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GODS

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Delhi's Sanjay Sawhney has collected over 2,000 images of Ganesha

Rajiv Malik, New Delhi, India

Sanjay started collecting images of Lord Ganesha about five years ago. "I used to collect matchboxes, " he says, "but my wife told me that I should collect something which has some value in life." In fact, it was his wife who initially inspired him to collect Ganeshas, and she has been his primary source of encouragement along the way.

"It started in Rishikesh, " continues Sanjay. "At my wife's suggestion, I purchased a wooden image of Lord Ganesha, which we put in our home shrine." Nice, he mused, but only a beginning. Sanjay began to collect wedding cards with pictures of Hinduism's beloved elephant-faced Deity on them. Normally such cards are thrown away after the rites, but Sanjay wasn't comfortable watching people indiscriminately consign images of the Gods to garbage cans. "I always tell people that either the cards with Ganesha's picture on them should not be produced, or if they are, then we must preserve them." He picks up old, discarded wedding cards with images of the Gods on them, even from the roadside. "I keep the cards with Ganesha on them that I want for my collection, and those with other Gods I reverentially offer to a holy river."

Sanjay Sawhney's collection is such an important part of his life now that he is searching for a new home in which he plans to dedicate an entire room for his Ganeshas. He relates, "I would like to manage it more systematically than I've done so far. I had about 2,000 Ganeshas in my collection a year ago, and now many more have been added." His collection includes cuttings of paintings from wedding and

greeting cards, as well as carved murtis in gold, silver, copper, brass, wood, glass and other materials. He has laminated posters, original paintings, key rings, lamp shades and wax images, to name a few of the many media through which the Remover of Obstacles gives darshan these days. He and his wife have even fashioned their own images of Lord Ganesha.

Sanjay considers it a big achievement that over 200 million people in New Delhi and neighboring states have read about him and his Ganesha collection in newspapers. "This could not have happened without the blessings of Lord Ganesha himself," Sanjay offers. "A lot of people are aware of my collection and recognize me. My friends and relatives also appreciate my interest and keep encouraging me. Whenever an article is published on my collection--over half a dozen have been published so far--my friends and relatives call me up on the phone and tell me that they saw it."

About adding to his collection, Sanjay says, "I am not investing a very large amount of money in purchasing Ganeshas, but whatever I do spend I know is graciously provided by Lord Ganesha Himself. The truth is that from where the Ganeshas come and how I buy them, I just don't know. I feel that all of this is happening, but I am not really doing it." At exhibitions, around town and while on vacation with his family, Sawhney is always on the lookout for a different form of the benevolent, large-bellied Lord. He adds, "Some Ganeshas suddenly appear before me in the most unexpected places, and I quickly pick them up."

According to Sawhney, money is usually not a big hindrance when it comes to buying Ganeshas. However, there have been a few occasions when he couldn't acquire a Ganesha because it was too expensive. He explains, "Sometimes I have to drop something I personally desire and opt for spending the money on adding one more Ganesha to my collection. Even when I give a gift, I try to give a Ganesha."

Sanjay recalls that his parents gave him reverence for the Hindu Gods and Goddesses by their pious example. He is trying to pass that devotion on to his two small children whom, he says, are inspired by the Ganesha collection to do good work. Becoming a vegetarian is another way his special connection with Ganesha has made him a better Hindu.

Sanjay's biggest ambition in life is to construct a Ganesha temple, which he would name Ganesha Dham. He's not sure how he'll manage to gather the resources for such a large project, but hopes that it would be a place where his Ganesha collection could somehow be used to benefit the poor.

Before I leave, Sawhney touches on more philosophical matters: "Ganesha is one of our most beautiful forms of God. He is known for fulfilling people's desires and removing obstacles from their paths, which is probably the reason why He is the first God to be worshiped whenever any puja is done. Though sometimes He may take time to fulfill one's desires, ultimately He does. The forms of Ganesha are endless, and as long as I am alive I will keep on adding more and more Ganeshas to my collection."