

**Vighnaharta Shri Siddhivinayak:
Ganesh, Remover of obstacles, Lord of beginnings in
Mumbai
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Introduction

In the early 1990s, every time I drove on the main western route which links the suburbs to the city of Bombay, I became curious about the ongoing construction of a massive temple complex abutting the road at Prabhadevi. I learnt that this temple was dedicated to Siddhivinayak, a form of Ganesh, the elephant-headed god, to replace a modest shrine. The building work continued for several years and the temple subsequently entrenched itself in the popular imaginary as a landmark of the city. It is now sadly also been surrounded by barriers and other security arrangements, as many believe it could be the focus of a terrorist attack, partly because of the bombing of the Akshardham temple in Gandhinagar but also because of the increasing insecurity of Mumbai since the events of November 2008.

Yet the temple continues to be popular and is a visible focal point for many Mumbaikers, not just because of its location but also because it attracts hundreds of barefoot devotees who walk there from all parts of Mumbai for the early Tuesday morning ceremonies at the shrine. The processions have become a feature of the city, giving it the occasional festive feel of a modern pilgrimage, albeit in a cosmopolitan metropolis.

Ganesh is a popular deity all over India, invoked before all Hindu ceremonies as the Lord of Beginnings and Remover of Obstacles (Vighnaharta). His close association with Mumbai is well attested through the Ganapati Utsav, the Ganesh festival, not least because images of his immersion in the sea against a backdrop of skyscrapers have become a visual

cliché about the paradox of the modern and the traditional in today's India. But while this form of Ganesh is a temporary visitor to the city, I wondered why this form, Siddhivinayak, has become perhaps the most visible deity in the city, during the period when the name of the city, Bombay, was changed to the local version of the city's name, said to derive from the goddess, MumbaDevi. As there is almost no published research available about the temple, and no archival records that can be accessed, I chose instead to look at a devotional film about Siddhivinayak, produced in cooperation with the shrine, to see how Ganesh is understood today by the way the shrine tells the story of the deity and his devotees. I also decided to supplement this by examining more broadly mythological and devotional films about Ganesh in order to see get closer to the popular imagining of this elephant-headed god.

Ganesh

The elephant-headed god, usually called Ganesh in modern languages, Ganesha in Sanskrit, has many names, including Gan(a)pati and Vinayak. He is one of most popular deities in India, invoked at the beginning of any venture, whatever its purpose, and without any reference to the invoker's sect, as he is the deity who removes obstacles and guarantees success. There is considerable scholarship on the history of Ganesh in India, which cover many aspects of his history and legends, notably Courtright *Ganesha*, Brown *Ganesh*, and Pal *Ganesh the benevolent*, while Pattnaik *99 thoughts on Ganehsa* recounts many popular tales about Ganesh.

The rendering of Ganesh's image varies enormously, and many different stories are told about his iconography. Ganesh has a human body – usually that of a rotund child – and an elephant head, which is sometimes a mixture of elephant and human features. One of his tusks is broken – a feature seen in many elephants, who often are called Ganesh or Eka-danta (one-tusked). Ganesh usually has four arms but he may have eight, and he holds various objects, whose symbolism is described variously. Sometimes he holds an ankush, a goad used to control captive elephants; a noose which is used to restrain wild elephants; an axe; modak sweets; his broken tusk (in some stories, he breaks it off it to write down the *Mahabharata* dictated by the sage Vyasa; or he can be making a gesture of benefaction.

Ganesh wears a snake, Vasuki, around his body, sometimes looking like a sacred thread and he usually rides a mouse. Sculptures show him sitting, fighting, or dancing while paintings and other media have more variations still. He is strong and sturdy, and beautiful.

He is often coloured red, the colour he becomes after killing the demon Sindura. Newer media from film to cartoons have allowed other ways of portraying him, while his images have also changed (see below).

The major stories about Ganesh appear in the Puranas, compendia of myths, which are dated from the 5thC AD, later than the great epics of the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. The three best known stories about Ganesh are his birth and how he acquired his elephant's head; and his competition with his brother (sometimes leading to his wedding) and his relationship with his family; the story of Ganesh Chaturthi, the fourth day of the lunar month Bhadrapada (usually September) and his relationship with Chandra, the Moon. These stories appear frequently in the mythological and devotional genres of Indian cinema,¹ where Ganesh has featured regularly from silent period onwards, with several being in the 1950s and 1960s, the most famous of which are *Shri Ganesh Mahima/Shri Krishna Vivah*, dir. Homi Wadia, 1950; *Shri Ganesh Janma*, dir. Jayant Desai, 1951; *Shri Ganesh Vivah*, dir. Jaswant Jhaveri, 1955; *Shree Ganesh*, dir. SS Dharwadkar, 1962.²

There are many variations in these myths, according to region and to different traditions. The texts themselves are aware of these, in particular of the many versions of why Ganesh has an elephant's head. “ ‘Because of the distinction between eras,’ the *Siva Purana* insists, ‘the story of Ganesha's birth is told in different ways.’ ”³

The elephant head

The version of the story usually shown in films is that Parvati creates a male child and gives him life, Shiv returns to find his way obstructed and beheads the child. Parvati is grief-stricken but Shiv cannot replace the head which is defiled so orders his followers to bring the head of the first animal they meet and he transplants the elephant's head onto the child's body. Shiv makes him head of Ganas and tells all gods he must be worshipped first. Lord of Obstacles – gives them to those who do not invoke him first and removes them from those who pray to him.

¹ Dwyer, *Filming the Gods*.

² Ganesh makes a brief appearance in *Jai Santoshi Maa*, dir. Vijay Sharma, one of the biggest hit films of 1975, where he gives birth to the goddess by rays of light moving from his eyes. Lutgendorf, ‘*Jai Santoshi Maa revisited*’; Dwyer, *Filming the Gods*, 45-8.

