



Impact Factor: 4.081

## Gaṇeśa Cult of Bengal: A Historical Interpretation

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### Abstract:

Gaṇeśa or Gaṇapati is a very prominent deity of India. Perhaps he is the most popular deity in the Hindu pantheon. The origin of this God is not clear. Therefore, there are a lot of hypothesis among the historians about him. Undoubtedly Gaṇeśa is the supreme deity of Western India, mainly in Maharashtra. Although numerous temples all over India and abroad are dedicated to him. During the last phase of Gupta period, Gaṇeśa had gained tremendous popularity among the all sects of Hinduism. In Eastern Indian States like Bengal, Bihar, Orissa and Assam, Gaṇeśa has a sacred position. The following article elaborates the characteristics of this deity in Bengal region and also enumerates his relation with the local cults and tribal culture. Further there is a section about the iconography, which clarifies the historicity of Gaṇeśa in the cultural perspective of Bengal. Actually, the following article tries to find out the distinctive entity of Gaṇeśa in the historical strata of Bengal, though he is regarded as the son of Śiva and Durgā.

**Keywords:** Gaṇeśa, Deity, Rat, Elephant, Tribal, Gupta Period.

Lord Gaṇeśa has a pervasive influence in Western Indian culture, especially in Maharashtra. In this region he receives grand honour and Gaṇeśa Chaturthī is celebrated with deep emotion and enthusiasm. He enjoys nearly universal adoration as he is the remover of obstacles, protector of the worshippers and provides access to the other Gods and Goddesses.<sup>1</sup> Most probably during the late Gupta period Gaṇeśa had secured his place in brāhmanical outfit. Many scholars think that Gaṇeśa was originated from Dravidian beliefs. Actually, Gaṇeśa is one of the latest brāhmanical deities as he is not mentioned in the Rāmāyana and is also excluded from the original Mahābhārata.<sup>2</sup> Though he is taken as the God of wisdom and said to have written down the great epic, Mahābhārata.<sup>3</sup> Gaṇeśa knowns in several epithets throughout India, like Vināyaka, Vignahartā, Ekadanta, Pillaiyār, Gaṇapatai, Gajakarna, Gajānana, Lambodara, Lambakarna etc. All of these names indicate to the attributes of this deity. Usually Gaṇeśa has a fatty human body with elephant head and he is mouse rider, one of his tusks is broken and has four arms and holds various objects

<sup>1</sup> Courtright, Paul.B, *Gaṇeśa: Lord of Obstacles, Lord of Beginnings*, oxford university press, 1985, p.163

<sup>2</sup> Sen Gupta Sankar, *A Study on Ganesha : A Distinct Member of the Durga Family in Bengal*, Folklore International

Monthly, September 1973, vol. xiv, no. 9, whole no. 163, P.323

<sup>3</sup> Michael, S.M, *The Origin of the Ganapati Cult*, Asian Folklore Studies, vol. 42, 1983. P.91

like an Ankuśa/goad, a Pāśa/noose, a Paraśu/axe and sweet Modaka.<sup>4</sup> Sometimes one of his lower hand displays abhayamudrā. He wears a snake around his protuberant belly. Apart from these, there are many tantric forms of Gaṇeśa across India and a female version, named Vināyakī.

In Bengal region Gaṇeśa is a part of Durgā family. The Bengalees believe that Goddess Durgā visits her ancestral house once in a year with her two daughters, Lakṣmī and Sarasvatī and her two sons, Kārttikēya and Gaṇeśa. Durgā Pūjā of Bengal was emerged during the 16<sup>th</sup> century by the patronage of Zamindars,<sup>5</sup> whether Gaṇeśa became popular in Gupta period. Asim Kumar Chakraborty states that the people of Bengal began to worship the Vedic deities like Indra, Surya, Ganesh, Vishnu, Madana and others from the time of the Guptas.<sup>6</sup> Many statues of this deity of pre and post Gupta period were discovered from the different sites of Bengal. Before entering in the detail interpretation about the tradition of Gaṇeśa worship in Bengal region, I want to pay attention to the religious practice of tribals where elephant and mouse have a sacred place. We all know that modern Hinduism has evolved through different religious phases, like Animism, Totemism, Anthropomorphism etc. In the practice of Totemism- the tribal culture is most influential. Therefore, tribal beliefs are indispensable when it comes to Bengal and origin and worship of Gaṇeśa in this region.

