
Ganapati, the God of the People: An Archaeological and Ethnographical Study

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The 2nd century sculptural work of two-armed Gaṇapati has been found on the frontispiece of Mihintale Kaṇṭaka Cētiya shows that the concept of Gaṇapati has been known to Sri Lankan Buddhist society since early historical time. During the Polonnaruwa era (1070-1200 CE) many four-armed images of Gaṇapati seems to have become popular due to the cultural interaction between Sri Lanka and South India. It also appears that four-armed Gaṇapati continued to be popular among Sri Lankan Buddhists until today. Worshipping Gaṇapati by the name of Pullaiyār in North-Central and Northern Provinces of the island by Sri Lankan Buddhists demands special attention owing to the simple aniconic form he had acquired. In these areas, he is often depicted as simple symbolic chalk drawing on a flat surface drawn as the English letter 'J' with two dots on either side of it. Thus, three major forms of representing Gaṇapati in the area from historical periods can be identified. It is challenging to discern why the aniconic figure is limited to a specific area while the four-armed figure is still being the common representation in other parts of the country. Therefore, the paper seeks to examine the sociocultural conditions that would have caused the transformation of the Gaṇapati sculpture from iconic to aniconic in that particular area. The in-situ evidence of *Gaṇapati* figures, as well as those, are exhibited in archaeological museums are examined. The causative factors for the sculptural productions are discussed concerning the changes in tangible and intangible assets resulted from the process of cultural interactions. Our study shows that accepting and believing him as the governing deity of the region by Sinhalese Buddhists of the area have caused this transformation. Perhaps, this aniconic representations, reveals a widespread and localized form of a Gaṇapati cult that had spread over the region than a traditionally specific purpose to worship Gaṇapati as in other parts of the country.

Keywords: Aniconic, Gaṇapati, Iconic, Pullaiyār, Sociocultural