Chapter-7

Ganesha

It is interesting to note the change in writing pattern of Gita Mehta. Her initial work, *Karma Cola*, tries to explain to the world that Indian mysticism is a serious business and not a commodity. In *Raj* she goes back to the past and reveals the British domination and Indian scenario lacking in development. She again turns back to Indian culture and attempts to explain certain aspect to the West in *A River Sutra*. *Snakes and Ladders* comes as a breakthrough and she criticizes post independence Indian unsparingly. Her latest work, *Ganesha*, is again on a different line. It is for the first time in her career that she directly writes on Hindu religion.

Hindu religion has been a soft target of the West for a long time. In addition, there is enormous multiplicity and diversity in it that makes it vulnerable to misinterpretations. From the incident which produced *Karma Cola*, it is evident that Gita Mehta has a preoccupation with Indian culture and seems to have a conviction about its significance and relevance. In this regard, *Ganesha* can be considered as an attempt to explain to the world what lies in the base of one of the oldest religions. Since Hindu religion has numerous gods and goddesses, it cannot be possible to comprehend and explain each of them. Lord Ganesha can be taken as a prototype. Much will be achieved if the author succeeds in convincing the reader about the logical relevance, the religious significance and symbolic interpretations of this one deity. From her diasporic position, it can be viewed as one more step in her endeavour to explain to the ‘foreign’ culture about the ‘home culture’. It tries to connect the past with the present.
In this book, Gita Mehta has explained the concept of Ganesha’s status as an ‘obstacle remover’ and described various parts of His body. In this explanation she has woven the real spirit of Hindu religion and derived the contextual interpretations. She begins the work by a mantra which describes awesome powers owned by Ganesha. The appearance of Ganesha is much different from other deities. He has an elephant’s head, plump body, large belly and sweets in one hand. He is riding on a mouse. To a non-believer it is more comic and less religious. But for an Indian, it is the image of fortune bringer and evil remover. Compared to other deities, Ganesha is most pervasive. One can find Him at every imaginable place. Another aspect that makes Ganesha more popular than other gods is his kind nature. He is named as The Long Eared, The Single Tusked (Ekdanta), The Big Bellied (Lambodara), Pitcher of Prosperity, Remover of Obstacles and Granter of Boons. There will be hardly any house or office of any Indian, at least any Hindu, which does not have Ganesha idol. In spite of incongruous figure with an elephant’s head and a big belly, Ganesha has transcended religious sanctum and become a part of Indian household. Almost all the houses (mostly Hindu) have His image at the entrance to make it sure that only good fortune enters the house and the evil is kept away at a safe distance.

It has been an ancient ritual to offer grains of rice to Ganesha to ensure family’s prosperity. This ritual dates back at least five thousand years back. In the Indus valley civilization, people used elephants to clear the fields for agricultural activities. As a gesture of gratitude for this help, they used to worship an elephant headed god. For them, the trunk symbolized a plough and belli stood for bounty of grains. Later on, Ganesha was worshipped as Lord of Water and people celebrated His festival during monsoon in expectation of bountiful harvests. Thus, being the god of agriculture and water, Ganesha still sways the hearts as Lord of Prosperity. But His influence is not restricted to farmer’s community.
only. Everyone including businessmen has devotion for Ganesha. However rich and successful a tradesman may be, he would not dare to venture new projects or investments in absence of Ganesha’s protecting blessings.

The mantra asking for judgment and discrimination from Ganesha is significant. Ganesha is the lord of judgment and discrimination. The devotee submits the self and asks for help in taking proper decision. The Hindu religion consciously deals with psychology of human beings. At the beginning of every new venture, especially ones in which monitory risk is involved or when one has to take some crucial decisions of life, one is stressed. In such situation total submission to the deity and faith in that deity removes all burdens. The devotee, now relieved of unforeseen results, is filled with positive energy and can properly concentrate on his action. The following line spoken with faith and devotion relieves the devotee of any imaginable burden:

You are the perfect knowledge,
Who are absolute awareness,
Who are supreme intelligence,
Guide me in my hour of need (Ganesha, p. 5)