#### **Elephant and Rat as Totem**

The tribals of Bengal have various types of totem in their religious life, both animal and tree. There are some tribal societies in Bengal and its adjoining regions (Bihar, Orissa and Assam) who consider elephant and mouse as their totemic emblem. These three regions and Bengal belonged to the same non brāhmaṇical cultural context for a long time before the emergence of Guptas. Therefore, in the deliberation about the totemism in Bengal, we must have to look into the tribal culture of these neighbouring states of present West Bengal. The Oraon people are divided into several clans. The 'Tikri' clan of this tribe consider young mouse as their totem. Another Oraon clan objects to water in which an elephant has bathed.<sup>7</sup> A clan of Oraon tribe 'Tiga' by name has field rat as their totem.<sup>8</sup> The Dom caste of Bankura district of Bengal, who has a Dravidian origin consider mouse as their totem.<sup>9</sup> The Munda people are divided in numerous clans and among their clan totems are the rat and the tree rat.<sup>10</sup> The Kumhar caste of Lohardaga district of Bihar has elephant totem.<sup>11</sup> In Chotanagpur Plateau, the pastoral caste, Goalas are divided into thirty-one exogamous septs and

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<sup>4</sup> Courtright, Paul.B, op.cit., pp.4-5

<sup>5</sup> Sen Gupta Sankar, op.cit., p.324

<sup>6</sup> Chakraborty, Ashim Kumar, *Life in Ancient Bengal Before the Rise of the Palas*, Howah, p.118

<sup>7</sup> Frazer, J.G, *Totemism and Exogamy: A Treatise on Certain Early Forms of Superstition and Society*, vol.i, London, 1910, p.12

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p. 13

<sup>9</sup> Frazer, J.G, *Totemism and Exogamy: A Treatise on Certain Early Forms of Superstition and Society*, vol.ii, London, 1935, p.313

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p.292

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p.317

their clan totems are the rat and the field rat.<sup>12</sup> Another two cultivator tribes of this region, named Kharias and Kharwars have elephant totem.<sup>13</sup> The Lohars, the blacksmith caste of Chotanagpur consider elephant as their totem.<sup>14</sup> The Juang tribe of Keonjhar district of Orissa has elephant totem.<sup>15</sup> The Goomsur region (Ganjam district) is the habitat of Khond tribe and they are divided into so many clans. Once this tribe performed a human sacrifice in the honour of their Earth Goddess who is represented under the effigy of a peacock and an elephant.<sup>16</sup> They consider elephant as Earth Goddess.<sup>17</sup> The Maulikas, a Dravidian caste of Manbhumi of Bihar and Western Bengal are divided into four totemic exogamous clans and the totem of a clan is a tree rat.<sup>18</sup> Beside this, the Garo tribe of Assam considers rat as their totem.<sup>19</sup> From this discussion we may not definitely say that the Gaṇeśa worship in Bengal originated from these tribal beliefs but there are strong evidences which associate these two creatures with the deity and they both have a sacred position in indigenous beliefs.

### **Gaṇeśa, an Agricultural Deity**

There are many assumptions about the origin of this most revered deity. According to B. A. Gupte, Gaṇapati represents the harvest festival, as he is called 'Mushhak Vahan' or 'rider on a rat' and in Sanskrit 'mūṣaka' means a thief and therefore this title implies that Ganapati is a rider of field rat, the thief of field.<sup>20</sup> There is another explanation about the relation of Gaṇeśa with agricultural activities. S. M. Michael states that the rat is such an animal multiplies with enormous expeditiously, which symbolizes fertility.<sup>21</sup> Michael also draws attention to the figurative depiction of this deity. Gaṇeśa has an elephant head which is similar with the load of cornsheaves on a farmer head.<sup>22</sup> Further he compares the yellowish colour of Ganapati with the features of cornsheaf.<sup>23</sup> Sankar Sen Gupta also thinks that Gaṇeśa is a deity of cultivation. According to him, the weapons of this God are needed by the peasants of India for agricultural purpose.<sup>24</sup>

#### **1.1 Relation with Śiva and Durgā**

Gaṇeśa usually known as the son of Śiva. In Bengal region Śiva is considered as a presiding deity of vegetation. According to a folklore of Bengal, Śiva had participated in agriculture as per the instruction of his wife Gaurī and with the help of Vīma, a

