

SEP. - 2005

Authored By Prof. Vijay Page - Director, MET Institute of Management

Ganeshostav

The ten-day long *Ganesh* festival is an annual ritual, which is eagerly awaited by young and old alike. While the youth look forward to it as an opportunity to partake in community worship, the elders in the family strive to keep up the family traditions and holistic rituals.

However, a century ago, when the late Lokmanya Tilak rejuvenated the *Ganeshotsav*, the social milieu and the context were entirely different. Our nation was reeling under an overpowering British rule, and extreme poverty and struggle for survival had already weakened the community and social structure of the Indian society.

It was against this backdrop of total collapse of society and community network that Lokmanya Tilak chose to promote the *Ganeshotsav* as a means to forge communal harmony and bonding. In 1893, after witnessing the grand *Ganesh* worship festival at the durbar of the Scindias at Gwalior, Lokmanya decided to launch it as a tool for galvanizing a slumbering nation to mass awakening for social action. He persuaded community leaders and businessmen to organize Ganesh mandals so that it would offer a platform to debate relevant social issues. This he hoped would lead to social activism to promote literacy and ultimately reform the society to achieve home rule. Thus *Ganeshotsav* was to offer a platform to sow the seed of political activism through open debate and discussion, eventually leading to the freedom of our country.

Even in the post 1947 era we find that the *Ganeshotsav* platform is still being used to launch debates on social and political issues. However, gradually the form, content and conduct of *Ganeshotsavas* have been changing from intellectual and social to mass exhibitionism and cheap entertainment. The level of mass participation in the *Ganesh* pujas has reached big proportions today, with almost 20000 plus mandals enrolling millions of citizens as their members.

It is unfortunate that this mass platform offered by *Ganeshotsav* is allowed to go into hibernation and slumber for almost 50 weeks of the year. The thousands of mandals networked to every nook and corner of the city, offer a unique opportunity for linking millions of citizens who could be motivated to act for societal and community welfare. As they link up people across the income and community barriers, they have potential to perform miracles through mass participation of the devotees. Such network could prove invaluable both in times of crisis or emergency as well as community welfare programmes.

Imagine for example, on the day of the 26th July deluge if all the *Ganeshutsavs* had been activated and networked, they would have provided a strong lifeline and support system to this crumbling metropolis. They could have provided a ready chain for distribution of essential supplies to the flood affected victims and dispelled the wild rumors, which had caused needless stampede deaths.

One cannot but painfully exclaim like Hamlet,

*It is true, it is pity,
Pity it is, it is true*

Therefore as an after math of the grievous tragedy and disaster of 26th July, we must make all efforts to build and stabilize these mass networks which can offer vital human capital to sustain such natural calamities and emergencies. A city of 25 million people cannot be left to the mercy of a few thousand who man the civic machinery. It needs a human wall of committed and motivated people to stem the tide of misfortune and calamity. The millions who carry the chip of *Ganesh bhakti* on their shoulders would undoubtedly receive the blessing and the *prasad* of the *Vighnaharta* if and when they participate in such community relief and rescue work. They would provide teams and leadership to encounter any crisis as they are already organized into self directed work teams.

We hope and pray that sooner than later, the *Ganeshutsav* samitis, Mohalla Committees and NGOs join with the State machinery to provide emergency relief mechanism to this city. It would be a fitting tribute to those who lost their life needlessly during the 26th July deluge as no one could hold their hand to safety.