Ganesha has a dish of sweets oh one hand. It also signifies a break with system of negation. It is not that only ascetics characterized by austerity, self-control and renunciation are on the track of self-realization. Even a good life with all the happiness can lead to self-realization. As mentioned earlier, Ganesha does not carry terror with Him. In recent years Ganesha has been so much in vogue that the image is proliferated in various forms. Because of such freedom, Indian artists have tried almost all kinds of material to form the idol. Peanuts, rice, fruits, flowers, grains and even discarded rubber can also work. There are no specifications or limitations. A poor villager can create Ganesha
idol with a mud triangle putting a vermilion mark at the top. In the tribal area, any twisted root or branch of a tree resembling the Ganesha becomes the place of worship. In a wealthy family Ganesha may be wearing silk clothes, ornaments and diamond throne. Ganesha whether made of cow dung or diamonds, is basically a class less god. Since Ganesha transcends the worldly limitations of caste, class and even of religion, He has been used by politicians as a means of national integrity.

Ganesha was instrumental in bringing Hindus together to raise their voice of protest. It happened in 1890s during Ganesha Chaturthi, the birthday festival of Ganesha. The festival lasts for seven days followed by the immersion of Ganesha idol in water. This ritual symbolizes the cyclic process of birth, death and rebirth. At that time the British rule had banned public gathering and therefore this immersion process took place in privacy. At the end of the century a native leader, Lokmanya Tilak appealed to the people to defy the British law and get together on the Chowpatti beach for the ritual of immersion. His aim was to consolidate all Hindu sects and prepare the people for freedom movement. Tens of thousands of people came out of closets and carried the idols to the beach. The leaders made elaborate speeches and urged them to join the freedom movement. The British were paralyzed as there was a fear of religious riots if they interfered with the proceedings. During all days there were shows and enactments filled with patriotic fervor.

Today, in independent India, the festival is celebrated with multiplied fervor. But the fervor has not been progressive in nature. On the contrary, it is marked with degradation. Millions of devotees get together for the immersion of idols. Every community, tradesmen, sports, clubs, and other compete with one another to purchase the tallest idol. Floats are constructed to carry the idols to the immersion sight. But the idols as well as floats are not unaffected by the influence of Bollywood. A
weeklong celebration is specially characterized by a great deal of eating. Right from smallest store to the biggest corporate houses, these idols are placed. At the corner of almost every street there are temporary stages. On the immersion day the main roads leading to Chowpatti are blocked for vehicles. The numerous processions are accompanied by loud speakers, drum beats, dancing and euphoria. The degradation is so much that people feel that it is the day to get drunk out of joy. Such drunken public is dancing to the beats of Hollywood music. It is a challenging day for the police department as it is very difficult to maintain law and order.

The author refers to the genesis of the Mahabharta. After a lot of persuasion of people from all over India, the great sage Vyasa agreed to write the story of India. But the condition of the sage was very strange. He demanded that he would dictate the story of India’s mythology, spirituality, history and philosophy only if Ganesha would write it down without stopping. If Ganesha would stop writing at any point of time, the story will remain untold. Ganesha agreed to the condition and for days he continued taking down the dictation of Vyasa. Weeks passed and Ganesha’s pens exhausted but still the recitation was going on. Afraid that Vyasa might stop dictation because of an interruption, Ganesha broke his tusk and started writing with it. This is how one of the greatest epics came into existence. It may sound as a story marked with supernatural or unreal and irrational element. It is open to multiple interpretations. We can say that the task of writing an epic on Indian philosophy, religiosity, mythology and history is herculean. You need someone like Ganesha to write an epic. The enormity of efforts is symbolized by Ganesha.

