Chapter-7

Eternal Ganesha as a Prakalpana Literature

Prakalpana literature is an effort to take literature beyond boundaries and sometimes even beyond words. The word “Prakalpana” means “proper use of imagination”. This style of writing was initiated in Bengal and the pioneers were Dilip Gupta, Chandan Kumar Bhattacharya and Ashish Dev. Breaking away from our tradition of colonial past, they have tried to define Indian sensibility in their own way. It is an attempt to take our understanding of literature beyond the western terminology of existentialism, absurdism, classicism, post-structuralism, blank verse or sonnets.

The basic concept of the movement is very straightforward. In order to convey the ideas along with words- graphics, paintings, photos, artworks, cartoons and even graffiti are used. Many a time Sanskrit shlokas or ancient signs are used to convey the thought and the mood. All of us know and feel that at certain point words are not enough to convey the clear meaning and in such situation pictures help a lot. For this there a common saying that “A picture speaks a thousand words.”

It is to be noted that the term Prakalpana increases the intensity and glory of literature and does not trivialize literature. The main idea of this literature is to create an artistic fusion of prose, poetry, story, essay, drama, opera, cinema, and song etc. Visuals and images are often used in prakalpana literature. The poems of this genre are called concrete poetry or visual poetry. Prakalpana encourages mixing of genres. Prakalpana is frequently a joint effort which tries to establish communication between different forms of art.
Gita Mehta’s *Eternal Ganesha* is a wonderful example of Prakalpana Literature. Apart from words she has used lots of images in this book. Images convey a lot rather than words. In this book she has used 105 various images of lord Ganesha painted on different places like home, post office, shop, on wedding invitation, on hands, on nails, on body, on Indian flag and made of stones, bananas, clays, metals, woods, papers, cloths, flowers, lights, leaves of tree etc. This inspires the reader to read the book. Such images create a vivid and live picture of Ganesha in the mind of the reader. With the help of various images of different occasions and different places of the every corner of India Gita Mehta introduces the reader different mythologies, pictures, occasions, worships and importance of lord Ganesha in Indian Culture. Indeed it is a true saga of Lord Ganesha in Indian Culture and Hindu religion depicted by Gita Mehta. Though Lord Ganesha is physically not alive today, his presence and liveliness is felt in the mind and heart of every devotee of Ganesha. It justifies the title *Eternal Ganesha* that Ganesha is immortal and eternal Indian culture. He is omnipresent and worshiped in everyday life by thousands of people at home and at the temples. *Eternal Ganesha* gives the true glimpse of Indian spirituality and Hindu religion.

Gita Mehta’s Eternal Ganesha is a true tribute to Lord Ganesha and Indian culture. In the book she provides chapters for each of Ganesha Characteristics. The book is divided into various chapters and each chapter talks about the influence of Lord Ganesha on Indian People and in Indian Culture. The whole book talks about how Lord Ganesha is dissolved into every aspects of Indian culture.

The first chapter opens with an invocation to Lord Ganesha in which Gita Mehta gives a tribute to Lord Ganesha for controlling the whole universe. The very first chapter of the book is an
introduction to Lord Ganesha. In Indian culture Lord Ganesha permeates India in every aspect. Lord Ganesha is so intricately involved and dissolved that Hindu life without Ganesha is not possible even in dreams. The author dates back to 5000 BC in order to find the origin of myth of Lord Ganesha. In ancient time the tradition of offering rice to Ganesha goes back to 3000 BC. Lord Ganesha was then worshipped as the Lord of farming and the Lord of water. She introduces the scientific reason believing in elephant headed god. In ancient times in India land was immensely covered by forests and only elephant was an animal that could help in clearing the forest for farming. And there are records of the Indian history that suggests that elephant played a vital role for farming in ancient India. In this way the myth of elephant headed god reveals a human credit to animals.

“…Indians first used elephants to clear the forest for agriculture. Ancient Indus Valley seals show India’s early farmers worshipped an elephant-headed god as their Lord of Farming, his trunk symbolic of the plough, his belly of a bursting granary. Later Ganesha was worshipped as the Lord of Water, his festival celebrated in the season of rains in hope of bountiful harvests. Today when the majority of the Indians still depend on agriculture for survival it is hardly surprising that Ganesha, Lord of Farming and Lord of Water, is still worshipped…” (14)