³ Courtright, *Ganesha*, 12.

The meaning of these stories has been explored at length but little has been said about what this means about Ganesh's status as God, elephant and human (at least in form), yet as this is his most singular feature, it requires further explanation. What is *gajatva*, or 'elephantness'?

Early Europeans found the animal gods the most distasteful.⁴ Courtright notes that they were seen as 'primitive', or 'low class or indigenous.'⁵ In other words, these deities were seen as too worldly, compared to the more abstract, 'classical' deities. Yet, other deities are also animals or part animal including the avatars, incarnations, of Vishnu; Hanuman⁶; and many mythical creatures, while the Jatakas tell the stories of the Buddha's incarnations in various animal forms.

In Hindu mythology, gods often behave like humans. Many gods have human(ish) bodies, that is they look like humans, though they may have extra arms and the ability to change shape, but they have special attributes, mentioned in the Nala-Damayanti episode of the *Mahabharata*, where Damayanti can distinguish the man from the gods only because he sweats, blinks, his garlands wither and he stands on the ground, casting a shadow.

Ganesh has a small body with a big stomach. Although the historic origins may be that this is the form of the ganas, it is often understood to be the body of boy, soft and not very masculine. He is dressed like a human, though with extra arms, and he usually sits as human although sometimes he dances or even fights. He is a combination of human and animal, but it is not entirely clear what the balance is between the two. Ganesh may be considered a theriomorphic deity, but he is not an elephant god, but a god with elephant head. Yet although the origins of the head and interpretations of this story have been examined, the nature of the elephant-headedness has been overlooked.

In iconography, the elephant head is noted first. But does the head dominate the body? If the heart is human but is the mind (which in Sanskrit is the seat of emotions) elephant? In western art, the face and head are seen as having primacy over the rest of the body, but this is not the case in Indian art⁷ where the body is as important. Yet even if it does not matter which part of the whole is human and which is elephant, most assume Ganesh is like other gods, taking a human form, but with a trunk.

⁴ Bernier, cited in Mitter, *Much maligned monsters*, 23.

⁵ Courtright, *Ganesh*, 3-4, 7.

⁶ Lutgendorf, *Hanuman's tale*.

⁷ Sheikh, 'The viewer's view'.

However, Ganesh's head is not entirely elephantine because he can speak like a human, although he rarely does so in movies. However, he thinks like a human or, rather a god. Why should it be strange that a god has an animal rather than a human head? Why is the god who is praised first the one with the animal head? There are many myths about head replacements – Daksha's head is replaced by that of a goat, while Hayagriva has a horse's head. Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana* (1971) draws on Thomas Mann's *Transposed Heads* (1940), which in turn takes its story from the *Kathasaritsagara*. (The play begins by invoking Ganesh). Here the head determines the body, both in the case of the hero and also with the character, Hayavadana, who has a horse's head and ends up as a horse.

Yet although Ganesh's body does not change to suit his head, his head is sometimes more elephantine and sometimes more human. He has a trunk, elephant ears and tusks, but sometimes he has human eyes and eyebrows, rather than small elephant eyes and short hair. It seems that he is becoming more human over time. He can be a regal elephant with a human body⁸ but in Calcutta Art Studio's later print he is a human baby with an elephant head,⁹ or while recent images show him as a baby with a human-elephant face.¹⁰ Other images show him in a more abstract form where it is hard to discern how animal and how human his body is.

Ganesh is also 'human' in his form, his dress human, his ornaments and decorations begin human and elephant, combining a regal masculinity with the cuteness of a greedy sweet-eating 'elephant' and also that of a child. The long history of human and elephant relations in India ranges from those of conflict to cooperation. The elephant has long been regarded as regal, majestic and beautiful¹¹ as is Ganesh,¹² but today elephants, especially baby elephants and elephant images, are regarded as cute. So Ganesh, a powerful god, who is one of the least human, is also one that devotees find the most approachable, and this can be considered through the category of 'cute', making him more personal, reachable, touchable, adorable.

⁸ 1878, Chitrashala Press: www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/108.2011/, last accessed 31 July 2014.

⁹ Centre for Indian Visual Culture website, <http://civicarchives.org/bengal-presses/>, last accessed 31 July 2014.

¹⁰ Jain, *Gods in bazaar*, 261, image 117.

¹¹ Sukumar, *The story of Asia's elephants*; Dwyer, 'My Lord, the elephant'; Dwyer, 'The biggest star of all'.

¹² Courtright, *Ganesh*, 28.

Ngai examines the aesthetic of cute as part of an intimate relationship where sensuous quality is appreciated in what Arendt calls ‘small things’ or mundane objects.¹³ There is a desire to touch, to get near to, as well as to protect as the objects in question evoke tender feelings. There are Indian traditions of the devotional sentiment of *vatsalyabhava*, where the devotee feels the affection of a parent to a child in his/her relationship to god, well known in devotion to baby Krishna. Chromolithographs show a number of baby gods,¹⁴ which become cuter and more playful while other gods become hyper-masculine. Ganesh combines this feeling of the sacredness of children and their link to divinity in his body of the child as well as his own divinity in addition to his animal component, bringing a host of references to ideas of auspiciousness and fertility.

Elephants, in particular baby elephants, are often regarded as particularly cute. There is no doubt that humans are fascinated by elephants, finding them ‘picturesque’ and sources of ‘aesthetic enthusiasm’.¹⁵ They are one of children’s favourite animals, while adults remain in awe of them. Images of the elephant are ubiquitous not just in countries that have native elephants but also throughout the world.

