

Who Said Elephants Were Afraid of Mice?

Ganesh and the Rodent

by Dinesh Sathisan

Hindu gods are usually depicted with their *vahana*, or mounts. Ganesh (also known as *Ganesha*, *Pillaiyar*, *Vinayaka*, *Ganapati*, *Vigneshvara*), the son of Shiva and Parvati, is often playfully depicted with his incongruous mount, the rat (*mooshika*). The 10th century Dancing Ganesha statue from Madhya Pradesh housed in the Asian Civilisations Museum depicts a small rat beneath the swaying body of the elephant god. We have seen many depictions of Ganesh standing on or attended by a rat, and we have heard myths about Ganesh riding on the rodent. So how do we interpret this animal?

The rat is said to be a servant of Ganesh and was originally an evil demon, *Gajamukhaasura*, whom he had subdued in a battle. The defeated demon requested that Ganesh transform him into a highly agile creature so that he could best serve the god. Ganesh agreed and *Gajamukhaasura* became his trusty companion in the form of a rat. Rats are also said to patiently gnaw their way through every obstruction in their path and hence represent who Ganesh is: the remover of all obstacles for his believers. The rat is also said to be a wise animal – clever, quick and sharp-sighted – representing Ganesh as God of Wisdom. Furthermore, its small size enables it to enter even the smallest of spaces, thus suggesting that Ganesh penetrates every nook. Some claim that the rat is an allegory of the smallest being on earth, indicating that even the most minute of beings will not be forgotten by the elephant god.

In the agricultural context, Ganesh is commonly known as the God of Harvest. The rat, an animal that multiplies rapidly, may perhaps be symbolic of agricultural fertility, thus explaining why it is placed with Ganesh. Other sources point to the opposite and claim that the rat is seen as a pest because it is ‘thief of the field’; Ganesh, as rider and thus conqueror of the rat, thus prevents the pilfering of rice and other crops. The rat is also seen as a symbol of the night because of its nocturnal nature; Ganesh destroys darkness and offers light to his followers. In its constant search for food, the rodent also represents insatiable desire; by controlling the rat, Ganesh is seen to influence control over voracious greed.

Whatever the rat may symbolise, it is always an amusing sight when it is depicted with Ganesh. At its simplest form, the rat, like its master, is highly mischievous and never fails to make one stop and smile.



Dinesh Sathisan was the youngest docent to join Museum Volunteers in 2005 after successfully convincing the interview panel that despite being a busy university student, he had time to devote to the museum. He guides at the ACM and at the Peranakan Museum. Dinesh has a special interest in the arts of South and Southeast Asia and loves to research and write on the cultural significance and symbolism behind myths and motifs.

Photo by Dinesh Sathisan