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid. p.295

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. pp.295-296

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. p. 297

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.p.315

<sup>16</sup> Campbell, John, *Human Sacrifices in India*, Delhi, 1986, p.126

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. p.126

<sup>18</sup> Frazer, J.G, op.cit.,p.317

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. p.324

<sup>20</sup> Gupte, B.A, *Hindu Holidays and Ceremonials with Dissertation on Origin, Folklore and Symbols*, Calcutta,1916, p.55

<sup>21</sup> Michael, S.M,op.cit.p.92

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.p.92

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.p.93

<sup>24</sup> Sen Gupta Sankar, op.cit., p.324

devotee of him, Śiva had cultivated a land and gained huge success.<sup>25</sup> After that Śiva started to produce cotton.<sup>26</sup> In this perspective another aspect is that Devi Durgā who is the mother of Gaṇeśa also known as ‘Annapūrṇā’, which stands for a deity of grains. Scholars often argued that the representation of Durgā with buffalo like Mahiṣāsura indicates that she is the protector of harvest.<sup>27</sup> In her iconography slaying the buffalo demon symbolizes that she protects growing grains from this wild animal which often runs through the paddy fields and destroys the crops in process.<sup>28</sup> The timing of the śārodīyāutsab or the Durgā festival in Bengal falls in the month of Aswin following the end of the rainy season and during this period the fields are full of growing crops. From the above explanation there is no doubt that as a member of Shiva-Durgā family, Gaṇeśa may has some connection with harvest.

## 1.2 Similarity with Local Harvest Cults

Sankar Sen Gupta recognized Gaṇeśa as Kṣētrapāla, a local cult of Bengal who is also associated with cultivation.<sup>29</sup> Kṣētrapāla is a less popular Grāma Devāta among the peasant community of Bengal. After gathering the crops in the month of Agrahayana and Baisakh, the farmers worship this deity. Actually Kṣētrapāla, is a Saivite deity, he is often called as a son of Shiva or an incarnation of Shiva.<sup>30</sup> Bengalees consider Kṣētrapāla as the supreme deity of fertile land and believe that he is the remover of the obstacles related to cultivation.<sup>31</sup> Now if we look into the characteristics of Gaṇeśa in various Puranas, we must find that he is also considered as the remover of various obstacles. The main ingredients for paying homage to Kṣētrapāla are parched rice, arched paddy and cooked vegetables.<sup>32</sup> All of these components are associated with farming. Beside this, Kṣētrapāla is familiar as dvārpāla or door keeper.<sup>33</sup> According to the story of Skanda Purana, Gaṇeśa played his role as a gate keeper of Parvati.<sup>34</sup> Apart from this there is a popular local cult in Rarh region of Bengal, Dhārma Thākur by name, who is also affiliated to the vegetation and fertility. Dhārma Thākur is an elephant rider like Gaṇeśa and during the veneration of this deity, devotees offer a clay figure of an elephant in honour of him.<sup>35</sup> In the Gājan (a typical religious song) of Dhārma Thākur, we get the reference of Gaṇeśa. Further, this deity is considered as rain-bringer. There is an image of Dhārma Thākur under a palm tree at Nityanandapur village of West Burdwan and this deity is worshipped during the time of drought.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Bhattacharya, Ashutosh, *Folklore of Bengal* (in Bengali), New Delhi, 1982, p.36

<sup>26</sup> Ibid,p.36

<sup>27</sup> Maitra, Lopamudra, *Durga idos of Kumartuli:Surviving Oral Traditions through Changes*, Chitrolekha

International Magazine on Art and Design, vol.3, no.1, 2013, p.20

<sup>28</sup> Ibid,p.20

<sup>29</sup> Sen Gupta Sankar, op.cit., p.327

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, p. 326

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, p.327

<sup>32</sup> Bhattacharya, Ashutosh, op.cit., p.75

<sup>33</sup> Sen Gupta Sankar, op.cit., p.328

<sup>34</sup> Tagare, G.V, *The Skanda Purana*, part ix, 1996, p.85

<sup>35</sup> Dalal Roshen, *Hinduism: An Alphabetical Guide*, 2010, p.120

<sup>36</sup> Mukhopadhyay Ashutosh, *Bangla Mangalkabyer Iithas*, (in Bengali), Calcutta, 1346 (Bengali Year), p. 327

Therefore, we may say that in Bengal Gaṇeśa has some very interesting relation with cultivation.