As the world’s biggest land animal, an elephant is never very small – at birth a baby Asian elephant weighs about 100kg but it looks very small next to its mother, who weighs almost 3000 kg. The baby looks particularly cute as it lacks the features which make the grown animal intimidating; being miniature, it scuttles rather than moving forcefully while its trunk wobbles out of control. Children’s interest in animals seems to be universal but children who are removed from everyday contact with animals in modern urban life are familiar with animals often from images, many of which are presented in a particularly cute form, such as in Disney’s films, where they have exaggerated baby features such as chubby bodies and big eyes. In India, the hit film *Haathi mere saathi/The elephants are my friends* (dir. M A Thirumugham, 1971¹⁶) has a boy who was raised by elephants who show him more kindness than human beings, their loyalty and self-sacrifice making them seem like humans – or gods – and their empathy and gentleness as well as warm companionship makes them even more loveable as they hug the hero with their trunks.

¹³ Ngai, *Our aesthetic categories*.

¹⁴ Uberoi, “‘Baby’ icons”; cf. Jain *Gods in bazaar*, 281-90 on baby images.

¹⁵ Digby, *War-horse*, 52; see also Scigliano, *Seeing the elephant*.

¹⁶ Dwyer, ‘The biggest star of all’.

Nimat Khan (d.1121, i.e. 1709/10 CE), a courtier of the Emperor Aurangzeb, composed Persian verses showing his affection for his pet baby elephant:

This baby elephant, my heart's desire,
cheers me up with his antics.

Although small and black, it is charming,
it is the apple of my eye.¹⁷

Ganesh is a very powerful god, and is also the son of a and Parvati, two of Hinduism's most powerful deities. This family unit forms three of main five *smarta*, orthodox, deities, along with Vishnu and Surya. However, he seems more approachable through this idea of 'cute' – shown as smaller than them despite his elephant's head, often a child, and comes across as gentle, relaxed, kind and benevolent, with an almost playful sense of fun. This is conveyed in cinema and in art, where he is depicted as a clever but also benevolent person, his cuteness deriving not only from his elephant-ness and his childlike form, but also from his role in the family where he tries to do his duty to his parents and his brother.

The second most popular story of Ganesh, at least in films, is the story of his family, in particular his rivalry with his brother, often set in the context of a competition to win Riddhi and Siddhi as brides. This story shows the cleverness of Ganesh contrasted with the prowess of his six-headed brother, Skanda (Karttikeya, Murugan). One version is that Shiv and Parvati say the first who goes around the world three times will marry Brahma's daughters. Skanda flew off round the universe while Ganesh walked round his parents saying that they were his world, so Ganesh won the brides.

Ganesh belongs to what Lutgendorf calls the second-generation of gods – the gods who have childhood stories.¹⁸ Krishna's story is from before his birth on earth to his leaving this world; Skanda and Hanuman¹⁹ also have birth and childhood stories. The childhood stories focus on the child-parent relationship and are much loved by children and adults. Ganesh is often shown living in his nuclear family, going on what look like picnics and excursions with his family, and although Ganesh is said to be very close to his mother, stories

¹⁷ Translation, Sunil Sharma, personal communication.

¹⁸ Lutgendorf, *Hanuman's tale*, 23.

¹⁹ Lutgendorf, *Ibid.*, 318-19.

show he is also devoted to his father. The famous story has him going around both parents – not just his mother. While in some sense he is not quite his parents’ biological son, he is created from part of his mother’s body and his father gives him his head. In other words, he is partly created by his father who gives him a second birth after he is killed, so he is very much Shiv’s son. There are other signs of closeness: the elephant association of Shiv, who killed the elephant demon Gajasura; Shiv also wears snakes; and Ganesh’s name derives from his status as the leader of Shiv’s *ganas* (*gana* + *ish* = Ganesh), the hosts which surround him.

Ganesh has other family relations in other traditions,²⁰ including being married to two wives, Riddhi and Siddhi (or Buddhi), and has two children Shubh and Labh, while the popular mythological, *Jai Santoshi Maa*, shows him creating the eponymous goddess.

These stories of the family are also part of Ganesh’s elephantness, in that elephants, like humans, live in family units, although his family looks like a human, or rather divine, nuclear family, rather than the matriarchal family structure adopted by herds of elephants.

The Ganpati Utsav

The third most popular story about Ganesh in mythological films concerns the origins of the Ganpati Utsav, the Ganesh festival, celebrated on Ganesh Chaturthi, the fourth day of the light half (waning) of the lunar month of Bhadrapada, which is sacred to Ganesh. The 4th of dark half of the month is always inauspicious day to start new things but a good day to worship Ganesh. However, the 4th of light half is auspicious in other months, but Ganesh curses all who look at moon on this day in Bhadrapada.

The Moon laughed at Ganesh for being strange-looking. A popular version is that Ganesh ate so many sweets that his stomach swelled up. As he was riding home on his rat, a snake scared the rat which reared up so Ganesh fell down and his stomach burst, spilling sweets. Ganesh picked up his sweets then tied the snake around his stomach as a belt. The moon laughed at him so Ganesh pulled out a tusk, threw it at the moon, and cursed him so he would not be seen. The world went dark, and the other gods asked Ganesh to restore the moon. He said the curse could not be undone but the moon would wax and wane each month.

Shri Ganesh Mahima, dir. Homi Wadia, 1950, uses this as a base for a story of Krishna, who looks at the moon on this day and is cursed so no one believes him. This is a useful cinematic device, in that Ganesh cannot play the typical film hero – handsome, romantic and someone who sings and dances - whereas Krishna can. It also reminds the audience of the importance of Ganesh who has power over other gods, even Krishna (the legend of the Siddhatek temple, below, shows Vishnu advised by Shiv to pray to Ganesh). It is also significant for linking Ganesh into the Vaishnav traditions, as by birth he is a Shaiva who worships his parents, underlining his importance as a non-sectarian god, invoked by all.

