

GANESH IN INDIAN FOLK THEATRE

M. L. Varadpande

Ganesha is one of the most popular deities of the Hindu pantheon. According to certain authorities he was a pre-Aryan deity of the aboriginals and his one tusk symbolised a plough. As such he was associated with the fertility rites of the local folk which included ritualistic dances. Some think that the tribal totem of the elephant might have evolved into an elephant-headed god such as the animal-headed gods of Egypt, the bovine deities of Assyria etc. Lewis Spence says, "When man realises his superiority then the totem gods take on his own image, retaining only the symbols or insignia of the beast. Thus the Egyptian sun-goddess, Bast, from being represented in the early times as a cat pure and simple, was latter figured as a woman having a cat's head. This, in a way, explains deification of the elephant, an animal known to the aboriginals of the country for its massive structure and superior intelligence. There is a Harappan seal with the elephant emblem engraved on it. The famous Pashupati seal found in Mohenjodaro includes an elephant as one of the animals around the deity. Pashupati on the seal is taken as an earlier form of Shiva and as such the elephant on the seal might have been turned into an elephant-headed deity in the Shiva family. Iconographically, the torso of Ganesha resembles Yaksha images found in the country. Some consider Ganapati as an elephant-headed Yaksha. That establishes a pre-Aryan origin of the deity as the Yaksha cult is more ancient than the Vedas.

In *Rigveda* (Mandal 2: Sukta 23) we find a mention of Ganapati who is equated with Brihaspati or Brahmanaspati, a deity of intellect and wisdom. "Many diverse trends were at work towards the end of the Vedic period, Gods which had begun as simple personifications of aspects of nature began to acquire increasingly elaborate mythologies which personalised or an-

thropomorphised them.” (Veronica Ions). The *Puranas* helped this process and bestowed upon each god a distinct personality and particular attributes. The evolution of Ganesha has been remarkably traced by Alice Getty in her excellent monograph on Ganesha.

Though the *Puranas* differ as to the origin and attributes of Ganesha, in general he is taken as an elder son of Lord Shiva and goddess Parvati and the head of their *ganas*. He is the remover of obstacles and the god of intellect. As Vighnesvara, he is the god whom the pious Hindu “invokes when he begins all sacrifices and religious ceremonies, all addresses even to superior gods, all serious compositions in writing, and all worldly affairs of moment”. In his Vinayaka form, he very much resembles the Greek god of theatre, Dionysus. Being the son of Nataraja himself, Ganesh is adept in the art of dancing. Shiva is a presiding deity of *tandava nritya* and Parvati of *lasya*. The dancing of Ganesh is a beautiful synthesis of both these dance forms. An incident is related in the *Krida-Kanda* of *Ganesh Purana* that when one day Shiva saw the one-year-old Bal Ganesha dancing skillfully, extremely delighted by the sight he himself started dancing in ecstasy. In the 105th Chapter of the *Linga Purana*, it is stated that on his creation by Lord Shiva, Ganesha started dancing gleefully. In the Gupta period the first image of Ganesha appeared in the country. His images are found practically in all parts of the country particularly in the south. Graceful images of dancing Ganesh adorn various Indian temples. The 12th century Nritya Ganesha idol at Hoysalesvara temple at Halebidu in Mysore state is an excellent piece of sculpture. On both sides of the image, we see musicians playing upon the *mridanga*. On observing Nritya Ganesha at Khiching, aesthetically aroused Dr Banerjea remarks, “... and all such details demonstrate in a remarkable manner how such an apparently grotesque iconic type could be converted into an elegant piece of sculpture by the anonymous artist of a corner of Orissa.’ According to the tenets of Hindu iconography the image of dancing Ganesh should have “eight hands in seven of which should be held the *basa*, the *ankusha*, cakes, the *kuthara* (a kind of axe), the *danta*, the *valaya* (a quoit), and the *anguliya* (a ring); the remaining hand should be freely hanging so as to be helpful to the various movements of the dance. The colour of the body of this Ganesha has to be golden yellow. To show that it is a dancing figure it is sculptured with the left leg slightly bent, resting on the *padmasana*, and the right leg also bent and held up in the air. The sculptures of this figure have generally only four hands, but not eight as in the description given above.” (T.A. Gopinatha Rao). In Mukteswara temple, Bhuvanavar there is a peculiar image of dancing Ganesha. In his two hands, raised above the head, he is holding a ferocious cobra. *Asthabhuja* (having eight hands) *tandava nritya murties* are associated with *tantric* rituals and black magic. Remarkable Ganesha idols in dancing posture are located at various places including Sohagpur in old Reva state and Nemavar in old Indore state. This aspect of Ganesh associates him with the theatre as his illustrious father, Lord Shiva the Nataraj.

