

A Study of the Kārttikeya-cult as reflected in the Epics and the Puranas

IT may be presumed that the cult of Kārttikeya or the Kaumāra-cult had once existed as an independent religious cult.¹ Though there is no recorded evidence about it available in the Epics and the Purāṇas, Kārttikeya is prominently mentioned in the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*,² but, there, as well as in the Purāṇas, he is often represented as the son of Śiva and as an ancillary deity in the Śiva-religion. Śaivism, especially the Purāṇic Śaivism, which is best reflected in the temple-cult of the South, considers Skanda-worship as one of its integral parts.³ However, as will be shown in the sequel, Kārttikeya has his own special importance in the religious ideology of South India.

The Epics and the Purāṇas present elaborate but diverse versions of the account of the birth of Kārttikeya. The common motif in all these accounts is, however, this: The gods were repeatedly harassed by the demons, under the leadership of Tāraka. They, therefore, complained to Brahmā and sought his help in the matter of overcoming Tāraka. Brahmā told them that it was the son to be born to Śiva and Umā, who alone would be capable of destroying the demon-chief. It was, accordingly, necessary for the gods to bring about the marriage of Śiva and Umā. Madana, the god of love, urged by the gods, undertook to bring Śiva, who was engaged in *samādhi* under the spell of love and thereby get him attracted towards Umā. Enraged at being disturbed in his *samādhi*, the great god burnt Madana to ashes. But the latter's mission was successful and the union of Śiva and Umā did materialise. The son for whom the gods were so anxiously waiting was at last born to the divine couple. This is the general outline of the legend of the birth of Kārttikeya. This episode, which frequently occurs in the Purāṇas, seems to suggest in clear terms that Kārttikeya was not born from the womb of Umā. And yet everywhere he claims to be the son of Umā. Agni, who received the *retas* of Śiva, carried it about for sometime. But soon

1. Sukumar Sen suggests (*Indo Iranica*, 4, p. 27) that Kumāra mentioned in *RI*. X. 135, is the prototype of post-Vedic Kumāra and a counterpart of Iranian Sraoša.

2. In this respect, he is to be contrasted with Gaṇeśa, who figures but rarely in the Epics.

3. There is hardly any Śaiva temple of importance in South India, which has not assigned, in its system of worship, a significant place to Kārttikeya. This applies to Gaṇeśa as well.

being unable to bear that lustrous burden, he deposited it in the streams of the Ganges at a spot overgrown with *śara* reeds. At last the child was born. The six Kṛttikās appeared on the scene and breast-fed the baby. They nurtured it with great care. In course of time Śiva, accompanied by Umā, came to that spot, embraced the child, and blessed it.⁴ In this connection, the Purāṇas also tell us how Umā was fully engaged in severe *tapas*, how, as a result of this, she could not suckle her own child, Skanda, and how, on account of this fact, the goddess came to be known as *apītakuca*.⁵

According to another version, Kārttikeya was the son not of Śiva and Umā, but of Agni and Svāhā.⁶ However, in this context, Agni is identified with Śiva, and Svāhā with Umā.⁷ Yet another version tells quite a different story about the birth of Kārttikeya. It speaks of six children, born separately, having been ultimately joined into one.

A reference may be made at this stage to the account in the *Matsya-Purāṇa*, which compares the birth of Kārttikeya with the production of fire from the *araṇis*.⁸ An allegorical interpretation of the birth of Kārttikeya is given in another Purāṇa. Viṣṇu who is identified with Śiva is Puruṣa. Umā, who is no other than Śrī, is Avyakta or Prakṛti. From their union was produced Ahaṁkāra, and this was Kārttikeya. A strong need was felt at the time for the birth of such a god. For, a leader had to be appointed to command the army of gods.⁹ The Purāṇas also mention that Brahmā and Viṣṇu were born respectively as Heramba and Ṣaḍānana,¹⁰ thereby suggesting the identity of Kārttikeya with Viṣṇu.

The Epics and the Purāṇas present Kārttikeya as having six heads and twelve arms.¹¹ At one place, he is described to have divided himself into six forms, with a view to satisfying the maternal instinct of the six Kṛttikās, each one of whom herself wanted to bring up the child.¹² Elsewhere the god is said to have assumed four different forms to serve four different purposes. As Kumāra, he brought great joy to Śiva. As Viśākha he was the sole delight of Umā. To Kuṭilā (Gaṅgā) and Agni, who too were, in

4. *Skanda P.* I. 2. 29.

