prepared an image of a child with an elephant's head, out of the unguents smeared over her body and threw it into the river Gaṅgā. It came to life. Both Gaṅgā, the guardian deity of the river and Pārvatī, addressed the boy as their child. Hence he is known as 'Dvaimātura,' `one who has two mothers'.
3. Pārvatī prepared the image of a child out of the scurf from her body, endowed him with life and ordered him to stand guard before her house. When Śiva wanted to enter the house he was rudely prevented by this new gatekeeper. Śiva became 'Rudra' and got him beheaded. Seeing that Pārvatī was inconsolable owing to this tragedy that befell her 'son' and not finding the head of the body anywhere—meanwhile one of the goblins of Śiva had gourmandized it!—he got an elephant's head, grafted it on to the body of the boy and gave him life. To make amends for his 'mistake,' Śiva appointed this new-found son as the head of all his retinues, who thus became `Gaṇapati'.

4. He sprang from Śiva's countenance which represents the principle of ether (ākāśatattva). His captivating splendour made Pārvatī react angrily and curse him, resulting in his uncouth form!

5. Ganeśa was originally Kṛṣṇa himself in the human form. When Śani, the male-volent planet-spirit gazed at him, his head got separated and flew to Goloka, the world of Kṛṣṇa. The head of an elephant was subsequently grafted to the body of the child.

Equally interesting are the other myths about his adventures: He lost one of his tusks in a fight with Paraśurāma, which he success- fully used as a stylus to write the epic Mahābhārata dictated by the sage Vyāsa. He tactfully won the race against his brother Skanda by circumambulating his parents and declaring that it was equivalent to going round the worlds. He thus won the hands of two damsels Rddhi and Siddhi. He cursed the moon to wax and wane, since the latter derisively laughed at him when he was trying to refill his burst belly with the sweets that had spilled out. He vanquished the demon Vighnāsura and successfully brought him under his subjugation.

There is no gainsaying the possibilities of man developing the concept of God and faith in Him as a result of his experiences through the various vicissitudes of life which prove his helplessness. He often disposes, what man proposes. Such a God must needs be all-powerful. If He is pleased, all the obstacles in our path will be removed. If displeased He may thwart our efforts and make them infructuous. Hence the paramount need to appease Him and please Him.

What could be the form of this almighty God? For a simple aboriginal living in a group (= gaṇa) near a forest or a mountain, the mighty elephant might have provided the clue. This might have led to the worship of an elephant-like God. He being the pati (= Lord) of the gaṇa (clan or group) might have obtained the name Gaṇapati. As the group became more refined and cultured, this Elephant God might have been transformed into the present form.

However plausible or attractive this hypothesis may be, it is at best a guesswork, if not an invention! Since Gaṇapati had gained de facto recognition in the hearts of millions of votaries, over several centuries, the purāṇas rightly struggled to make it de jure! True, they have given very confusing accounts.

Nevertheless they have succeeded in fusing together the votaries by giving them a scriptural or authoritative base. There is certainly no contradiction or confusion in the accounts as far as the worship and its result are concerned.

It is a favourite pastime of some western scholars and their Indian counterparts to 'discover' a Dravidian base for many interesting developments in our cultural and religious life and then to 'unearth' the further fact of the white-skinned Āryan 'conquerors' graci-ously and condescendingly absorbing
these, tactfully elevating the same to 'higher' levels all the while. This has naturally led to a vigorous reaction and these 'reactionaries' go the whole hog to 'prove' it the other way round! When our Gaṇapati is caught in the web of such controversies one may be driven to the ridiculous conclusion that he is not an Āryan deity at all, but, most probably, imported from Mongolia! It is therefore better to play safe, rescue our deity from embarrassing situations and get the best out of him for our spiritual life.

The most commonly accepted form of Gaṇapati depicts him as red in colour and in a human body with an elephant’s head. Out of the two tusks, one is broken. He has four arms. Two of the arms hold the pāśa (noose) and aṅkuśa (goad). The other two are held in the abhaya and varada mudrās. The belly is of generous proportions and is decorated with a snake-belt. There is also a yajñopavīta (sacred Brāhminical thread), either of thread or of serpent. He may be seated in padmāsana (lotus-posture). When the belly does not permit this, the right leg may be shown bent and resting on the seat.

Apart from beautiful robes and ornaments, he wears a lovely carved crown.

The trunc may be turned to the left or to the right. He is normally seen helping himself to liberal quantities of modaka (a kind of sweet).

A mouse, of ridiculously small proportions, is seen near him, nibbling at his share of the sweets, hoping perhaps, to gain enough strength to carry his master!