### 1.3 Gaṇeśa and Kalā Boū

In Northern India, Gaṇeśa has two wives, Riddhi and Siddhi but in South India he is considered as a bachelor. However, in Bengal Kalā Boū or banana tree (*Musa Sapientum*) regards as his spouse. The Kalā Boū is also called Nabapatrikā. Kachu/esculent root (*Colocasia esculenta*), mānkachu/giant taro (*Alocasia macrorrhizos*), turmeric (*Curcuma longa*), bael/wood apple (*Aegle marmelos*), ashoka tree (*Saraca asoca*), jayanti tree (*Sesbania sesban*), aparajitā (*Clitoria ternatae*) and paddy (*Oryza sativa*) are included in Nabapatrikā.<sup>37</sup> According to some scholars Vanadurgā or the forest Durgā is the primitive form Nabapatrikā.<sup>38</sup> During the period of assimilation of brāhmaṇical and indigenous culture, Vana Durgā secures her place as Nabapatrikā. Sankar Sen Gupta says that Nabapatrikā is a seasonal and agricultural deity at first.<sup>39</sup> She is adorned in a red saree and her breasts are represented by a pair of wood apple, resembles like a newly wedded woman.<sup>40</sup> The elements which form Nabapatrikā are associated with the harvest.

### Iconography

The tradition of Gāṇapatya sect in Bengal is not prominent. According to Jitendranath Bandyopadhyay, distinctive entity of Gaṇeśa is contemporary and the sectarian activity of the Gāṇapatyas is insignificant than others around India.<sup>41</sup> Though in Bengal Gaṇeśa is regarded as the remover of obstacles and bestower of success. Once he had a glorious position not only among brāhmaṇical perspective but also to a lesser extent, even among some followers of heterodox creeds.<sup>42</sup> Seated, standing and dancing types images of Gaṇeśa are quite common in Bengal. Several representations of this deity in stone, metal and terracotta were found at Pāhārpur.<sup>43</sup> Actually, numerous figures of Gaṇeśa are excavated from this site and most of them are made of terracotta. In one plaque, the deity is shown with his vehicle, the mouse, holding a bunch of flowers or in the upper left hand and a goad in the upper right hand, the lower left hand resting on the thigh and the lower right hand in the gift-bestowing attitude.<sup>44</sup> The most striking feature of this image, the hair of the deity is arranged in the form of a jaṭājūṭa and the third is clearly visible on the forehead.<sup>45</sup> A funny image of Gaṇeśa from Pāhārpur shows the deity in dancing mode with a radish of plenty leaves in his hand.<sup>46</sup> Pāhārpur is an early Pāla establishment and a number of charitable records of the Gupta period associated to this religious complex were

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<sup>37</sup> Sen Gupta Sankar, op.cit., p. 324

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, p.324

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, p.324

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, p.324

<sup>41</sup> Bandyopadhyay, Jitendranath, *Panchopasana* (in Bengali), Calcutta, 1960, p.16

<sup>42</sup> Majumdar, R.C, *History of Bengal*, vol.1, Dacca, 1943, p.448

<sup>43</sup> Ibid,p.448

<sup>44</sup> Dikshit, K.N, *Memoirs of the Archaeological Survey of India, No.55, Excavation at Paharpur, Bengal*, Delhi, 1938, p.60

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, p.60

<sup>46</sup> Roy, Niharranjan, *A History of Bengali People: Early Period*, (in Bengali), Calcutta, 1993, p.501



