



September 13, 2018

Dear Parents,

Ganesh Chaturthi is the Hindu festival celebrated in honour of the God Ganesh, the elephant-headed remover of obstacles and the God of beginnings and wisdom. Ganesh Chaturthi or "Vinayak Chaturthi" is one of the major traditional festivals celebrated by the Hindu community. It is observed in the Hindu calendar month of Bhadrapada, starting on the shukla chaturthi (fourth day of the waxing moon period). Typically the day falls sometime between August and September. The festival lasts for 10 days, ending on Ananta Chaturdashi. Lord Ganesh is the son of Shiva and Parvati. Although he is known by many attributes, Ganesh's elephant head makes him easy to identify. Ganesh is widely revered as the remover of obstacles, the patron of arts and sciences and the God of intellect and wisdom. As the God of beginnings, he is honoured at the start of rituals and ceremonies. Ganesh is also invoked as patron of letters and learning during writing sessions.

Significance of Ganesh Chaturthi

It is not known when and how Ganesh Chaturthi was first celebrated. Ganesh Chaturthi was being celebrated as a public event in Pune since the times of Shivaji (1630-1680), the founder of the Maratha Empire. The Peshwas, the de facto hereditary administrators of the Empire from 1749 till its end in 1818, encouraged the celebrations in their administrative seat Pune as Ganesh was their family deity (Kuladevata). With the fall of the Peshwas, Ganesh Chaturthi lost state patronage and became a private family celebration again till its revival by Indian freedom fighter and social reformer Lokmanya Tilak. In 1893, 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 generate nationalistic fervour among people in Maharashtra against the British colonial rule. Tilak was the first to install large public idols of Ganesh in pavilions.

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. Lokmanya saw how Lord Ganesh was worshipped by the upper stratum as well as the rank and file of India. The visionary that he was, Tilak realized the cultural importance of this deity and popularised Ganesh Chaturthi as a National Festival "to bridge the gap between Hindus and find an appropriate context in which to build a new grassroots unity between them" in his nationalistic strivings against the British in Maharashtra. He knew that India couldn't fight her rulers until she solved the differences within her own. Hence, to unite all social classes Tilak chose Ganesh as a rallying point for Indian protest against British rule.

Celebration of Ganesh Chaturthi

The festival of Ganesh Chaturthi is celebrated by bringing and worshipping clay or plaster of Paris idols of the elephant-headed god in public pandals, which are worshipped for ten days and immersed at the end of the festival in a water body. The size of the idol varies from 3/4 inches up to 25 feet. Artisans put months of effort into making the statues. The artisans who make the idols of Ganesh, compete with each other to make bigger and better sculptures. Homes, various organizations and public places bring idols of their choice and keep it on an elevated platform. Outdoor tents are organized so that people can visit there and pay homage to Lord Ganesh that day. The duration of the Lord's stay varies from place to place. Elaborate arrangements are made for lighting, decoration, mirrors and flowers. The 10 days are full of worship for the Lord, celebrations and social gatherings. Women make 'modakas' and offer Lord Ganesh on this auspicious day. The Lord is worshipped in the same manner in morning and in the evening for all 10 days. Public celebrations of the festival are hugely popular, with local communities (mandalas) vying with each other to put up the biggest statue and the best pandal. The festival is also the time for cultural activities like singing and theater performances, orchestra and community activities like free medical checkup, blood donation camps, charity for the poor, etc. On the eleventh day, the idol is taken on a procession through the streets of the city and then immersed in water after a pooja is done on the riverbank or seacoast. This procession and immersion is accompanied with dancing and the sound of exciting drum-beats, devotional songs and exploding firecrackers. The festival comes to an end with pleas to the Lord to return the next year with chants of "Ganpati bappa morya, pudcha Varshi laukar ya" (Hail Lord Ganesh, return again soon next year). Today, the Ganesh Festival is not only a popular festival, it has become a very critical and important economic activity for

Mumbai, Pune, Visakhapatnam, Hyderabad, Bangalore and Chennai. Many artists, industries, and businesses survive on this mega-event. Ganesh Festival also provides a stage for budding artists to present their art to the public. In Maharashtra, not only Hindus but many other religions also participate in the celebration. While the festival of Ganesh Chaturthi is celebrated all over India, it is most elaborate in Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Goa.

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Environmental Impact

The most serious impact of the festival on the environment is due to the immersion of idols made of Plaster of Paris into lakes, rivers and the sea. Traditionally, the idol was sculpted out of mud taken from nearby one's home. After the festival, it was returned to the Earth by immersing it in a nearby water body. This cycle was meant to represent the cycle of creation and dissolution in Nature. However, as the production of Ganesh idols on a commercial basis grew, the earthen or natural clay was replaced by Plaster of Paris. Plaster is a man-made material, easier to mould, lighter and less expensive than clay. However, plaster is non-biodegradable and insoluble in water. Moreover, the chemical paints used to adorn these plaster idols themselves contain heavy metals like mercury and cadmium, causing water pollution. The toxic waste kills plant and animal life in the water. Also, on immersion, non-biodegradable accessories that originally adorned the idol accumulate in the layers of sand on the beach. In Goa, the sale of Ganesh idols made from Plaster of Paris (PoP) is banned by the State Government. People are urged to buy traditional clay idols made by artisans. Materials like clay, paper and other eco friendly materials dissolve easily in water without harming marine life and hence prevent water pollution.

Recently there have been new initiatives sponsored by some state governments to produce clay Ganesh idols. To minimize the impact on environment, a series of events to promote Eco-friendly Ganesh celebration, campaigns have been launched across Mumbai and Pune. Sculptors make eco-friendly idols of the Lord Ganesh. These Eco-Friendly Ganesh idols are completely biodegradable and do not cause water pollution. Water pollution endangers marine life. The immersion can also be done at artificial ponds created at various places by the government to reduce water pollution.

Hindus worship idols or statues of their Gods because it gives them a visible form to pray to. They also recognize that the universe is in a constant state of change. Form eventually gives away to formlessness. However, the energy still remains. The immersion of the statues in the ocean or other bodies of water, and subsequent destruction of them serves as a reminder of this belief. The immersion and dissolution of the idol in water represents the cycle of creation and dissolution in Nature. All Indian festivals, beneath the aspect of delight and celebration, hold the underlying essence or the spirit which has to be captured to grasp the eternal truth. So it is with Ganesha Chaturthi. Let us thus pray to Lord Ganesh to guide us to worship Him in His glorious form and to lead us to the eternal formless truth which is Sat (Truth), Chit (Knowledge), Ananda (Eternal bliss).

Sd/-

Director