

Ganesha, according to the mythology, is the son of **Shiva** and **Parvati**, brother of **Kartikeya** - the general of the gods. He is widely worshiped as the god of wisdom, prosperity and good fortune and this festival celebrates his birth.. Legend has it that Parvati created Ganesha out of the sandalwood dough that she used for her bath and breathed life into him. Letting him stand guard at the door she went to have her bath. When her husband, Shiva returned, the child who had never seen him stopped him. Shiva severed the head of the child and entered his house. Parvati, learning that her son was dead, was distraught and asked Shiva to revive him. Shiva cut off the head of an elephant and fixed it on the body of Ganesha.

Another tale tells of how one day the Gods decided to choose their leader and a race was to be held between the brothers- Kartikeya and Ganesh. Whoever took three rounds of the earth first would be made the Ganaadhipati or the leader. Kartikeya seated on a peacock as his vehicle, started off for the test. Ganesh was given a rat, which moved swiftly. Ganesh realized that the test was not easy, but he would not disobey his father. He reverently paid obeisance to his parents and went around them three times and thus completed the test before Kartikeya. He said, " my parents pervade the whole universe and going around them, is more than going round the earth." Everybody was pleasantly surprised to hear Ganesha's logic and intelligence and hence he came to be known as the Ganaadhipati or leader, now referred to as Ganpati.

There is also a story behind the symbolic snake, rat and the singular tusk. During one of his birthdays, His mother, Parvati, cooked for him twenty-one types of delicious food and a lot of sweet porridge. Ganesha ate so much that even his big belly could not contain it. Mounting his little mouse, he embarked on his nightly rounds. His mouse suddenly stumbled upon seeing a huge snake. To adjust His belly, Ganesha put the snake on as a belt around his stomach. All of a sudden, he heard laughter emanating from the sky.

He looked up and saw the moon mocking him. Ganesha infuriated, broke off one of his tusks and hurled it at the moon. Parvati, seeing this, immediately cursed the moon that whoever looks at it on Ganesh Chaturthi will be accused of a wrong doing. The symbolism behind the mouse and snake and Ganesha's big belly and its relationship to the moon on his birthday is highly philosophic. The whole cosmos is known to be the belly of Ganesha. Parvati is the primordial energy. The seven realms above, seven realms below and seven oceans, are inside the cosmic belly of Ganesha, held together by the cosmic energy (kundalini) symbolized as a huge snake which Ganesha ties around Him. The mouse is nothing but our ego. Ganesha, using the mouse as a vehicle, exemplifies the need to control our ego. One who has controlled the ego has Ganesha consciousness or God-consciousness.

The Festival:

The festival is observed in the Hindu calendar month of Bhaadrapada, starting on the fourth day of the waxing moon period. The date usually falls between 20 August and 15 September. The festival lasts for 10 days, ending on Anant Chaturdashi, fourteenth day of the waxing moon period.

Ganesha is invoked before the beginning of any auspicious work by the Hindus. It is believed that for the fulfillment of one's desires, his blessing is absolutely necessary. There are numerous stories in Hindu mythology, associated with the birth of this elephant-headed god, whose vehicle is the Mooshak or rat and who loves Modaks (droplet shaped Indian sweet).

■ Ganesh Chaturthi Celebrations

The festival of Ganesh Chaturthi is celebrated the states of Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh and many other parts of India. Started by Chatrapati Shivaji Maharaja, the great Maratha ruler, to promote culture and nationalism, the festival was revived by Lokmanya Tilak (a freedom fighter) to spread the message of freedom struggle and to defy the British who had banned public assemblies. The festival gave the Indians a feeling of unity and revived their patriotic spirit and faith. This public festival formed the background for political leaders who delivered speeches to inspire people against the Western rule. The festival is so popular that the preparations begin months in advance.

Ganesha statues installed in street corners and in homes, and elaborate arrangements are made for lighting, decoration, mirrors and the most common of flowers. Poojas (prayer services) are performed daily. The artists who make the idols of Ganesh compete with each other to make bigger and more magnificent and elegant idols. The relevantly larger ones are anything from 10 meters to 30 meters in height. These statues are then carried on decorated floats to be immersed in the sea after one, three, five, seven and ten days. Thousands of processions converge on the beaches to immerse the holy idols in the sea. This procession and immersion is accompanied by drum- beats, devotional songs and dancing.

It is still forbidden to look at the moon on that day as the moon had laughed at Ganesha when he fell from his vehicle, the rat. With the immersion of the idol amidst the chanting of "Ganesh Maharaj Ki Jai!" (Hail Lord Ganesh). The festival ends with pleas to Ganesha to return the next year with chants of "Ganpati bappa morya, pudcha varshi laukar ya" (Hail Lord Ganesh, return again soon next year).

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ganesh_Chaturthi

Historical records reveal that Ganesh Chaturthi celebrations were initiated in Maharashtra by Chatrapati Shivaji Maharaja, the great Maratha ruler, to promote culture and nationalism. And it had continued ever since. There are also references in history to similar celebrations during Peshwa times. It is believed that Lord Ganapati was the family deity of the Peshwas. After the end of Peshwa rule, Ganesh Chaturthi remained a family affair in Maharashtra from the period of 1818 to 1892.

In 1893, Indian freedom fighter and social reformer Lokmanya Tilak transformed the annual domestic festival into a large, well-organized public event.

Tilak recognized the wide appeal of the deity Ganesh as "the god for everybody", and popularized Ganesh Chaturthi as a national festival in order "to bridge the gap between Brahmins and 'non-Brahmins' and find a context in which to build a new grassroots unity

between them", and generate nationalistic fervor among people in Maharashtra against the British colonial rule.[5][6]

Tilak encouraged installation of large public images of Ganesh in pavilions, and also established the practice of submerging in rivers, sea, or other pools of water all public images of the deity on the tenth day after Ganesh Chaturthi.

Under Tilak's encouragement, the festival facilitated community participation and involvement in the form of intellectual discourses, poetry recitals, performances of plays, musical concerts, and folk dances. It served as a meeting ground for people of all castes and communities in times when, in order to exercise control over the population, the British discouraged social and political gatherings.