Since Lord Ganesha is the pitcher of prosperity, he is a favorite of trader’s community as well. Almost every trader, in India, begins his day with the worship of Lord Ganesha with a hope of getting good customers and running the business well. He is also worshipped as a Lord of
beginnings hence he is remembered at various occasions such as the opening of new business, constructing new building/home, purchasing new vehicle, wedding of couple, and almost all new beginnings of life. As the Lord of Learning and knowledge, Lord Ganesha is the most favorite God of Indian students. Their faith in Lord Ganesha is seen when:

“Many students believe if they slice a closed text book with a Ganesha medallion the book will fall open at the very topic on which they will be examined, and before entering an examination hall cautious students might recite the Ganesha prayer…” (15)

Throughout India Lord Ganesha is worshipped in different forms such as pitcher of prosperity, guarantor of success, ‘the remover of obstacle and the grantor of boons’. In Indian temples Lord Ganesha is offered sweets and milks. During his birthday festival, Ganesha Chaturthi, he is offered variety of foods:

“Gallons of milk are offered to him. Elaborate sweets are baked for him. Special savories are fried for him. Sometimes he is actually made of food himself sugared almonds, cashew nuts, raisins being popular ingredients” (16)

The idol of Ganesha is fashioned and made from any substances and artists always try to make the unique about Lord Ganesha among Indian Gods. The idols are often fashioned out of wood, chalk, rice, matchsticks, unripe banana and even discarded rubber tires. This enthusiasm of the
artist shows the best part of Lord Ganesha that he is extremely adaptable among all Indian gods and perhaps this adaptability attracts every one of their religious belief and sects.

Gita Maheta narrates an incident during the freedom movement in India. Indians were restricted to their homes and banned by British law from congregating in public. This is why people could not celebrate the birthday festival and immersion of their god in public. At the end of the nineteenth century Lokmanya Tilak, one of the great Indian Leaders, Challenged the British Law and urged Indian People to defy the British ban on congregating in public by bringing their Ganesha idols out of their homes. People courageously came out of their homes on Tilak’s appeal and indirectly wielded weapon against the British Rule. Tilak was quite aware that people from any background have a strong faith in Ganesha and this faith could be used to revolt against British Empire. This incident in a way suggests that the faith in Lord Ganesha is not only a religious aspects but the same faith is a tool which unite Indian people to revolt the unjust.

The first chapter also covers the popular myth of Ganesha that talks about how Lord Ganesha happened to dictate the great epic Mahabharata narrated by Ved Vyasa. His devotion towards the creation of the Epic is observed in the following excerpt.

“…Vyas, who came from the lowest caste, announced that he would only recite the epic narrative containing India’s mythologies, her histories, her philosophies, if Ganesha could write it all down without halting. If for any reason Ganesha stopped writing, the story of India would remain untold. Ganesha accepted the challenge and over successive days and nights he proceeded to take down Vyasa’s dictation of
what remains world’s longest poem. Weeks passed, Ganesha’s pen wore out and still the recitation went on. When his last pen exhausted, fearing Vyasa might cease his revelations, a quick thinking Ganesha broke off his tusk, dipped it in ink and continued writing. Thus, Ganesha succeeded in gifting the *Mahabharata* and *the Bhagavad Gita* to India. And thus, Ganesha is always depicted with a broken tusk.”

(31)

The myths connect God with common man by introducing human characteristics in God. As devoted man never stops in achieving his goal even if he is surrounded by adverse conditions and finally gains the goal. In the same way Lord Ganesha takes up waiting the difficult task for an uncertain time and when it seems fail as his pen is broken, Lord Ganesha breaks his tusk and finishes the great epic by using the broken tusk as a pen. In this way Lord Ganesha is very close to common people unlike other Indian deities.

In the next chapter Gita Mehta includes the myth which talks about the origin of Ganesha. This myth is widely popular in Indian culture and has its significance too. The story of the myth is that while Parvati, wife of Lord Shiva, was bathing and her son Ganesha was guarding the gate following mother’s instructions, Lord Shiva returned. There took place a tension between son and father who were unaware about their relationship. Annoyed by Ganesha Lord Shiva severed his head. When Parvati came to learn about this she became desperate and pleaded her husband to enliven their child. Lord Shiva commands his Gans to bring the head of the first living being they come across. They encounter an elephant and carried its head to Lord Shiva who placed an elephant head to Ganesha’s body and restored to life.
The present myth about the origin of Lord Ganesha includes two significant things: one the introduction of Elephant and two Lord Ganesha as the supreme God among all Indian Gods. Gita Mehta presents various reasons behind the introduction of elephant in Indian myth. She presents these reasons from various perspectives such as history, anthropology, behavioral science, biological etc. From ancient times in India animals have been integral parts of Indian culture. From historical perspective elephants helped a lot to ancient people in clearing woods for farming. In this way elephants were original remover of obstacle (vigna harta). And later on ancient people worshipped elephants as in the form of god giving this credit.