This story and the festival itself appears two silent films, now lost, by the ‘Father of Indian cinema’, DG Phalke, *Chaturthicha Chanda* and *Ganesh Utsav* in 1925 while the festival itself features in several recent films (see below).

Siddhivinayak

The Ganesh mythologicals focus on this cute version of Ganesh from the Puranas and other stories about him, but I now turn to a specific form, Siddhivinayak of the Shree Siddhivinayak Ganapati Madir of Prabhadevi, Mumbai, who is the subject of a recent devotional film. A Siddhivinayak is a potent form of Ganesh, a wish-granting deity who gives *siddhi* – success, accomplishment or powers to those who pray to him. He has a right-curling trunk marking him as powerful but he is harder to please than left-trunked Ganesha. Devotees do not usually keep a Siddhivinayak at home but worship him in a temple.

History of the temple of Siddhivinayak

Govind Narayan does not mention any temples to Ganesh in Bombay in the 1860s in his book,²¹ though he does discuss the Ganapati festival²², which is celebrated by Dakshini (Deccan, southern) Hindus while he says, ‘The Gujaratis and Ghatias do not seem to have even heard the name of Ganapati. In Mumbai Ganapati is much venerated the Prabhu, Sonar, Brahmin, Bhandari and Shenvi people.’ However, after mentioning stone-throwing and trouble during the festival, he mentions that people yearn to see the moon on this day - which is the opposite as one should avoid the moon on this day or, like Krishna, face false blame. J

²⁰ Cohen, ‘The wives of Ganesha’.

²¹ Narayan, *Govind Narayan’s Mumbai*.

²² *Ibid.*, 287.

Raghunathji's *Hindu Temples of Bombay*, published in 1900, mentions a small temple at Siddhivinayak when its garden provided an income for the priest.²³

The temple was founded before the area becomes residential after the development of the local railway. It is situated on the southern end of Mahim Bay, which was a salt-making area until the 1850s, south of Mahim woods and surrounded by farms and rice-growing areas. It was populated mostly by Koli fishermen and Agri salt-makers. These two groups (now classed as Other Backward Castes) are mostly devotees of Khandoba but increasingly of Ganesh.

The existing accounts do not say why the site was significant – though the nearby temple of Prabhadevi, after whom the area is named, suggests this was already a holy site, perhaps a water source as old maps suggest Prabhadevi is built on land reclaimed from the Worli Sluice, and there was once a pond at the Siddhivinayak temple.

The main source for the history of the temple is given on the site's webpages²⁴, which provide a modern version of a *sthalapurana* or the *mahatmya*, that is history and legends of the place. The temple was founded in November 19, 1801, when Laxman Vitthu built it, financed by Mrs Deubai Patil, a rich but childless lady of the Agri Samaj (salt-collectors) He installed a *murti* (image, statue) carved out of black stone, holding modaks in lower left, upper right lotus, upper left axe, lower right has japmala and he has a snake wound around him like sacred thread, third eye, seated between Riddhi and Siddhi. (Narayanan has Lakshuman Vitthu Patel building the temple after seeing an old image of Siddhivinayak belonging to an Agri woman.) The *murti* is a 'Navala Pavanara Ganapati' or a wish-giving Ganesh.

In the early twentieth century, Ramakrishna Maharaj Jambhekar, whose organisation was based nearby next to Dadar beach,²⁵ buried two *murtis* at the order of his guru, Swami Samarth, over which a *mandaar* tree grew that can still be seen in the temple. Twenty-one years later a *swayambhu* (self-originating) *murti* appeared in the tree.

Jambhekar sent Govind Chintaman Phatak as a priest to improve the temple, which he did over the next 18 years and painted the image the red it is today. Narayanan notes that the Patils managed the temple until 1936, then after tensions between priests and owners, the

²³ Narayanan, 'Trunk calls'.

²⁴ Official website of Shree Siddhivinayak Ganapati Temple Trust, <http://siddhivinayak.org/>, last accessed 31 July 2014.

²⁵ Shri Ramkrishna Maharaj Jambekar, <http://jambhekarmaharaj.org/>, last accessed 31 July 2014.

state Government took over temple in 1974, the Legislative Assembly setting up the Shri Siddhi Vinayak Ganapati Temple Trust (Prabhadevi) in 1980 after the temple's popularity continued to grow.²⁶

In 1988 a new building was planned, no longer simple but grand and wealthy, and while it is admired by many others condemn it as a rather vulgar aesthetic disaster. The new temple houses the shrine. Some people say it is the same shrine while others say it is new, while the temple's upper floors house offices and a library. On 13 June 1994 the new building was opened by the Shankaracharya of Sharada Peetham, with the Chief Minister of Maharashtra, Sharad Pawar, leading the *pooja*.

It is striking that Courtright does not mention this temple in his study of Ganesha 1985 which focuses on Maharashtra, as this is a significant omission in this otherwise comprehensive study. Many, including the well known Bombay historian Sharada Dwivedi, have said the temple's popularity grew in the 1980s after Amitabh Bachchan's family began to pray for a miracle after his near fatal accident on the sets of the film *Coolie* (dir. Manmohan Desai, 1983), which may be why Courtright does not mention the temple. However, it seems its popularity rose sharply during the 1960s.²⁷ This might be connected to the rising Maharashtrian nationalism which led to the creation of Maharashtra State from the division of the Bombay State. The temple is located in the heart of middle-class Marathi-speaking Mumbai, comprising Prabhadevi, Dadar and Shivaji Park. The pro-Marathi political party, the Shiv Sena, founded in 1966, and has its headquarters, Shiv Sena Bhavan, in a nearby street, and now has monuments to Veer Savarkar (whose first name was Vinayak) and Dr Ambedkar. Although little is known about the background of the devotees, and it seems most are Marathi-speakers, English is the major language of the website and the film (see below) is in Hindi as well as Marathi, with the central characters being Gujarati. The names of the temple trustees listed on the website²⁸ are mostly Maharashtrian, although one is Gujarati. The temple has become a landmark of the city and attracts devotees beyond this core constituency, also offering a special welcome for overseas visitors.