Another important aspect of the Ganesha is that he is a remover of obstacles. He is called Lord and remover of obstacles—Vighneshavara and Vighnaharta. “Ganesha forges ahead through obstacles as an elephant through the jungle, but the rat too, is an overcomer of obstacles, and, as such, an appropriate, even though physically incongruous, mount for the gigantic pot-bellied divinity of the elephant head. The elephant passes through the wilderness, treading shrubs, bending and uprooting trees, fording rivers and lakes easily, the rat can gain access to the bolted granary. The two represent the power of this god to vanquish every obstacle on the way” (Heinrich Zimmer). The cult of Ganesha, *Ganapathya*, started spreading in the 6th century A.D. and became quite powerful by the end of 10th century. It established the importance of Ganesha and people started worshipping him at the beginning of every auspicious work. In his capacity as the remover of obstacles he is associated with the theatre and prayers are offered to him for the successful completion of the performance.

However the great sage Bharata does not directly mention the deity in his *Natyashastra*. Here, not Ganesha, but ‘Jarjara’ is worshipped as remover of obstacles. In the third chapter he says, “one should consecrate the Jarjara with the following *mantra*: For putting off obstacles thou hast been made very strong, and as hard as adamant, by gods such as Brahma.” In the same chapter he has made references to Mahagra-mani, Gramani and Ganeshvaras. Some of the critics, including Abhinavagupta, think that all three names refer to Ganesh. But Manmohan Ghosh does not subscribe to this view. He conjectures that the fully developed Ganapati seems to be non-existence at the time when the *Natyashastra* was composed. If the time of *Natyashastra* is taken as 2ndC. B.C. his thinking seems to be on the right track. In the first chapter of the treatise we find that various deities have been deputed to protect the theatre world from the angry *asuras*. Verse ninety-six says, “Let Indra protect the actor who assumes the role of the hero, Sarasvati the actress assuming the role of the heroine, Omkara the *vidushaka* and Shiva the rest of the characters.” Ganesh is worshipped in Omkara form also. Hence we may conjecture that Ganesh might have been entrusted with the task of protecting *vidushaka*, the jester.

The invocatory songs, Nandi, of the majority of Sanskrit plays are dedicated to Lord Shiva. Kalidas, in the beginning of all his three plays, has prayed to Shiva. Shudraka has described in detail Shiva and Parvati in the beginning of his famous play *Mricchakatika*. In *Ratnavali*, Harsha has offered prayers to Shiva-Parvati. Bhattanarayan invokes Krishna and Shiva in the Nandi song of his play *Venisamhara*. Bhavabhuti is the only major Sanskrit playwright who has an invocation to Ganesh in the invocatory song in the beginning of his play *Malati Madhav*. It is really a very beautiful Nandi song in which we observe the picturesque imagination of the poet at work. Lord Shiva was dancing in *tandava* style and Nandi was joyfully beating the tabor

with his hands. Attracted by the sound, Kartikeys's peacock came on the scene. Frightened by his presence, the lord of serpents, with his body contracted, entered into Ganesh's trunk. Ganesh moved his head and from his temples swarms of the bees started flying in all direction filling the atmosphere with their buzzing sound. The poet says, "May the shakings of the head of Vinayaka accompanied by *chitkaras* (peculiar elephant sound) long protect you." However, in general, Shiva remained a popular deity with the Sanskrit dramatists.