The author then refers to the story of Ganesha’s creation. Once goddess Parwati wished to bathe undisturbed. In order to ensure her privacy she searched for a guardian. She could not find anyone so from
sandal and earth she molded a beautiful boy, a son. She instructed him to guard her. While she was bathing, her husband, Lord Shiva came and he was interrupted by the small unknown boy. Annoyed Shiva instructed his Ganas to remove the child. But the child overcame the Ganas. Angered Shiva severed his head with his trident and the head rolled spinning. When Parvati learned about this incident, she was shocked. She wanted her son back and pleaded Shiva to revive him. Shiva’s Ganas searched for the head but it was lost. So he instructed them to go and take the head of the first living thing they come across. An elephant appeared on their way and they carried back its head. The life of the boy was restored with an elephant’s head. Shiva named him Ganpati - the chief of Gana, or Ganesha - the lord of Gana. But Parvati asked Shiva to make her son ‘Remover of Obstacle’ and also insisted that no gods should be offered prayers unless Ganesha is offered first. Thus Ganesha became the Lord of Beginning.

In the following part of the book, the author has tried to deal with the symbolic explanations of various aspects of Ganesha. This has been an integral element of Hindu religion. Most of the times, the message or preaching is not in a direct way. It is symbolized and described in a subtle way. Perhaps this may be the reason why it has become vulnerable to the rational attacks of the West. Ganesha’s attachment with elephant is very thoughtful. Elephant has always been beneficial to human beings. It was with the help of elephant that human beings cleared jungles for agriculture; thus elephants were the real ‘Remover of Obstacles’. Later in wars, the elephants became the ‘Protector’ of people. Among animals, elephants are the most intelligent, even capable of certain emotions. Thus for the primordial inhabitants of India, elephant headed Ganesha must have been a favorite deity. According to a tribal myth, the universe’s primal Mother and Father descended in the form of Matangi and Matang. Charles Darwin has mentioned the capacity of the
elephants to show the emotion of disappointment by tears. They even contract the same muscle as human beings to shed tears. Perhaps the author is aware that the western world understands the terminology of Charles Darwin and not the Indian tribal.

Ganesha’s trunk is another symbol loaded with meaning. What attracted the Indian philosopher in elephant was its trunk with a curling shape. The curling shape forms India’s most profound syllable OM. It is the symbol of the origin of the universe. According to the Ganapatī cult, the universe was born out of ‘Omkar’. As energy escaped from darkness to light for creation, Ganesha appeared in front of the light of the first dawn blowing a conch shell. He came as Nritya Ganapatī, Dancing Ganapatī, and blew the conch until it was reverberated in the universe. Then he summoned the trinity- Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh- to their tasks of creation, maintenance and destruction respectively. Thus Ganesha’s trunk forms the sacred syllable of creation and therefore He is believed to carry the Omkar in its material form. He is the origin of the universe: the Vac, the first word; the First Cause.

Ganesha’s body defies Maya- an illusion. The strange appearance of Ganesha’s body informs us that the physical beauty is an illusion and it is temporal. One has to transcend the limits of physical appearance and beauty to reach the truth. On the other hand, the largeness of the body is suggestive of the divine capacity to contain the entire universe and all the contradictions present in it. At least one foot of Ganesha is touching to the ground showing his closeness to reality. Ganesha is generally portrayed with four or six arms. When shown with six arms, they stand for six different schools of Indian philosophy. Four arms have multiple interpretations. For some, these arms show four different life forms- life on the land, aquatic life, amphibious life and avian life. As if the author were mocking at the western craze for science, she says that these are the four forms suggested by zoology. For some, the four arms
are the four stages of language learning. Ganesha’s hands can be viewed as a philosophical template. On one hand he holds the noose signifying the bondage of desire. In another hand there is an axe to free men of materialism. The bliss of knowledge and spiritual wisdom is represented by the dish of sweets. His fourth hand in a raised position is the symbol that enlightenment comes after liberation from desires. Ganesha’s body has an elephant’s head; his body is of a man; a snake holds His belli together; he rides on a mouse. These four different categories are too varied to be grouped together. It indicates the prime objective of Hindu metaphysics—to achieve unity which can contain all the possible contradictions. This combination also suggests that elements with opposite nature should coexist peacefully. It may have led us to the concept of humanism and non-violence. It is an indication toward intimae connection among all forms of life. It is Hindu philosophy’s prime concern; humanity’s primary duty is to maintain unity in diversity.