The film: *Vighnaharta Shree Siddhivinayak*

²⁶ Narayanan, 'Trunk calls' and Patil, 'Shree Siddhivinayak'.

²⁷ Narayanan, 'Trunk calls'.

²⁸ <http://siddhivinayak.org/trustee.asp>, last accessed 31 July 2014.

The Siddhivinayak temple is very media-savvy, with an E-shrine, Permanent Devotee numbers and IDs for frequent visitors, webcams, SMS and Internet remittances. The website makes for fascinating reading but it does not mention the modern devotional film, *Vighnaharta Shree Siddhivinayak: a film on true miracles*. The film is not listed on IMDB but is available through shops in Mumbai. The box does not give the names of director or actors (who include well known actors, usually secondary roles such as Parmeet Sethi, the baddy in *Dilwale dulhania le jayenge*, dir. Aditya Chopra, 1995, and Divya Dutta), but gives the producers as Vistaas media, made in association with the Temple Trust. The front has a 3-D image of Siddhivinayak, while the back has a still of the hero praying in temple. The webpage gives the year of release (2009). The film can be watched in Hindi and Marathi (I watched the Hindi). The DVD classes the film as a mythological. Although it has elements of the mythological genre, notably the animated story of Ganesh's circumambulation of his parents, the main narrative is that of a new devotional, that is it mixes the stories of devotees and the deity, but no longer features historical figures, as the classics from 1930s did but is fictional, though claims to be a composite narrative of true miracles: the film opens with a voice declaring he is Siddhivinayak of the temple based in Prabhadevi, Mumbai and this is a *satya katha* or a true story. The film also contains elements of the traditional *mahatmyas* in that, while it says little about Siddhivinayak as a special form of Ganesh, it narrates the particular significance of this temple²⁹ tracking away from the gods on Mount Kailash (Heaven) then cutting to the film's titles which roll to a devotional song showing footage of the temple's Tuesday pilgrims as well as famous devotees, including Sachin Tendulkar and Kajol and Ajay Devgn worshipping the image. Later in the film, Siddhivinayak is said to be everywhere but is easy to access here, and the story is told of Siddhivinayak of Siddhatek, one of the Ashtavinayaks, where Vinayak gave Vishnu *siddhis* (accomplishments, special powers) by Vinayak, then saying this temple has a *pratirup* ('likeness of a real form') of this Siddhivinayak which is a visible miracle (*saakshat chatmatkar*) for the people of Mumbai.

The film may well aim to follow the success of other devotional films to promote religious sites in Maharashtra. In 1979, a Marathi film, *Ashtavinayak* (dir. Rajdutt), was made on the Ashtavinayak (see below), while a devotional film on Sai Baba at Shirdi, another shrine very popular with the film industry is said to have been important in raising

²⁹ Dwyer, *Filming the gods*, 63-6.

the profile of the shrine.³⁰ The film is a way of learning about Siddhivinayak and the temple as well as inspiring his devotees with stories of his miracles and his presence in Mumbai.

The main story concerns a rich Gujarati business family in Mumbai which is facing the usual family and work conflicts of modern lifestyles: the father has too much work and union troubles in his factories, the mother squabbles with her in-laws and her husband about bringing up the children, the son is disabled, and the daughter wilful. Other people in the film have their own problems - blackmail, kidnapping, terrorism and health among others – while one couple provides ‘comic relief’.

It is not clear why the family is Gujarati except perhaps to appeal to that community. In the Hindi version of film, they speak the occasional sentence of Gujarati, there is some Gujarati writing in shots, and the older woman’s sari is worn Gujarati-style and they eat Gujarati food, but the other characters mostly have Maharashtrian names.

Siddhivinayak appears to help all. The gods in heaven are animated while Ganesh’s mouse appears once on earth in animated form. Siddhivinayak is shown as the form in the temple, which is often directly efficacious, as when he appears on the coma patient’s monitor as part of the healing, but he incarnates himself in several human forms (with no elephant signs) to several characters in the film.

Moved by a Sufi by the road, singing ‘*Kya karna hai?* (‘What should we do?’)’, the main hero, Manav Mehta, drives around the city of Mumbai. Manav’s car breaks down outside the temple – when we see the first manifestation of Siddhivinayak as a mechanic - and one of his Muslim factory workers, Mohammed, invites him for darshan, explaining in Sanskrit language to his surprised boss that he walks barefoot every Tuesday from from Panvel (approximately 40km) because he has, like everyone else in this wonderful city (*mayanagari*) receives his kindness (*kripa*), worshipping him with full faith (*pura vishvaas*).

The second incarnation is an auto driver (automated rickshaw) who drives the kidnap victim to safety; while the third is a doctor who brings a patient out of a coma. The fourth is a man in the temple who tells Manav to hurry to the station where his parents are boarding a train; while the fifth is a railway porter who heals the son; and the last is the train conductor who stops the train from leaving before the family is reunited. All these are ordinary people, perhaps the ‘Marathi manoos’, the urban Marathi guy, with only the doctor being upwardly mobile and are all played by Dr Ganesh Divekar, a little known actor from Marathi cinema.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 94-5.