As we have seen earlier, by 10th century the cult of Ganesh spread all over the country. The Sanskrit theatre world also started feeling the impact of the god. Dhananjaya began his treatise *Dasharupaka* by offering prayers to Lord Ganesh. He salutes the deity whose voice resounds like the *Mridanga* when Shiva does his *tandava nritya*. In the '*Abhinayadharpan*' (12th Century) the author, Nandikeshvara, clearly states that dancers, before the commencement of their performance must pray to Lord Ganesh. This indicates how Ganesh came to occupy a predominant position in the art of theatre by the 12th Century. After this we find many Sanskrit playwrights invoking Ganesh in their Nandi song.

Ganesh, according to Manu, was a deity of the common folk. Alice Getty has observed that Ganesh was, upto the 6th Century A.D. known only to the illiterate common folk of the country. Hence it was quite natural for them to feel an affinity with this elephant-headed son of Lord Shiva. His popularity can be gauged from the fact that practically in every village, particularly in South India, we find Ganesh in one or other form. As T.A. Gopinatha Rao has observed "Every village, however small, has in it an image of Vighnesvara, with or without a temple to house it in. At the entrances of villages and forts, below pipal trees adjoining villages, on the right side of the entrance into Shiva temples, in the niche which is at the commencement of the innermost *prakara* circuit in the temples of Vishnu as well as Shiva and also in the separate shrines specially constructed in Shiva temples in the south-west corner, the figure of Vighnesvara is invariably found." Ganapati is called *Mahagramani*, meaning leader the village. Hence it was quite natural for the villages folk to make Vighnaharta Ganesh the presiding deity of their theatre.. The present-day folk theatre of the country is mainly the outcome of Shaiva and Vaishnava *Bhakti* movement. It was considered that "*Bhakii* to god when performed through music is good, but it is still better if done through the combined arts of music, dance and drama." (Mohan Khokar). In south India, *Shiva Leela Natyam* was in vogue long before the dance dramas of Vaishnava Bhagwats. I feel that the idea of praying to Ganesha at the beginning of a performance or introducing him in person on the stage might have been borrowed by the Bhagavatas from *Shiva Leela* plays. However it may be mentioned here that Ganesh as the remover of obstacles was accepted by many Vaishnavite sects also.

In practically in all folk theatre forms of the country prayers are offered to Ganesh for the successful completion of the performance. In 'Tamasha' of Maharashtra these songs have a special significance and they are called 'gana'. These songs were prevalent in earlier forms like *Gondhal* and *Lalit* also. The great saint-poet Ramdas, contemporary of Chatrapati Shivaji, has written a beautiful *gana* in which he has described the theatrical attributes of the deity in detail. He has conceived Ganesh as *Natavar*, supreme actor and has described his dancing in the stage arena in such a way that one undoubtedly feels that he must have seen Ganesh dancing on the folk stage. In *Leela* plays of North India, *Jatra* plays of Bengal prayers are offered to Ganesh for the removal of obstacles.