5. *Skanda P.* I. 3. 2. 21.

6. *MBh.* III. 220.

7. *Ibid.* III. 217. 5.

8. *Matsya P.* 154. 52-53.

9. *Varāha P.* 25. 1-43.

10. *Skanda P.* I. 3. 2. 17.

11. *MBh.* III. 214. 1-21.

12. *Brahmaṇḍa P.* III. 10. 40-51.

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their own way, responsible for his birth, he was Śākha and Naigameya respectively.¹³ The picture of the god usually presented in the Purāṇas is that of the child, or sometimes of the youth. Skanda, even while he was only a child, could destroy the demon Tāraka. Based on this Purāṇic ideology, Skanda is often worshipped as a child, and also as a hero endowed with youth and exquisite beauty. For the South Indians, he is Murukan, an embodiment of beauty. It is in this sense he is often cited as a standard of comparison.¹⁴

The Epics and the Purāṇas have attributed to Kārttikeya the function of leading the army of the gods.¹⁵ As has been mentioned earlier, the gods had no suitable commander to lead their army against the demons. Therefore, on the advice of Brahmā, they brought about the birth of Kārttikeya. The great pomp and pageantry which accompanied the installation of this god as the leader of the army are described in detail in the *Mahābhārata*¹⁶ and Purāṇas. The *Mahābhārata* recounts how Indra offered to renounce his sovereignty and expressed his desire to instal Skanda in his place as the king of gods, Skanda declined the offer, but readily consented to take upon himself the leadership of the army.¹⁷ It is interesting to note that both the sons of Śiva have been assigned more or less similar functions, as leaders—one became *gaṇapati*, the leader of the *gaṇas*¹⁸ and the other became *deva-senāpati*, the commander of the gods' army.¹⁹

The various Purāṇic accounts about the god have contributed to the shaping of the present popular concept of the god, Skanda. Śakti is the special weapon of this god. It was by means of this weapon that he vanquished the demon Tāraka.²⁰ It was, again, by means of Śakti that he split into two the mountain Krauñca.²¹ Mayūra is often mentioned as the vehicle of Skanda.²² *Kukkuṭa* also is associated with him, sometimes as his vehicle.²³ In later mythology it was displayed as the crest on his

13. *Vāmana P.* 57. 1-59.

14. *Matsya P.* 158. 39. 41.

15. *Vāmana P.* 21. 1-22; *Ibid.* 57. 50-102; *Skanda P.* 1. 2. 30.

16. *MBh.* III. 218. 25.

17. *Ibid.* III. 218. 21.

18. *Matsya P.* 154. 544-47; *Kūrma P.* II. 43. 42.

19. *Brahmāṇḍa P.* III. 10. 40-51.

20. *Vāyu P.* I. 54. 24; *Matsya P.* 160. 1-25.

21. *Vāmana P.* 58. 1-21.

22. *Vāyu P.* I. 54. 19.

23. *Varāha P.* 24. 1-45; as a toy *Matsya P.* 159. 4-11.

banner. The goat also is connected with the god.²⁴ All these are mentioned in the Purāṇas as having been presented to Skanda when the gods celebrated his birth.

The various names by which Skanda is celebrated reflect the various features of his character and personality as depicted in the Purāṇas. The *retas* of Śiva borne by Agni was deposited in a pond in which *śara* grass grew in abundance. Kārttikeya was thus born in the *śaravaṇa*, and he accordingly came to be known as Śaravanabhava or Śarajanmā.²⁵ He was brought up by the six Kṛttikās, and therefore, received the name of Kārttikeya. He was also called Sānmātura, because he was nurtured by the six Kṛttikās as mothers. Kṛttikāputra is another name of Kārttikeya.²⁶ When Agni, unable to bear the *retas* of Śiva, deposited it in the river Gaṅgā, the river retained it and the child was ultimately born out of it. This accounts for Skanda's other name, namely, Gāṅgeya.²⁷ Because the six babies, originally born separately, were welded together into one (*skanna*), the god received his name Skanda.²⁸ The god is often described as having six faces, and is therefore, known as Ṣaṣmukha,²⁹ or Ṣaḍānana. As a continuous source of delight to Pārvatī, he is Pārvatīnandana.³⁰ His names Agnibhūh, Pāvakeya and Pāvaki point to the part played by Agni in the matter of the birth of this god.³¹ Viśākha is another name which occurs in the Purāṇa.³² He is Śikhivāhana because he rides on a peacock.³³ As the commander of the armies of the gods he is Mahāsenā and Senānī.³⁴ The ascetic had his own way of propitiating the god by enshrining him in his heart. Presumably on account of this fact, the god received the name *guha*, which word, in philosophical terminology means the heart.³⁵

We come across two diametrically opposite pictures of Kārttikeya in the Purāṇas. One presents him as a bachelor god,³⁶ while the other presents him as a young hero married to two wives. Both the traditions are pre-

24. *Brahmāṇḍa P.* III. 10. 40-51.