The film's most important concern is family and personal connections. Siddhivinayak asks his followers to worship their parents as he did and this will solve all your problems. Women are encouraged to play their traditional family roles and their vows and fasts, sometimes over many weeks, are shown to meet with just rewards, uniting families, making children well, and so on. Children are seen as in need of family love and affection, and one song 'G for Genius' shows them as modern kids in western clothes dancing in Bollywood style (with a guest appearance by the famous choreographer, Ganesh Acharya) on a picnic, although here they are not, as in some films (see below) the agents of change in the family, as the focus is on the father. At the end of the film, his family is all playing their correct role and his business is prospering.

The father is the only one who realises that Siddhivinayak himself has appeared on earth, but the others in the film quickly accept that Siddhivinayak has performed miracles which are wonderful but not totally unexpected. The moral of the film is made clear at then end when Siddhivinayak tells Manav in a voiceover:

Yes, you recognized me. It was me, myself. In each of those places, you met me in a different form. Without being asked, I fulfill all the wishes of the devotee who serves his parents with his true heart. There is no pilgrimage place, no place of worship, no ceremony, no fast, only the service of parents matters to me.

Familial deity

The film raises many issues which suggest some of the reasons behind the popularity of this particular temple to Ganesh. One is that he will help modern Indians who are dealing with home-work conflict and roles within the traditional family. He is also seen to help the wealthy, although he is fond of the poor. Manav is not shown to be a greedy man and is always willing to use his wealth to help others, although not to give into his striking workers.

Ganesh has a perennial appeal to children as a child-god who lives with his parents and brother, but also as an elephant, an animal for which children show great affection, celebrated in one of India's most popular children's films, *Haathi mere saathi* (above). Rather than having a fat man with a prosthetic trunk, animation has restored much of Ganesh's visual appeal. *Amar Chitra Katha* (Immortal picture stories) of mythologicals have been read by many children since 1967.³¹ Ganesh features in several recent series of

³¹ McLain, *India's immortal comic books*; Sreenivas, *Sculpting a middle class*.

animated films or as an animated character in a feature film which focus on him as a child, and often as a superhero, forming a definite children's genre which is barely established in other Indian films. These include *Bal Ganesha*, dir. Pankaj Sharma, 2007, where, naughty childlike Ganesha snow-boards around Mount Kailash where his parents Shiv and Parvati live; this was followed up by *Bal Ganesha 2*, 2009. As VSV, the parents in an upwardly mobile family are too busy for their children. The Maharashtrian maid teaches the child about Ganesha who then appears to him as a friend. The child persuades his family to bring a Ganpati home for the festival and the 'remover of obstacles' helps solve the family's problem and bring them close together again. Other 'child helped by Ganesh' films include *My friend Ganesha*, dir Rajiv S. Ruia, 2007, *My friend Ganesha 2*, 2008 and *My friend Ganesha 3*, 2010. Ganesh also takes on this superhero role in the popular animated television series, *Chota Bheem* (2008–, Rajiv Chilakapudi, Pogo Television), about a 9-yr old boy in dhoti bare-chested and with a tuft and a tilak, who gets power from eating *laddoos* (sweets). In one episode Chota Bheem saves Ganesh's mouse, so the deity helps him fight a dragon.³²

Gentrification of the gods

The term 'gentrification of the gods' has been coined by Waghorne in her study of the mother goddess in Chennai where she examines the mixture of non-Brahminical and other devotees in creating new forms of donation, architecture, conduct of rituals and a connection to the global bourgeoisie.³³ Lutgendorf observes Hanuman's popularity is growing with the new middle classes of north India³⁴ as part of what Hawley labels the 'Vaishnavization' of worship –sobriety, magnificence and vegetarianism.³⁵ Elements of these can be observed in the growth of the popularity of Siddhivinayak, a potent form of an already popular god, along with other deities such as Vaishno Devi or Tirupati, who, like Siddhivinayak, attract business, financial and media celebrities.

Hawley notes³⁶ the move from the rise of godmen and guru to the gentrified deity, while Meera Nanda notes in India what Paul Gifford, Birgit Meyer and others have observed

³² http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x194v84_chhota-bheem-aur-ganesh-http-watchkidzcartoons-blogspot-com_shortfilms. Viewed 25 February 2014.

³³ Waghorne, 'The gentrification of the goddess'.

³⁴ Dwyer, *All you want is money, all you need is love*.

³⁵ Lutgendorf, *Hanuman's tale*; Hawley, 'Modern India and the question of middle-class religion'.

³⁶ Hawley, 'Modern India and the question of middle-class religion'.

in Africa, that globalisation and rise of new middle classes often leads to a turning away from philosophical religion to ritualistic religion based on temples, pilgrimage, processions, rituals, while public life sees a new mix of state-temples-business.

Does rise of SV mean decline of goddesses of the city of Bombay?

Mumbai has many temples to different goddesses including Mahalaxmi – a temple on the coast, across Race Course to Mahalaxmi station; Kalbadevi in heart of city; Gamdevi in Girgaon; Mumbadevi; and Prabhadevi who gives her name to the suburb in which the Siddhivinayak temple is located. There are also many other major temples– Babulnath in Girgaum and the Walkeshwar temples at Banganga Tank at the tip of Malabar Hill. Many of these temples are associated with particular castes and sects, as well as the social class in whose areas they are situated, hence Mahalaxmi with higher castes such as Prabhus. While there is no evidence to suggest a decline in these temples while Siddhivinayak has risen, these are located mostly in South Bombay, in the old city, many of them founded before the twentieth century. Siddhivinayak is set squarely amid the suburbs that developed in the early twentieth century and, with the growth of the outer suburbs in Salsette and beyond, this ‘Central Bombay’ now means the centre of Bombay Island rather than Greater Bombay.