Mouse represents one of the lowest forms of consciousness. In the terms of spiritual philosophy, it is the form ego. Some believers interpret the mouse as an agent of desires. In this regard, the supremacy of Ganesha over mouse explains the necessity of self-denial and annihilations of ego and desires. Other interpretations believe that sacrificial Agni had once disguised as a mouse. Agni is the mediator among the three levels, inside the earth, the ground and the sky symbolizing ignorance, materialism and enlightenment. Thus the mouse suggests evolution from the lowest form to the highest level. Another myth says that once the earth presented a mouse to Ganesha. Thus it is the symbol of restless intellect which resolves dark mysteries of the world.

Entrance to a greater world of higher consciousness is promised by the serpent of Ganesha. It is related to *Kundalini Shakti*. Kundalini literary means a curl or a coil. Ganesha’s serpent stands for enormous potential of psychic energy lying beneath everyone’s consciousness. This
psychic energy has to be connected with the universal energy. For this purpose, annihilation of every human illusion is primary requirement. The only way to annihilate these illusions is to practice discipline. After this process of self-denial and self-control one can enter the realm of cosmic energy. When this Kundalini is latent, it lies at the bottom of the spine. Thus Kundalini is called the serpent of power. The ultimate goal of the pursuers of Kundalini Yoga is to awaken this serpent of energy. For centuries people have undergone austerity and rigorous meditations to achieve this goal. Though many of them succeeded, they hid their knowledge. The reason was that this release of energy carried supernatural powers and ability to transcend the limitations of time and place; lest it goes in wrong hands. At the same time if this meditation is done without anyone’s guidance it could harm physically and psychologically as it involves patience, physical strength, breath control and meditational command. The released cosmic energy is too massive to be contained by a fickle person.

In Yogic practice there are seven chakras or centers of energy. The Muladhar Chakra is at the base and is controlled by Ganesha. Only when this chakra is activated, the serpentine energy is released from the base and uncoils upwards from the base of the body. Once this power of Kundalini is awakened and it surges upward activating all the centers of energy, it explodes into the core of the pineal gland mystically called the Third Eye. It is this Third Eye that blasts the enormous amount of energy in the skull. In Yogic tradition this situation is the process in which the self is dissolved into thousand petalled lotus of light. This is how individual consciousness merges with the universal. It is the moment when one can merge with the Brahma which is formless, soundless, deathless, which has neither beginning nor end, and which is without decay. Thus Ganesha is considered as the prime force able to awaken the Kundalini. Without His blessings, this process cannot even be initiated.
In the later part of the book, Gita Mehta touches very sensitive point. Hindu religion and its followers are often criticized for superstitious, irrational and unscientific approach. She refers to one such incident which has been criticized as a mass hysteria. On September 21, 1995 an extraordinary event took place in India and soon it spread across the world. Suddenly the idol of Ganesha had started drinking milk. The news spread much faster than a wild fire. A huge mass of people across India came out of home to get a firsthand experience of this miracle. The temple managements, city police stations and traffic police literally struggled to maintain discipline and law and order. Huge cues outside the temples were found and everyone wanted to offer milk to Ganesha. Many were convinced the miracle was an indication that Lord Ganesha had taken birth in India to end Kaliyug, the evil age. People were so desperate to offer milk to Ganesha that Bombay Stock Exchange, a hub of Indian economy, and even the central government office were closed down.Milk was out of stock. Indian Rationalist Society came down heavily on this event. It severely criticized the gullibility and foolishness of superstitious Indian community. To the horror of Indian Rationalist Society the news went overseas and people across the globe started trying to offer milk to Ganesha. The author has recorded numerous responses of different people and quoted newspapers and television news channels. The persons whose statements she has recorded are not poor, illiterate and superstitious. They are highly educated people from well to do families. The tone of the narration and the recorded responses of variety of people clearly indicate one thing: Gita Mehta does not dismiss the event as a mass hysteria nor does she label people as superstitious and gullible. We can go to the extent of saying that she is obliquely hinting that it did happen; Ganesha did consume milk.
“It’s unbelievable. My friend told me and I just thought it was rubbish’ said a Delhi businessman, Mabati Kasori. ‘But when I did it myself. I swear that the spoon was drained. The Manchester Guardian noted, “The media coverage was extensive, and although scientists and ‘experts’ created theories of capillary absorption and mass hysteria, the overwhelming evidence and conclusion was then an unexplainable miracle had occurred…While the media and scientists still struggle to find an explanation for these events, Many Hindus believe they are a sign that a great Hindu teacher had born.” (Ganesha, p.96 and 101)