A third eye may sometimes be added on the forehead, in the centre of the eyebrows. The number of heads may be raised to five. The arms may vary from two to ten. Lotus, pomegranate, water vessel, battle-axe, lute, broken tusk, sugarcane, ears of paddy, bow and arrow, thunderbolt, rosary, book-these are some of the other objects shown in the hands. His Śakti is often shown with him as sitting on his lap. Sometimes two Śaktis, Ṛddhi* and Siddhi, are also shown.

Let us now make an attempt at un- ravelling this symbology.

`Gaṇa' means category. Everything that we perceive through our senses or grasp through our mind can be expressed in terms of kind, of category. The principle from which all such categories have manifested themselves is Gaṇapati, the Lord of categories. In effect, it means the origin of the whole creation, God Himself.

A common Sanskrit word to denote elephant is `Gaja'. Hence the name Gajānana or Gajamukha (`elephant-faced') for Gaṇapati. But the word `Gaja' has a much deeper connotation. `Ga' indicates 'gati,' the final goal towards which the entire creation is moving, whether knowingly or unknowingly. `Ja' stands for `janma,' birth or origin. Hence `gaja' signifies God from whom the worlds have come out and towards whom they are progressing, to be ultimately dissolved in Him. The elephant-head is thus purely symbolical and points to this truth.

Another factor we observe in creation is its two-fold manifestation as the microcosm (śūkṣmāṇḍa) and the macrocosm (brahmāṇḍa). Each is a replica of the other. They are one in two and two in one. The elephant-head stands for the macrocosm and the human body for the microcosm. The two form one unit. Since the macrocosm is the goal of the microcosm, the elephant part has been given greater prominence by making it the head.

Perhaps, the boldest statement concerning philosophical truths ever made is contained in that pithy saying of the Chāndogya Upaniṣad: 'tat-tvam-asi,' 'That thou art'. It simply means: 'You, the
apparently limited individual, are, in essence, the Cosmic Truth, the Absolute.' The elephant-human form of Gaṇapati is the iconographical representation of this great Vedāntic dictum. The elephant stands for the cosmic whereas the human stands for individual. The single image reflects their identity.

Among the various myths that deal with Gaṇapati’s origin, the one that attributes it to the scurf or dirt taken out of her body by Pārvatī seems to be the most widely known, and considered as odd and odious. It is therefore worthwhile to delve a little deeper into this mystery.

One of the epithets by which Gaṇapati is well-known and worshiped is ‘Vighneśvara’ or ‘Vighnarāja’ (‘the Lord of obstacles’). He is the lord of all that obstructs or restricts, hinders or prevents. With the various grades and shades of the powers of obstruction under his control, he can create a hell of trouble for us if he wants! In fact, according to the mythological accounts, the very purpose of his creation was to obstruct the progress in the path of perfection!

How does he do it? If he is not appeased by proper worship, all undertakings, whether sacred or secular, will meet with so many obstacles that they will simply peter out. This is to show that nothing can succeed without his grace. If he is pleased by worship and service, he will tempt his votaries with success and prosperity (Siddhi and Ṛddhi) the very taste of which can gradually lead them away from the spiritual path. Why does he do it? To test them thoroughly before conferring upon them the greatest spiritual boon of mokṣa. Being the master of all arts and sciences, and the repository of all knowledge, he can easily confer success or perfection in any of these. However, he is unwilling to give spiritual knowledge leading to the highest spiritual experience, lest it should appear easy of achievement in the eyes of men. Hence the severity of the test. The path of the good is fraught with innumerable obstacles, śreyāṁsi bahuvighnāni. Only the very best of heroes, who can brave the roughest of weathers, deserve to be blessed with it. Human beings by nature are inclined towards the enjoyments of the flesh and intoxications of power and pelf. It is only one in a million that turns towards God. Among many such souls, very few survive the ordeals and reach the goal.

When compared to the highest spiritual wisdom, which alone is really worth striving for, even Ṛddhi and Siddhi (success and prosperity) are like impurities, mala, as it were. Since Gaṇapati’s consorts are Ṛddhi and Siddhi (personifications of the powers of success and prosperity), he, their spouse, has been described as created out of Pārvatī’s bodily scurf.

Again, the word ‘mala’ need not have any odium about it. If Śiva represents Parama-puruṣa, the Supreme Person, Pārvatī stands for Paramā Prakṛti, Nature Supreme, consi-dered as his power, inseparable from him. She is, in the language of philosophy, Māyā-prakṛti, comprising the three guṇas-sattva, rajas and tamas.