The film of Siddhivinayak says there is no need for pilgrimage or special rituals (the temple has priests for rituals but they do not appear as important figures in the film), just worship your parents (see above). Tuesdays are the most sacred day and devotees set out barefoot to walk from their homes to be there for the opening darshan, but this is not seen as a penance but something which devotees enjoy and where all mix on the road leading to the temple and later take Siddhivinayak’s presence out to the wider city.

Bombay to Mumbai – the Maharashtrian city

The Ganesh festival or Ganaptai Ustav was mobilised by Tilak as a symbol of Maratha power to protest against British rule.³⁷ It is now a major annual event which takes place for ten days around the beginning of September, which helps to define the city of Bombay, the centre of the film industry which was starting at the same time at Tilak was developing the festival in Pune as a symbol of neo-traditionalist resistance to colonialism.³⁸ While MG

³⁷ Cashman, *The myth of the Lokamanya*; Kaur, *Performative politics and the cultures of Hindusim*.

³⁸ Cashman, *The Myth of the Lokamanya*; Courtright, *Ganesh*.

Ranade (1842-1901) wrote about the devout Vaishnava flavour of the Pandharpur festival of the Varkari Panth,³⁹ Balgangadhar Tilak (1856-1920), a neo-traditionalist, promoted the Ganesh festival to bring Brahminical virtues of asceticism and wisdom together with non-Brahminical devotion and pleasure.⁴⁰

Tilak turned this mostly small family festival, which had become popular in Poona (Pune) under the Chitpavan Brahmin Peshwas, whose titular deity (*kuladevata*) was Ganesh, into a major festival with public images of the god worshipped and carried through the streets. In 1894, Tilak instructed Hindus to withdraw support from Moharram, in which they had participated, following riots in 1893 over cow protection by mill workers in Bombay and the Deccan, organising this festival on similar lines but using songs which were often explicitly anti-Muslim.⁴¹ The festival emphasised unity as well as seeking prosperity, asking Ganesh to remove the obstacle of British rule, while uniting groups who had lost power with those seeking to rise. The festival was soon associated with communal violence and by 1910 was heavily restricted. However it continued and its popularity continues until today and it is now most closely associated with the city of Bombay though held in many other cities in India and beyond

The most celebrated of all the Ganapati Rajas is Lalbaugcha Raja ‘King of Lalbaug’ (1934–), even though the Girgaumcha Raja is older (1893). Lalbaug is in the heart of the former mill area of Bombay– now under pressure to gentrify–and the first statues made when the market place was built were of Ganesh as a fisherman. These were followed by images of freedom fighters, then slim urbane characters, sometimes from theatre. He became a Raja in 1980s, now a massive regal figure, dressed in fine clothes, jewellery and wearing a crown.⁴² He has celebrity visitors who add to his aura including Bollywood stars (Akshay Kumar, Asha Bhosle, Shilpa Shetty, Amitabh Bachchan) and business people such as the Ambanis, and politicians including the Thackerays. He receives 10m visitors a year, as well as those who can see the live webcam, seeking the blessings of this majestic Raja, associated with glamour, wish-giving deity.

This majestic image of Ganesh is the inspiration for the form who appears most frequently in films where he has become an icon of the city in films from *Agneepath* (dir.

³⁹ See Dwyer, *Filming the gods*, Chapter 2 on the devotional films made about this sect.

⁴⁰ Cashman, *The myth of the Lokamanya*, 75.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 78.

⁴² Lopez, ‘Feat of clay’.

Mukul Anand, 1990), where Amitabh Bachchan carries the statue to the immersion and *Satya* (dir RGV, 1998), which evoke the celebration of the festival of San Gennaro in *Godfather 2* (dir. Francis Ford Coppola, 1974). The major stars are filmed in a song worshipping a massive Ganesh image: Shahrukh Khan in *Don* (dir. Farhan Akhtar, 2006), while Salman Khan does so in *Wanted*, dir. Prabhu Deva, 2009 and Hrithik Roshan in *Agneepath*, dir. Karan Malhotra, 2012. Offscreen, the charismatic leader of the Shiv Sena, Bal Thackeray, sent his supporters greetings for Ganesh festival.⁴³

Lalbaug is in the heart of working class Marathi-speaking Mumbai, in an area which was founded in the 19th C and where the major mill areas were found. The working classes, who had neither the time nor the money to commute, remained in living in chawls (one-room apartments) in this area while the emerging lower and middle classes followed the expansion of the city to Dadar, Matunga, Wadala and Sion, from beginning of 20th century⁴⁴ with the Marathi-speaking groups settled in the Prabhadevi-Dadar area where Siddhivinayak is situated.

Maharashtra comes to Mumbai

The cry when Bombay's Ganeshes have their visarjan ('immersion in the sea') at the end of the festival is:

Ganapati Bappa moraya, pudhacya varshi lavkar ya
'Ganesh, Lord of Moraya, come again early next year.'

This reference is also heard in the much repeated chant in the VSV film: *Shri Gajanan, Jai Gajanan, Siddhivinayak Moraya* (Names of Ganesh). Moraya refers to Moregaon, one of the Ashtavinayak ('Eight Vinayaka') shrines which form a circle or mandala around Pune, the city which was a leading centre of Marathi culture under the Peshwas in the 17-19th centuries and from where Tilak launched his Ganpati Utsav.⁴⁵ The shrines are to be visited on an annual pilgrimage before the Ganesh Chaturthi. They are among the most important shrines in Maharashtra along with Pandharpur, the centre of the Vaishnav Varkari Panth

⁴³ 'Eliminate the obstacle in the form of Congress! – Shiv Sena Chief prays to Shri Ganesh', www.hindujagruti.org/news/14926.html.