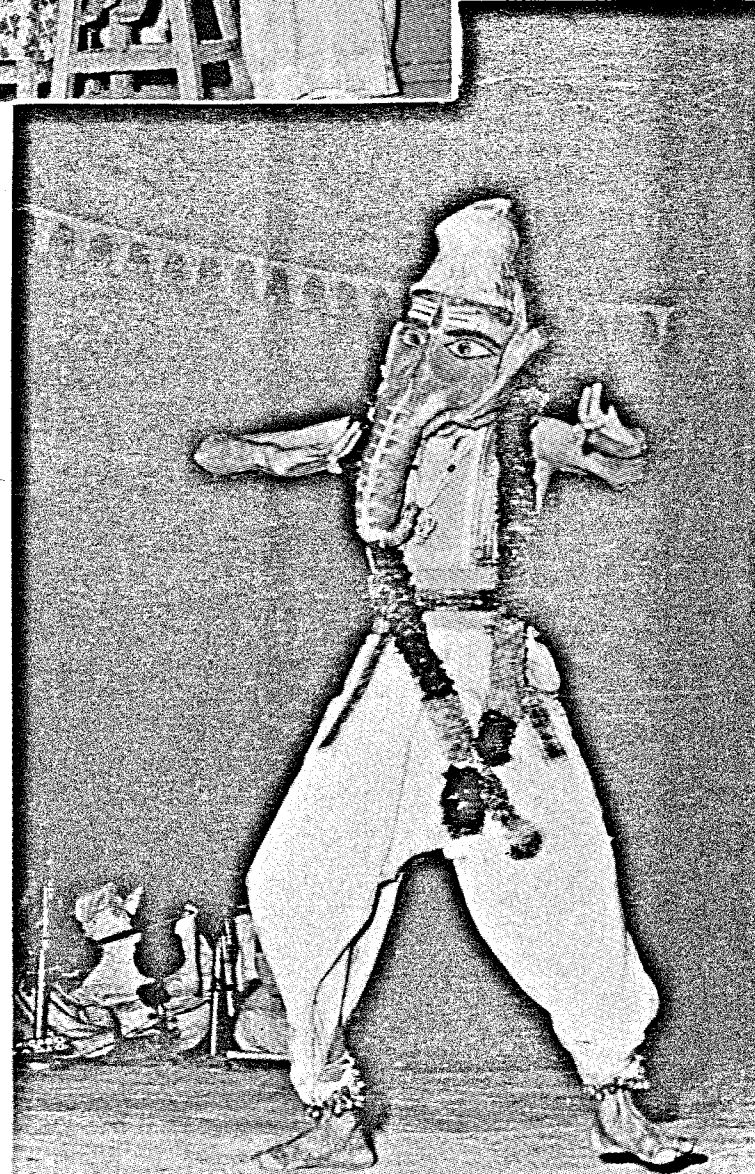
There is another class of folk theatre in which the Ganesh symbol is brought on the stage and worshipped. In *Yakshagana*, a colourful folk theatre of Karnataka with a tradition of about four hundred years, the Ganesh idol is worshipped by the actors in the *Nepthya-griha*, make-up room and prayers are offered to him. Sometimes the idol of the Ganesh or his headgear, *kirita*, is brought on the stage. It is shown to the audience from behind the curtain held by two actors. While explaining this symbolic representation of Ganesh, some critics have opined that he is never impersonated because he is not a character but a deity to be worshipped. This is not fully correct, because, if the theme of the play demands, Ganesh is impersonated on the *Yakshagana* stage by the actor. As observed by Dr. C.B. Gupta, Ganapati is an inevitable entity in the different folk plays of Karnataka.