Sattva is stated to be pure and, as compared to it, rajas and tamas are said to be impure. Since creation is impossible out of pure sattva, even as pure gold does not lend itself to be shaped into ornaments unless mixed with baser metals, it has got to be mixed with rajas and tamas to effect it. This seems to be the import of the story of the ‘impure’ substances being used by Pārvatī to shape Gaṇapati.

Let us now try to interpret the other factors involved in the symbology of this god. His ears are large, large enough to listen to the supplications of everyone, but, like the winnowing basket, are capable of sifting what is good for the supplicant from what is not. Out of the two tusks, the one that is whole stands for the Truth, the One without a second. The broken tusk, which is imperfect, stands for the manifest world, which appears to be imperfect because of the inherent incongruities. However, the manifest universe and the unmanifest unity are both attributes of the same Absolute. The bent trunk is a representation of Oṅkāra or Praṇava which, being the symbol of Brahman, the Absolute, is declaring as
it were that Gaṇapati is Brahman Himself. His large belly indicates that all the created worlds are contained in him.

The pāśa (noose) stands for rāga (attachment), and the aṅkuśa (goad) for krodha (anger). Like the noose, attachment binds us. Anger hurts us like the goad. If God is displeased with us, our attachments and anger will increase, making us miserable. The only way of escaping from the tyranny of these is to take refuge in God. Or it can mean that it is far safer for us to surrender our attachment and anger to Him. When they are in His hands, we are safe!

How we wish that Lord Gaṇapati had chosen a big bandicoot as his mount! The fact, however, is otherwise and that privilege has been conferred on a small mouse! The word mūṣaka (mouse) is derived from the root `muṣ' which means `to steal'. A mouse stealthily enters into things and destroys them from within. Similarly egoism enters unnoticed, into our minds and quietly destroys all our undertakings. Only when it is controlled by divine wisdom, it can be harnessed to useful channels. Or, the mouse that steals, can represent love that steals the human hearts. As long as human love is kept at the low level, it can create havoc. Once it is directed towards the Divine, it elevates us. The mouse that is wont to see the inside of all things can stand for the incisive intellect. Since Gaṇapati is the lord of the intellect, it is but meet that he has chosen it as his mount.

Icons of Gaṇapati

There are several varieties of Gaṇapati icons available in our temples and archaeological monuments. Whether the number is 71, 50, 31, or 21, it is certain that there are several aspects of this deity. Only a few of them can be dealt with here.

`Bālaganapati' and `Taruṇaganapati' images depict him as a child and a young man, respectively. `Vināyaka' is shown with four arms holding the broken tusk, goad, noose and rosary. He holds the sweet modaka in his trunk. He may be standing or seated. `Heraṁbaganapati' has five heads, ten hands, three eyes in each face and rides on a lion. `Vīravighneśa' exhibits the martial spirit with several weapons held in his ten hands.

`Śaktigaṇapati', several varieties of which are described in the tantras, is shown with his Śakti, called variously as Lakṣmī, Rddhi, Siddhi, Puṣṭi and so on. Worship of this aspect is said to confer special powers or grant the desired fruits quickly.

One of the varieties of this `Śakti-gaṇapati' is called `Ucchiṣṭagaṇapati,' the Gaṇapati associated with unclean things like orts, whose worship belongs to Vāmācāra (the left-handed path', i.e., the heterodox and unclean path) and said to give quick results. There is nothing to dread or recoil in this concept. Dirty things are as much a part of nature as clean things. But do not scavengers and doctors handle them in a hygienic way and serve the people? Are not all people obliged to be scavengers in varying degrees? Why not do it religiously, as an act of service and worship? Nature converts clean things into unclean things and vice versa. Making Gaṇapati preside over it and handle dirt scientifically and religiously can also be a spiritual discipline. This seems to be the philosophy behind this concept.

`Nṛttaganapati' is a beautiful image showing him as dancing. It seems once Brahmā met Gaṇapati and bowed down to him with great devotion and reverence. Being pleased with this Gaṇapati started dancing gracefully. That is why Gaṇapati is declared to be the master of the arts of music and dancing.
'Varasiddhi-Vināyaka' is the aspect worshipped during the famous Gaṇeśa Caturthī festival. He is said to be a celibate.

Gaṇapati is sometimes depicted as a Śakti (female deity) under the names of Gaṇeśānī, Vināyakī, Śūrpakarnī, Lamba-mekhalā and so on.

Ganapati is worshipped not only in images but also in liṅgas, śālagrāmas, yantras (geometrical diagrams) and kalaśas (pots of water). Gaṇapati śālagrāmas however, are very rare. The svastika is also accepted as a graphic symbol of Gaṇapati.

Temples and shrines dedicated to Ganapati are very numerous. They are spread all over the country. He appears in the campuses of temples of most other deities also.