25. *Matsya P.* 6. 27.

26. *Ibid.* 6. 27.

27. *MBh.* I. 127. 13.

28. *Brahmāṇḍa P.* III. 10. 40-51; *Rāmāyaṇa* I. 37. 24-32.

29. *Varāha P.* 25. 44-49; *Vāmana P.* 57. 46.

30. *Vāyu P.* I. 54. 20. 21.

31. *MBh.* I. 127. 13.

32. *Matsya P.* 6. 26; *Ibid* 159. 1-3; According to *Varāha P.* 25. 1-43, Śākha and Viśākha are his attendants.

33. *Vāyu P.* I. 154. 24.

34. *Varāha P.* 25. 1-17; *Vāyu P.* I. 54. 20.

35. *Vāmana P.* 58. 1-121.

36. *Brahma P.* II. 11.

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valent in the country. In Mahārāṣṭra, for instance, Kārttikeya is regarded as a confirmed bachelor. Even the mere appearance of women in his temples is strictly prohibited.³⁷ As against this in the temples of the South, he is shown with two wives, Vallī and Devasenā. There are, however, some temples in the South where the god is also depicted as a *saṁnyāsin*. The *Śiva-Purāṇa* mentions Gajavallī as the wife of Skanda.³⁸ The Purāṇas and also the Great Epic describe in detail Skanda's marriage with Devasenā. Devasenā obviously represents a figurative personification of the army of the gods. Indra as the leader of the gods, is said to have given her in marriage to Kārttikeya.³⁹ The characterisation of the god as a bachelor also has a Purāṇic background. The *Brahma-Purāṇa*, for instance, narrates the following legend: Kumāra was deeply addicted to sensual pleasures. He often enjoyed the company of divine damsels. Once, however, he suddenly discovered in these damsels a kind of resemblance of his mother. This episode fundamentally changed his attitude towards women in general.⁴⁰

About Skanda, *Bhandarkar* has made the following observation: "Another god whose worship was extensively practised in ancient times, but is now rare, is Skanda or Kārttikeya."⁴¹ Obviously, so far as South India is concerned, this observation is quite unwarranted. As a matter of fact, it may be pointed out among the Hindu gods, Kārttikeya perhaps claims the largest number of devotees in the South. The ancient literary works in Tamil present to us quite a wealth of information about this god. In Tamil Kārttikeya is celebrated as Murukan a name which denotes a youth with exquisite beauty. Being an embodiment of beauty, Murukan is always regarded as a standard of comparison in that respect. This appellation has its equivalent in the Sanskrit name Kumāra. The god is also known, for this reason, as Kumārasvāmin. Another name prominently ascribed to this god in the South is Velan. This is a very popular name, and implies that he is a wielder of a lance. Almost the same is the implication of the Sanskrit name Śaktidhara. He is Seyon, which means one of red complexion. He is the lord of *kuruñci* or mountainous regions. In this connection, it is significant that most of the temples exclusively assigned to this god are situated on hill tops. Curiously enough, at times, Tamil literary works speak of young girls as being possessed by Murukan. Under such

37. Such is the rule, for instance, at the Kārttikeya-temple on the Parvati hill near Poona.

38. *Śiva P. Kailāsa-saṁhitā*, 7. 40 and 64.

39. *Matsya P.* 4. 11.

40. *Brahma P.* II. 11.

41. *Bhandarkar*, *Vaiṣṇavism, Śaivism and Minor Religious Systems*, p. 150.

circumstances, the god was to be propitiated by magic spells. The same idea seems to be reflected in the reference to an evil spirit as *skandagraha*.

The Āgamas and the *Kumāratantra* have, in conformity with the Purāṇic portrayal of Skanda, prescribed the construction of the image of Kārttikeya in various poses, for the purpose of installation and worship, in temples. Of these the one portraying the god with six faces and twelve arms may be said to be the most significant. Provision is also made for images with six heads and two arms, another with one head and eight arms, and still another with one head and two arms.