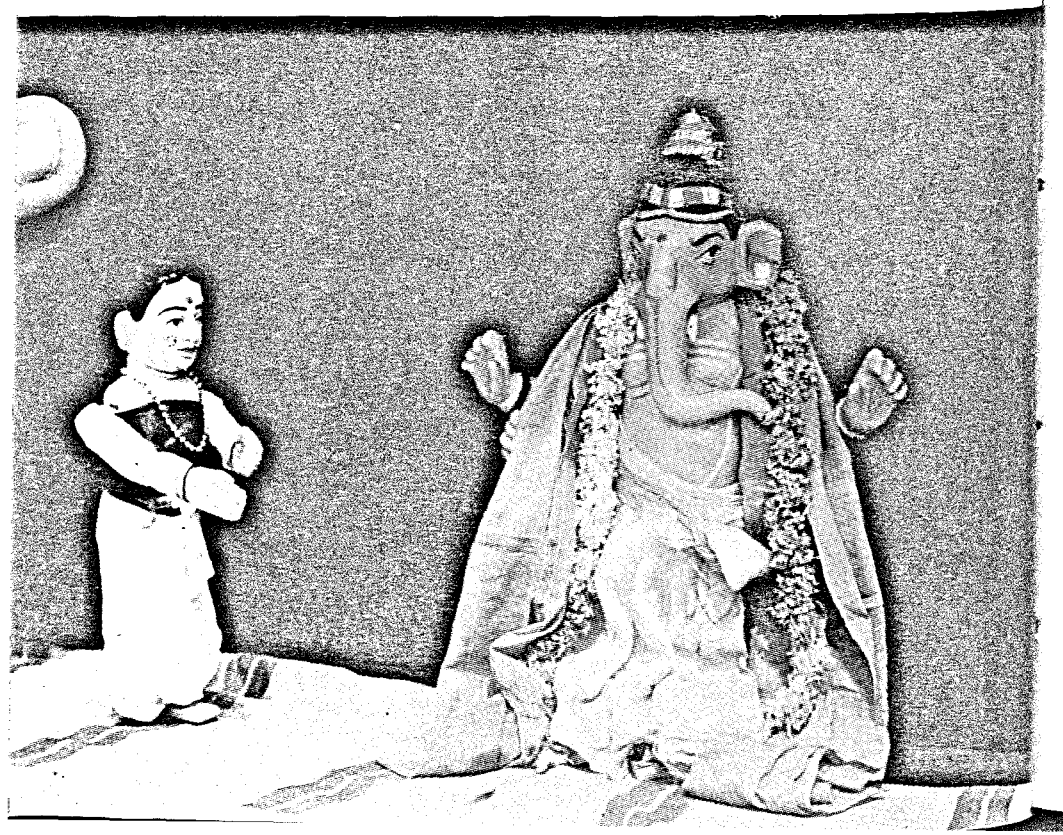
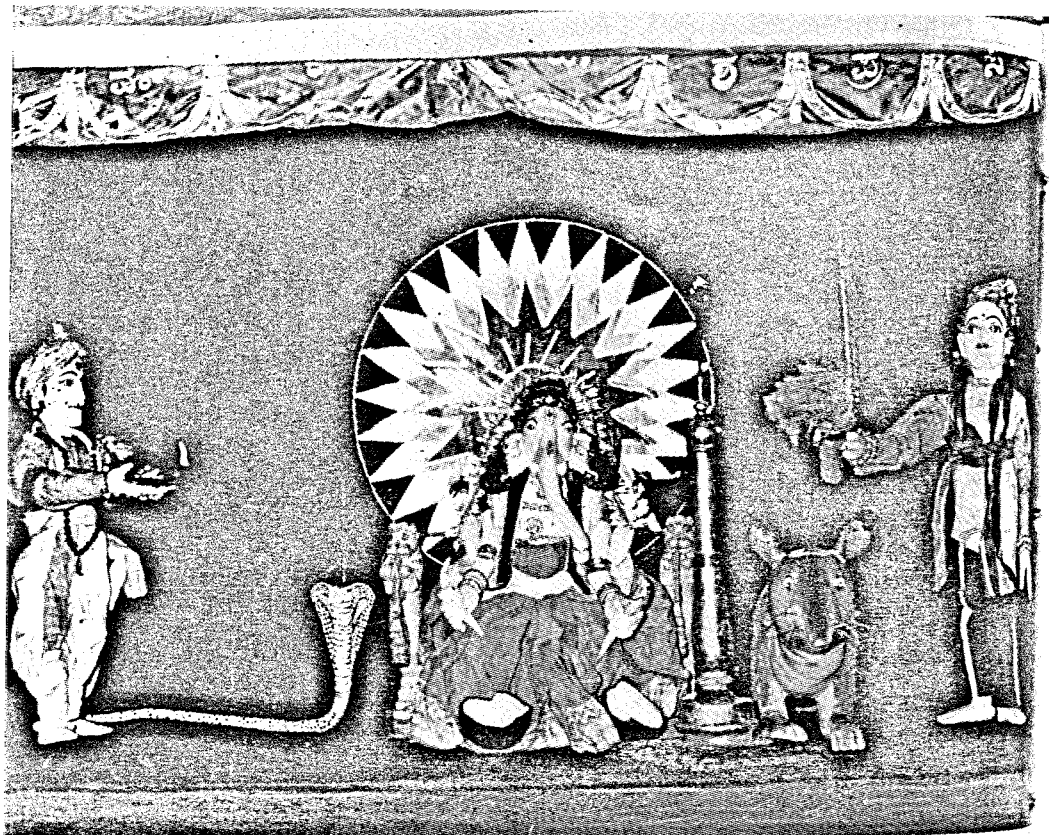
Amba, mother of Ganesh, is the presiding deity of the *Bhavai*, the popular folk theatre of Gujarat. *Bhavai* plays are called *veshas* and they are presented in a specially marked arena on the ground. Though the majority of *veshas* are secular thematically, Ganesh appears on the stage in the performance. Here also the appearance is symbolic. An actor covering his head with a cloth and holding a big brass plate before his face, occasionally showing his eyes, appears on the stage, dancing. In the opinion of Balwant Gargi "this method of representing Ganesh is much more expressive of dignity which the god should command as the chief deity than the elephant-head with tusks worn by an actor." In the *Mach* plays of Malwa region, a small boy is presented on the stage as a symbol of Ganesh. He is covered with a red or saffron robe and a trunk made of cloth is appended. He is worshipped on the stage before the commencement of the play proper.