⁴⁴ Rao, *House but no garden*, 168-72.

⁴⁵ Mate, *Temples and legends of Maharashtra*, 1-25.

(celebrated in Prabhat Studios Sant films) and Khandoba in Jejuri, the subject of Arun Kolatkar's brilliant poems 'Jejuri'.

These eight centres sacred to Ganesha, the Ashtavinayaka, have *swayambhu* (self-originating) images, not carved images and are places where Ganesh himself appeared. Of the eight - Moregoan, Siddhatek, Theur, Ranjangaon, Lenyadri, Ojhar, Madh Pali – Moregoan most important, celebrated in the Mudgala Purana (14th-16th centuries), the text of the Ganesh sect, the Ganapatyas.⁴⁶ Only one of the Ashtavinayaks is a siddhi, the Siddhivinayak of Siddhatek, the second on the pilgrimage (though often visited third), who is mentioned in the film *VSV* as being the same as Siddhivinayak of Mumbai.

These Ashtavinayak shrines define the sacred geography of Pune, the former seat of power and of learning in Maharashtra⁴⁷ and through them, Ganesh links the metro city to the hinterland, bringing Moraya/Moregaon to Mumbai, while Siddhivinayak specifically brings Siddhatek, to Mumbai, a city which has little of India's ancient sacred geography. The Ashtavinayak retain their power but they are less visited than known,⁴⁸ while the Mumbai Ganeshes attract millions. This creation of equivalences in sacred geography is widespread with well known examples such as Kanchipuram being defined as 'the Varanasi of the South'.

Ganesh marks the Maharashtrian nature of Mumbai with the processions making him visible all over the city, while the temple itself has a high profile and is unmissable, visually speaking, when driving in to south Bombay from the suburbs. Political parties espousing Maharashtrian nationalism also launch their rallies from Shivaji Park to Siddhivinayak, for example, the Yuva Sena in January 2012⁴⁹, while Raj Thackeray launched his new party, the MNS (Maharashtra Navnirman Sena) after prayers at Siddhivinayak.⁵⁰

The film *VSV* makes no links to Marathi culture and politics. As noted, the central characters are Gujarati, and they eschew the martial values embodied in iconic figures such as Shivaji, while Marathi language is not mentioned and the Gujarati hero has to have everyday Marathi food such as the *thalipeeth* explained to him. The film is explicit about

⁴⁶ Courtright, *Ganesha*, 212.

⁴⁷ Preston, *The Devs of Cincvad*, 16. For Ganesh defining Varanasi, see Eck, *Bangras*, 187.

⁴⁸ Feldhaus, *Connected places*, 146.

⁴⁹ 'Continuing grandfather Bal Thackeray's legacy, Aditya dares Congress', <http://post.jagran.com/Continuing-grandfather-Bal-Thackerays-legacy-Aditya-dares-Congress-1347880679>, last accessed 31 July 2014.

Siddhivinayak accepting offerings from all devotees whatever their religion or their wealth. Certainly, like Lalbaugcha Raja, Siddhivinayak attracts many celebrity devotees, including the Bachchan family who make barefoot pilgrimages of many miles to worship him. Yet unlike the Raja, Siddhivinayak, although regal, is small and perhaps even cute, having a direct appeal to his followers. Siddhivinayak sits along other major centres of worship in Mumbai which are frequented by many of all faiths - Haji Ali or St Mary's. The temple is said to receive up to 100,000 visitors daily and has an annual income in tens of crores making Siddhivinayak one of the leading deities.

Siddhivinayak the presiding deity of Mumbai

Ganesh remains a popular deity to have at home – not just during the Ganpati festival. He seems a very modern god, despite hostile views of outsiders thinking he was 'primitive', being young, smart and wise. He is an approachable god, who grants wishes, and is easily propitiated. He lives in the heart of the cosmopolitan city, and the website offers virtual worship available to those who cannot visit him. He is neither patriarchal nor too serious; and he is never frightening though he makes tangible interventions in people's lives. In other words, he's public and private, Brahminical and belonging to other castes; ascetic and fond of sweets; wise and and naughty and greedy; a powerful king and a cute deity. He is never either/or but always both/and. Ganesh's elephantness adds to his appeal to new followers, perhaps making his paradoxes easy to understand as they are shared by the animal as well as the god who has a partly human form.

The god who presides over beginnings and removes obstacles, he seems the ideal deity for the Indian's new middle classes, the constantly changing city of Mumbai, and as a media presence. The 2014 elections have given a new leader, Narendra Modi, a clear majority to govern, although it is too early to know about his renewing of the already new India. It is no surprise that Ganesh is the maximum deity, and while walls have been erected to protect the shrine of Siddhivinayak, he is felt to continue to bless and guard Mumbaikars in this changing times.

⁵⁰ 'Raj Thackeray launches Navnirman Sena', www.rediff.com/news/2006/mar/09raj.htm?zcc=rl, last accessed 31 July 2014.

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Vighnaharta Shree Siddhivinayak, dir. Yashwant Ingawale, 2009

CAST: Parmeet Sethi, Divya Dutta, Ashalata, Ramesh Deo, Dr Ganesh Divekar.
Star appearances: Sachin Tendulkar, Ajay Devgn, Gracy Singh, Kajol, Ganesh Acharya, Naveen Prabhakar, Archana Puran Singh,
Music Director Anil Mohile
Lyrics Rajesh Johri, Dr. Deepak Sneh
Cinematographer Charudatta Dukhande
Playback Singer Ravindra Sathe, Shankar Mahadevan, Ravindar Bijour, Shilpa Pai, Tulsi Kumar, Udit Narayan
Producer Shree Siddhivinayak Ganapati Temple Trust, Rajiv Singhvi, Eros International