SANMUKHA

The Ṣaṇmukha image, as the name implies, shows the god with six faces and twelve arms. The faces have two eyes each. The splendour of the moon and thirty-two auspicious marks are displayed in the image. Both the ankles are adorned with anklets. The peacock is displayed in the background. Ten out of the twelve arms are depicted as wielding respectively *śakti*, *śara*, *khaḍga*, *dhvaja*, *gadā*, *cāpa*, *kuliśa*, *kheṭaka*, *śūla*, and *pañkaja*. The other two hands are in the *abhaya* and the *varada* poses. The Ṣaṇmukha image is also shown as mounted on the peacock, whereby the left leg drops down, and the right one is folded up to the knee and laid on the vehicle on which he is mounted. The image portrayed on the *padmapīṭha* is in a standing pose and both the feet are placed evenly.⁴² If six arms are featured, the weapons held in the four hands are respectively *nāga*, *vajra*, *śakti* and *arrow*; the other two hands are in the *abhaya* and the *varada* poses.⁴³ The image with six faces and two arms is depicted as wielding *vajra* and *śakti*. On the left is represented Devasenā and on the right Valli, both of whom are featured as carrying lotuses in their left and right hands respectively. The other two hands of these two consorts of the god are shown as hanging down.⁴⁴

A mention may be made at this stage of a peculiar portrayal of the god, which is fairly common in the South but which cannot be directly related to the Purāṇic tradition. According to it, Skanda is presented as an ascetic, unattached to worldly life. A shaven head, a rosary, a staff, and coloured robes befitting a *saṇnyāsīn* are the salient features of this image. Skanda is

42. *Kāraṇa*. II. 93. 2-5.

43. *Ibid.* verse 6.

44. *Ibid.* verses 9-12.

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also featured in sculpture as *gurumūrti*, where he is shown as imparting higher knowledge to his father Śiva, who as a *śiṣya*, sits at his feet with all the humility befitting a pupil.⁴⁵ Another representation peculiar to the South is based on the account which is given in the Tamil rendering of the *Skanda-Purāna*, but which is not traceable in the original. In this, Skanda is portrayed as chastising Brahmā, the creator, because the latter had failed to explain to him the meaning and significance of the *praṇava*. Mention should also be made in this connection of the Somāskanda—form of Śiva, already described.⁴⁶ Here Skanda is depicted as a child in the company of Śiva and Umā.

The rituals performed in the worship of Kumāra are for the most part similar to those performed in the worship of Śiva. The difference lies only in the substitution of the appropriate subordinate deities and weapons. Nandin is thus replaced by *mayūra*; similarly the *triśūla* of Śiva is substituted by *śakti* or the lance. That the worship of Skanda gained very great currency in the South—certainly greater currency than that of any other ancillary god of Śaivism—is indicated by the fact that only in connection with the worship of Skanda was an independent text required to be produced with a view to instructing the worshippers in the details of the various rituals. This work, though not classed as an Āgama, is given wide recognition as *tantra*. The work, accordingly, came to be known as *Kumāratantra*. The *Kumāratantra*, however, cannot be regarded as being comparable to the Śakta—tantras, for the absence of the elements of *vāma* form of worship is conspicuous in it. The work consists of fifty-one chapters and deals with such topics as *nityapūjāvidhi*, *naivedyaividhi*, *agnikāryavidhi*, *nityotsavavidhi*, *kuṇḍalakṣaṇa*, *dikṣā*, *snapana*, *jīrṇodhāraṇa*, *vāstuśāntihoma*, *diśāhoma*, *mūrtihoma*, *pratimālakṣaṇa*, and *rathapratīṣṭhā*. Apart from what is laid down in this *tantra*, each temple of Skanda, in the South has evolved a tradition of its own. The temple at Palani may be cited as an instance in point. The god enshrined in that temple, is presented as an ascetic, though neither the Purāṇas nor the *tantra* lend support to this. Reference may also be made to another tradition, which prevails in certain parts of South India and Ceylon. One finds the worship of *śakti* prevailing in some temples. The *śakti*, the weapon of Skanda shaped like a lance, is made of bronze or silver or gold, and is installed in the place of the image of the god. The rituals relating to the installation and worship of *śakti* and the treatment which this object of veneration receives, clearly assume the complete identification of it with Skanda.

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45. *Kantapurāṇam*, (Tamil rendering in verse), *Ayanaicciraipuripaṭalam*, pp. 500-508.

46. *Ibid.* pp. 508-522.