discovered.<sup>47</sup> According to Niharranjan Roy, between late Gupta and early Pāla period there are considerable number of images of Gaṇeśa but independent sectarian activity associated with this deity doesn't exist during this time.<sup>48</sup> A four-armed (upper right- aksamāla, lower right- lotus, upper left- broken, lower left- rests on the knee) Gaṇeśa image of Pala period is unearthed from Bāngarh of Dinajpur district.<sup>49</sup> In this image, the deity is seated on a pedestal with both his legs resting below his protuberant belly, wears crown on his head and bangles on his arms.<sup>50</sup> There is one unique five faced and ten handed figure of Gaṇeśa seated on a roaring lion, found from Rāmpal (Bangladesh) and now being worshipped at a vaishanava monastery at Munśiganj.<sup>51</sup> Historians like N. K Bhattasali and T. A Gopinath Rao provide different views about this image. Actually, the origin of this image is unidentified. Though on the top section of this deity, there are six miniature figures of Gaṇeśa, According to Jitendranath Bandyopadhyay, this figure probably suggests an allusion to the six subdivisions of Gāṇapatya sect, namely the devotees of the six forms of the deity such as Mahā, Haridrā, Ucchiṣṭa, Navanīta, Svarṇa and Santāna.<sup>52</sup> From the ruins of Rājibādidāngā of Murshidābad district, a Ganesa image of bronze was found.<sup>53</sup> During my visit to Indian Museum in Kolkata, I saw a very fascinating figure of Gaṇeśa belonging to 12<sup>th</sup> century of eight arms in dancing mode on his vehicle, the mouse. The deity is accompanied with two figures at the bottom, holding an aksamāla in the lowest right hand, the next hand in varadamudrā attitude, next holds an añkuśa and own tooth in the top right hand and in the four left hands, there are lotus, radish and modakas, one hand is broken.<sup>54</sup> (figure 1) This image is from Northern Bengal and made of basalt stone. On the top section of this image, a bunch of mangoes with leaves attach to the stalk. The fruits to be found on so many Gaṇeśa images of Bengal are most probably symbolical representation of success.<sup>55</sup> There is one more specimen of this deity belonging to the same period is also in dancing mode with six arms. (figure 2) This figure is from Jangipara of Hoogly district. Telkupi of Purulia district was once a prosperous temple complex but now submerged because of construction of a dam on Damodar river. From this site, a four-armed upavita wearing standing Gaṇeśa figure was restored and the image is bejeweled with lots of bangles.<sup>56</sup> Ganesa is considered as a member of Durga family and during the sharodiya durgotsav, Gaṇeśa is present in every puja pyāndels. Though this deity is also the part of the local form of Durgā. In Northern Bengal, a popular Goddess, named Bhadrani,

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<sup>47</sup> Dikshit, K.N, op.cit., pp.6-8

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, p.501

<sup>49</sup> Goswami, Kunja Gobinda, *Excavations at Bangarh (1938-41)*, University of Calcutta, pp.17-18

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, p.17

<sup>51</sup> Majumdar, R.C, op.cit., pp.448-449

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, p.449,

Dasgupta, K.K, *Pratima Shilpe Hindu Deb-Debi* (in Bengali), Kolkata, 2000, p.165

<sup>53</sup> Chakraborty, Ashim, Kumar, op.cit., p. 210

<sup>54</sup> Dasgupta, K.K, op.cit., p.167

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, p.448

<sup>56</sup> Mitra, Debala, *Memoirs of the Archaeological Survey of India, No.76, Telkupi –a submerged temple-site*

*in West Bengal*, Delhi, 1969, p.49

commonly known as the sister of Durgā is also accompanied by Gaṇeśa, Kārttikēya, Lakṣmī and Sarasvatī.<sup>57</sup> The origin of this cult is still in mystery and her worship begins after the end of the śārodīyāuṭsab.

### **Conclusion**

Gaṇeśa is a prominent deity in the arena of the religious strata of Bengal. The origin of this deity is still mysterious. Perhaps Ganesa was introduced in Bengal region after the Guptas. Though the elephant and the mouse, the two sacred creatures related with this deity had a holy place among the tribes long before the emergence of brāhmaṇical religion in Bengal. We can find numerous references of Gaṇeśa in Bengali literature, especially in Maṅgal Kābya. Usually, it starts with the praise of him. Bharatchandra Roy Gunakor in his 'Annadamangal', venerate Gaṇeśa as the creator of this universe.<sup>58</sup> Gaṇeśa is considered as the son of Lord Shiva and Durga and this duo are associated with cultivation. Therefore, we may conclude the origin of Gaṇeśa related with vegetation. Undoubtedly Gaṇeśa has a deep influence in Bengali culture. The trader community worship him on the occasion of Bengali New Year or Poila Baisakh. Recently like Maharashtra, Ganesa worship has become popular around Bengal. Before the Durga Puja, Gaṇeśa Chaturthī is celebrated with a huge enthusiasm, especially in Kolkata, the state Capital of Bengal.

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<sup>57</sup> Maity, Pradyot Kumar, *Human Fertility Cults and Rituals of Bengal: A Comparative Study*, New Delhi, 1989, p.148

<sup>58</sup> Roy, Bharatchandra, *Annadamangal* (in Bengali), Calcutta, 1853, p.1