There is a class of folk theatre in which an actor actually impersonates Ganesh on the stage by wearing an elephant mask. Sir John Malcolm, in his 'Memoirs of Central India' (1823) mentions such an interesting spectacle.

Illustrations : P 69 Dancing Ganapati, late 12th C, Halebid. P 70 Ganeshpuja, above, in Krishna Parijat, Mysore, below, Kunchipudi, Andhra. (Photos Archaeological Survey of India; Sangeet Natak Akademi).







He says, "the villages are frequently visited by drolls or strolling players. The subject of the satire of the plays or rather farces which they represent is as often their mythological fables as the measures of their earthly rulers and governors. The figures of the demigod Hanooman with his monkey face, Ganesh with his elephant head and portly belly, are brought on stage to the great entertainment of the spectators". Sir Malcolm does not mention the exact name of the folk theatre these strolling players represented. However that establishes the fact that the practice of impersonating Ganesh was prevalent in Central India about 150 years ago, and even earlier.

God is basically an idea or concept. Man gave it a concrete shape. The formless (*nirakara*) was given a form (*akara*) in the course of time. That was how icons came into existence. The *bhakta* wanted to 'see' god with his own eyes; the icon fulfilled his desire. But this did not satisfy him completely. He desired to see him walking, talking, doing things as described in mythology and for this he took recourse to theatre. This wonderful device reconstructed before his very eyes the super-natural world of mythology full of interesting characters. This explains the relationship between theatre and religion. The *bhakta*-actor invoked Lord Ganesh in his prayer songs. He wanted the Lord to come to him to accept his worship in person and bless him, and he appeared on the stage to fulfil his desire.

In north India, we find an old operatic folk drama *Bhagat* in the vicinity of Agra, Mathura and Vrindavan. This folk form is mentioned in the *Ain-i-Akbari* of Abul Fazal, one of the nine gems of Akbar's court. The play starts with the appearance of Ganesh on the stage and then the deity is worshipped by Khalifa, *sutradhara*, of the play. "He dances wearing an elephant-headed mask, vermillion trousers, and a yellow satin jacket" (Gargi). *Dashavatar* is an ancient folk theatre of Maharashtra and Goa. It depicts ten incarnations of God Vishnu on stage. In this play, the entry of Ganesh on stage is an elaborate ritual. Ganesh, with both his hands placed on the shoulders of his two spouses, Riddhi and Siddhi, comes out of the makeup room with much fanfare and climbs onto the stage, dancing. Here *puja* and *arti* are offered to him and *sutradhara* asks the god for his blessings. Ganesh blesses the performers and exits, dancing. The whole ritual takes about half an hour. Maharashtrians are great devotees of Ganesh. In the mythological plays of Vishnudas Bhave, the pioneer of modern Marathi theatre, Ganapati used to appear on the stage in the same fashion as in *Dashavatar*.