In the last chapter of the book titled as “Ganesha’s Revelations”, the author comes down heavily on the trend of fancy Ganesha and on the perversion of Ganoshotsava, the festival of Ganesha. There is an increasing demand of ‘fancy looking Ganesha’. The models to be used for Ganesha festival are supposed to be made of clay and vegetable colours so that they get dissolved into water harmlessly. But in order to fulfill the fancied demands of models people are using plaster of Paris and industrial colours and other chemicals. Not only this, the wives of Ganesha, Prudence and Discrimination are featured as heroines. There is also a demand of theme based Ganesha. If it is the time of cricket world cup, Ganesha is shown with his pads on and a cricket bat in hands. All types of such models are made to fit ‘poor’ Ganesha into thematic demands. Each year the number of images is increasing and so is the water pollution. Every emersion ceremony adds hazardous chemicals, lead, industrial colours and other non-degradable plastic items into water resources. Referring to the myth of the Moon’s encounter with Ganesha, the author makes a witty remark that how would Ganesha punish the modern India for ‘fancy looking’ models.
The book ends on a very sound note. Gita Mehta suggests that instead of concentrating wealth on Ganesha, people should concentrate on his name. The word Ganesha is made of three elements: Ga, Na and Esha meaning entry, goal and lord. His name signifies the entry into the word of learning and the goal is wisdom. Ganesha is the lord of this process. Gana stands for category. Ganesha is the power of language; He is the power of numbers; He is the first cause; He is the power of thought. Thus by worshipping Ganesha one can awaken consciousness. In fact, His worship is ideally replaced by awareness and that gradually leads to consciousness. The eternal quest of Sanatan Hindu Dharma is the higher consciousness that recognizes the unifying principle of Brahma. Ganesha enables devotees to reach this higher consciousness and merge the individual egos in the Brahma. Ganesha seems to suggest that if divinity is to be found anywhere, it is to be found in the self.

This book can be considered as a significant statement made by Gita Mehta. She has beautifully described the symbolism of Ganesha’s body parts. In fact this symbolism is not confined to a single interpretation. There are multiple suggestions of a single gesture. Not only that every deity is symbolic, but every ritual has certain significance. However, it cannot be denied that such understanding is gradually becoming a rare phenomenon. People may be superstitious about their religious beliefs but it is lack of understanding on part of people; not irrationality on the part of religion. Here, the author seems to be telling the western rational world that Hindu religion and philosophy are built up on the very concrete concepts of spiritual enlightenment. This enlightenment does not come through idol worshipping, rituals and superstitions. The very base of Hinduism is the existence of Brahma. This Brahman is ‘Nirakar’- shapeless, formless and beyond anything that we can conceive of. But it can express itself in myriad forms; deities, gods and goddesses. These are the ‘Sakar’( with shape and form) forms of
Brahman. But it cannot be confined to the total sum of these revelations as well. Each of the deities represents one aspect of dynamic Brahma. It is like the sun. We cannot experience the sun itself but can experience its rays. So the sun is the Brahman and its rays are deities. In this sense, it is a perfect divine system in operation. But the problem with the Indian scenario at present is that the essence or understanding has been marginalized and the sects have become an end in itself. In addition we have begun to interrogate the spiritual concepts in the terms of rationality. But in this imitation we have forgotten that many enlightened minds of the West acknowledged the superiority of Indian culture; and most importantly even the modern science is not capable of explaining certain aspects of our life and the universe but it does not mean they do not exist.