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Research Thesis for Master of Philosophy
Faculty of Graduate Studies
University of the Visual and Performing Arts
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Research Topic:

**Evolving Mythologies: From Antiquity to the 21st Century – A study of the Evolution of
the Myth of Lord Ganesh in Sri Lankan Culture.**

Medium: English

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Abstract

There are many constituents of human identity to which the community in which one lives exerts a major influence. Individuals become who they are through constant interactions with their community and communal forces. Key amongst these forces is religion and faith based practices. A defining characteristic of any community, especially Asian communities is their affiliation to one or more religious institutions and their almost subconscious dependence on ritualistic faith based practices.

Sri Lanka is a multicultural, multi-ethnic nation with inhabitants belonging predominantly to four major religions; Buddhism, Catholicism, Islam and Hinduism. Of these four, a majority of Sinhalese are Buddhist. That being said, what is intriguing is the dependency that most Sinhalese Buddhists have towards deities and beings belonging to other faiths. Key amongst these figures is that of Lord Ganesh, son of Shiva and Parvati, two stalwarts in the Hindu pantheon. Whilst the transference of deities between Sri Lanka and predominantly Hindu India can be explained by geographical positioning, what geography fails to explain is how and why Ganesh commands a special place in the hearts of much of Sri Lankan people and why this affection for the elephant headed God goes beyond mere religious reverence.

Throughout this study, it will be explained how Lord Ganesh has managed to permeate the daily lives of Sri Lankans and possible explanations for this phenomenon. Prominent historians, anthropologists and researchers have attempted, throughout time, to unravel the various interpretations of the Ganesh myth to understand why he exerts such influence over the masses devoted to him. This study will cover those explorations extensively as pertinent. The endeavour of this investigation however, will be to understand just what Ganesh means to the Sri Lankan people and how he has achieved this position. It is plausible and not improbable that over time, Ganesh has moved beyond the religious realm to inhabit a more secular and popular position within the hearts and minds of the people. It will be argued that, he has become, for Sri Lankans at least, a God of the common man; a communal God rather than a religious one. It is understood that a deeper understanding of Lord Ganesh and his import would be the result of this endeavour, paving the way for further study of other such deities who have captured the communal psyche.