From the perspective of Anthropology Gita Mehta suggests that human beings find it easier to worship gods fashioned after what they find familiar. She refers to the narration of Roman Arena by Cicero in which elephants were brought for sport (killing). As Cicero noted that elephants have same feeling and compassion which human beings have. In this way elephants have very close relation to humans in compare to other animals.

Further in the same chapter she refers to Pliny, a natural Historian. In his book *Natural History* Pliny claims of all animals in intelligence the elephant approaches nearest to man and the degree which is very rare among men even possesses notions of honesty, prudence and equity in elephants. Even the modern science has proved the remarkable intelligence of elephants. All these references give an answer to why elephant only have introduced in the myth of Lord Ganesha. Gita Mehta referring some historian presents the reasons of the introduction of elephant as a divine power.
“Some historians have even suggested that Shiva’s beheading of Ganesha is a mythical version of the Aryan conquest of India’s original tribal inhabitants, and that only after the tribals have been subjugated is their elephant god accepted into the Hindu pantheon as the subservient son of Aryan deities.” (51)

Referring Charles Darwin’s study of Elephant behavior in his book *The Expression of Emotion in Man and Animal* it is observed that in the Zoological Gardens the keeper of the Indian elephant had several times seen tears rolling down the face of the old female when distressed by the removal of the young one. Thus he has acknowledged the emotional similarity between man and elephant. Darwin also presents a biological similarity between human and Indian elephants.

“The Indian Elephants contracts the same muscles as are used for the shedding of tears in man” (51)

‘Ganesha’s Sacred Trunk’ offers mythological views which explain the significance of Lord Ganesha in the universe and in the creation of the universe. Elephant headed Ganesha’s trunk represents the shap of ‘India’s most profound concept, the syllable OM’. In Hindu mythology OM is considered to be the only sound produced during the origin of cosmos. In this way OM vibrated through the galaxy which is represented in the constant vibration of atoms. The whole universe is alive and dances in co-ordination with Dancing Ganesha. In this way Lord Ganesha is omnipresent representing the cosmic vibration. The present chapter Ganesha’s Sacred Trunk
focuses mythology of creation is backed by modern astrophysics. In Hindu philosophy it is believed that creation has no beginning and no end.

“… creation is an endless cycle of becoming in which one cosmos disappears into what modern physics would call a Black Hole, then out of that black Hole energy escapes to form another universe, which in time collapses into darkness from which new energy eventually escapes to form yet another universe, ad infinitum.” (55)

The next chapter of the book Ganesha’s Body focuses on the philosophical and mythical meaning of Ganesha’s body. Ganesha’s elephant head suggests that physical appearance is an illusion which must be overcome to reach the ultimate truth. Ganesha’s six arms represent six separate schools of Indian Philosophy. The worshippers see these four arms depicting life on land, aquatic life, amphibian life and avian life. This kind of worship suggests the presence of Lord Ganesha in all kinds of life on earth. Gita Mehta also describes the philosophical insight in Hindu religion. According to her Hindu philosophers have always been engaged in defining truth and as truth is always infinite, human mind is unable to reach it. Gita Mehta also presents an argument in favour of worshiping idols in Hindu culture. She refers to an ancient text the Vishnu Samhita:
“Without a form how can God be meditated upon? Where will the mind fix itself? Therefore the wise will meditate on some form, remembering, however, that the form is a superimposition and not a reality.” (71)

The image of Lord Ganesha is the composite of four separate animals. These four animals represent the significant mythical images. The head of the elephant is a symbol of ‘ahimsa’ or non violence as elephant is herbivorous creature. A human body is connected to a mouse through snake. This represents the union of the small with the great. In this symbolism Lord Ganesha possesses different mythical images which finally results into a single image of Lord Ganesha. In this way the different symbols of Lord Ganesha binds different forms of life which represent unity in diversity. This also suggests the peaceful co-existence not only among human beings but also among all sorts of life.