As we have seen earlier, Ganesh is a very popular deity in South India. "It is said that the shrines of Subrahmanya are rather common in South India; but those of Vighnesvara are even more numerous." This

Illustrations : P 71 above, Ganapati in Chau, Purulia West Bengal. Below, Dashavatar, Goa, P 72 Above, Ganesh in Yakshagana String puppets, Mysore. Below, Tamil Nadu marionnettes.

has naturally influenced the South Indian theatre in which also a prominent place is given to Ganesh. *Mudalapaya* or *Dodddata* plays of Mysore state are staged in the open-air and they are very popular with the local population. It has a close resemblance to *Yakshagana* of Karnatak. "The platform in the decorated arena is more spacious than for *Yakshagana*, as it has to accomodate a larger number of participants who perform wild dances". Here action begins with the entry of Ganesh in the arena. He creates a fantastic atmosphere and adds grandeur to the performance. As we proceed to Andhra, we come face to face with the graceful dance-drama of *Kuchipudi*. It is based on the classical dance style of South India, *Bharata Natyam*. It is said that a Telegu Brahmin, Sidheyendra Yogi, created this dance-drama form at the village Kuchipudi in Andhra in the 17th century. They have a tradition of showing the elephant-headed god, in person, on the stage. *Kuchipudi* has a close affinity with *Bhagavat Mela* dance-dramas of Tamilnadu. *Bhagavat Mela* originated in the village Melatur in Tanjore District in the reign of the Nayak rulers. In the opening of the play comes jester, *Konnangi*, and performs certain pranks. Then enters *Nattuvanar* who, along with other musicians, sings a prayer. After their exit comes Ganesh, remover of obstacles and blesses the performers and the audience. Another prominent Tamilnadu folk theatre in which Ganesh appears in person on the stage is *Therukoothu*. Essentially operatic in form, this folk drama has a long tradition. *Therukoothu* literally means street-play. Themes are taken from mythology and plays like *Draupadi Vastrapaharanam*, *Pralhada Charitam* are very popular among village folk. Preliminaries of *purvaranga* are observed in this folk drama also. Ganesh appears on the stage while musicians sing an invocatory song seeking his blessings. His dance creates an atmosphere of awe and reverence which is essential for staging mythological plays.

After the fall of the Vijayanagar Empire, Tanjore in Tamilnadu became one of the major cultural centres of South India. Art and literature flourished under Nayak and Bhosala rulers of Tanjore. Marathi theatre, emerged in this region, far off from the mainland of Maharashtra, in the 17th Century under the patronage of Bhosala Kings. The second Bhosala ruler of Tanjore, Shahraja (1684-1711 A.D.) wrote many plays in Marathi in Telugu *Yakshagana* style. In the Nandi songs of the majority of plays, prayers are offered to Shiva. After that an actor wearing the mask of the elephant comes on the stage as Ganesh and performs a graceful dance. According to Dr. Maya Sardesai and Dr. Joga Rao, Shahraja introduced Ganapati on the stage for the first time as earlier Telugu *Yakshagana* plays do not contain this item. Later on it was adopted by *Kuchipudi* and *Bhagavat Mela Natakas* also.

It is worth nothing that in the majority of folk plays in which Ganesh is brought on the stage, the deity comes dancing. Acharya Nandikeshvara in his '*Abhinaya Darpana*' has described ten types of *gatis*; styles of walking. One among them is *gajaleela gati*. This gives us a fairly good idea as to

how the actor impersonating the deity should appear on the stage. He says:

“Hands in *patak mudra*, placing equal step, moving slowly from left to right he should appear dancing on the stage.”

Mythology is still a part of the living culture of India, particularly of rural India. Deities of the Indian pantheon are deeply rooted in the day to day life of the people and due to their close association they are more of a fact than fiction to them. Indian folk theatre is essentially mythological in its character, borrowing themes and conventions liberally from its repertory. Characters from epics, *Puranas*, religious books appear as a living reality on the boards of folk theatre. The convention of worshipping Ganapati, the remover of obstacles, in the beginning of every auspices work comes straight from the scriptures to the theatre. Because, according to the *Natyashastra*, drama itself is a religious ceremony, a *yajnya*.

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