The next chapter investigates the reasons behind choosing mouse as Lord Ganesha’s mouse upon which he rides. Gita Mehta presents multiple interpretations of mouse as God’s vehicle. Just as our subconscious desires roam in the dark recesses of our mind and gnaw the tranquility of our mind, a mouse symbolizes these instincts the best. Ganesha’s mastery over the mouse suggests how we should control our desires however they are small and minor. Another myth holds that the capacity of a mouse to dig deep into the earth, won him this position as Ganesha has this relentless quest for knowledge and this digging into ideas. Interestingly, the computer’s most important handle is called a mouse.
After describing the meaning of mouse Gita Mehta devotes the next chapter to the serpent. The serpent is said to symbolize the coiled psychic energy which can be realized only by rigorous mental discipline. In Hindu mythology it is called the “Kundalini”. This knowledge is dormant and can be revived only through hard practice.

Gita Mehta refers to various everyday miracles that are attributed to Ganesha in the chapter Ganesha’s Miracle. Enlightenment is not easily come by in the age of Evil. The world is thought to have reached such a nadir of wickedness, many Hindus believe the time is ripe for Ganesha to reappear. Gita Mehta has given plenty of examples of the miracles of Ganesha that different idol of Lord Ganesha drink milk. It is noticed not only by the Indian but also by the entire world and well known news papers and media of the world. That has created a chaos and it was difficult to control the traffic. Even there was felt a shortage of milk. One of the examples Gita Mehta has quoted is - On September 21, 1995, the British newspaper, *The Manchester Guardian*, reported an extraordinary incident:

“It all began at dawn in a temple on the outskirts of Delhi, India, when milk offered to a statue of Ganesha just disappeared into thin air. Word speared sp quickly throughout India that soon thousands were offering milk to the gods and watching in amazement as it disappeared. Life in India was brought to a virtual standstill as people rushed to temples…” (95)
Some believe that Indian people lacking scientific temperament and believe in superstitions, and warning India would remain a backward nation if superstitious Indians persisted in such foolishness. But their warnings were ignored as even cynics joined the queues. Even in present time such incidents happens in India time and again. Whether it is true or not it is very difficult to dismiss. This shows the faith of Indian People in Lord Ganesha and reminds the eternity of Ganesha.

The most important chapter of this beautiful and inspiring book is Ganesha’s Revelation. Showing the importance of Ganesha Gita Mehta says that now a day there is trend of “theme Ganesha” and among them Sport is a popular theme. She says if the country is in the grip of cricket fever, Ganesha is shown with a cricket bat in his hand. When the World Cup is played, he swings his trunk over his shoulder and lobs a football towards a Brazilian football star. Sycophancy is another favorite theme, enabling worshipers to curry temporal as well as divine favor. Further Ganesha is accompanied by Riddhi and Siddhi who stands for prudence and discretion respectively. This can be summarized as the final lesson by Lord Ganesha. We must be prudent and we must use our discretion in dealing with our life. If understood in its totality, Ganesha epitomizes, the complete Indian thought. Gita Mehta warns the present and upcoming generations, not to take Lord Ganesha lightly,

“The moon once there dared to ridicule Ganesha when his mouse reared up and throw him to the ground. Delighted by Ganesha’s discomfiture the moon roared with laughter where upon furious Ganesha broke off his tusk and flung it at the laughing moon, casting it into darkness. Only after the moon had groveled in
apology did Ganesha relent and allow it to shine again, and then too, only partially.

The dark nights of the moon are supposed to remind both moon and mankind that Ganesha is a serious god, not to be treated lightly. What reparation will Ganesha demand of modern India for the “fancy looking models” and “theme Ganeshas” which render him increasingly ridiculous? What retribution for the fortunes disappearing under water, watched helplessly by the poor? Indians seem to have forgotten that Ganesha is the Lord of Connections, the god of cause and effect, or else they would not be oblivious to the possibility that extra vagrant idols are unlikely to guarantee the future. (119-120)

Perhaps Indians should concentrate their mind on Ganesha’s name instead of concentrating their wealth on Ganesha’s image.

Gita Mehta concludes the book quoting the reference of Hymn from the Ganesha Upanishad:

I bow to you, Lord of Categories.

You alone are the visible principle.

You alone are the creator.

You alone are the sustainer.

You alone are the destroyer.

You alone are the true self.

You are Brahman. (125)
According to Gita Mehta if divinity exists at all, it is to be found in the self. Indeed, Ganesha represents hope, optimism, good will, and some healthy self-indulgence. Transcending cultural boundaries, Ganesha is the most democratic of deities and a symbol of tolerance in a fractious world.

Thus along with various myths Mehta has used plenty of pictures, images & photographs of Lord Ganesha in entire nine Chapters of the book which justifies the term Prakalpana Literature.
References
