

# The Myth of Skanda : A re – reading

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## 0.1. Introduction

The Skanda myth as depicted in the various Puranas and Epics yield different reading in different context and the interpretation of this myth can be a rewarding experience for scholars working in different fields of study. Myth by their nature is not the imaginary fabrication of the human mind, but is a product of history containing cherished memories of the past in a symbolic language. It is a type of speech chosen by history, says Barthes, and has to be defined by its intention which is more than its literal sense and this intention is somehow frozen, purified, eternalized and made absent by this literal sense<sup>1</sup>. In this paper I have chosen to present three different types of interpretation together with my reading of Skanda myth, in which the first is the direct historical derivation of the myth and the other two are metaphysical and psychological in its sense respectively. This myth itself expresses the concurrence of the God Skanda over his adversaries - the Curapatman and his brothers. Before we enter into this discussion in detail, it is necessary to narrate in brief the complex story of the Skanda myth.

According to the Skanda myth in the Ramayana the Gods and Risis in search of a Senapati in their war against the Asuras, approached Brahma for advice and were told that Agni would produce with Ganga the senapati they wanted. So they went to mount Kailasa and engaged

Agni to produce a son from Ganga (the daughter of mountain). When Agni approached Ganga, she assumed a glorious divine form at the sight of which, Agni spilled his semen all over her. Since Ganga was unable to bear the semen, Agni advised her to place it at the foot of the Himalayas, where it took the form of different metals such as gold, copper, iron, tin and lead after its contact with earth. From the embryo the child Kumara took shape. The gods engaged the Kartikas to nurse him and they claimed him as their son and he became Kartikeya. He was also Skanda, as there was sport at his birth; he developed six faces for being nursed by the Karttikas and conquered Asuras by his strength and was crowned the commander of the army of Devas<sup>2</sup>.

The story given in Mahabharata is little more complex than Ramayana and differs in details. Agni fell in love with wives of the Sapta risis and being unable to attain the objects of his love resolved in despair to give up his corporeal form. Svaha - daughter of Daksa, who was enamoured by Agni took advantage of the opportunity and appeared before him in the guise of the wives of the six out of the seven risis, Sivaha could not assume the divine form of Arunthathi - the wife of Vasistha, whose power of chastity was beyond the ability of Svahas impersonation. Svaha has intercourse with Agni in succession and repaired the seeds of the Agni in a golden reservoir on the top of the

inaccessible mountain, out of which Skanda was born with six heads, While he was a baby of four days, Skanda split the Kraunca hill, demolished the peaks of the Svetha Mountain, defeated Indra and caused a great commotion in Svarga. The mother clans accepted Skanda as their son and as their leader. In the course of time, Skanda become a mighty hero and the commander in chief of the army of Devas and gained victory over the Asuras<sup>3</sup>.

Slightly variant version of the Skanda myth is given in Kantapuram. According to this version, Devas approaches Lord Siva and begged him to beget a son, who can be the Senapati in their war against the Curapatman and his brothers. At the gods' request, Lord Siva emanated his fiery energy from his central eye and it was carried by Vayu (the wind), Agni (the fire) and Ganga (the river) and deposited on a lotus flower in a pond called Saravanam. The child Murukan was born from this fiery energy. Then Kacciyapper goes on narrate more or less the same story as stated in the Epics and Puranas. However, it is interesting to note that Skanda was born not from the womb of a mother in all the versions stated above.

## 0.2. Historical Reading:

Swami Jnanaprakasara (1910) a traditional SriLankan scholar, interpreted Skanda myth based on Kacciyappers Kanthapuram, in a historical plane. Mythology in his opinion, is a product of the imagination and the expression of the ideal, so too is the description of the world. He argued that Skanda was an Aryan warrior who invaded Deccan in

India and defeated Curapatman - the King of the Asura race. In the course of history, this event has taken the form of a myth and the worrier Skanda - because of his heroic character, was elevated to the status of a god and admitted into the Brahmanic pantheon with the annual festival of Curan por rite which symbolized the victory of Skanda over Curapatman. By being imaginatively identified Skanda as the commander of the gods forces i.e, Devasenapati, Skanda lost his historical root and deified<sup>4</sup>.

To justify his argument, Jnanaprakasara cites the case of Sunthara Pandiyan - the King of Madurai, who was considered as an incarnation of god Siva and several other instances where the local heroes after their death, were deified and worshipped by the indigenous people<sup>5</sup>.

According to Kanthapuram, Curapatman in his fight against Skanda / Murukan, assumed various forms, huge bird and earth, terrible wind etc. Murukan destroyed all the fallacious forms of Curapatman. Finally he jumped into the sea and changed into a huge mango tree. The spear of Murukan split the mango tree. Then the defeated Curapatman appeared in his own Asura form before Murukan. The divine weapon of Skanda split his body into two, which turned a cock and a peafowl and again were ready to attack Skanda. When Skanda looked at them with grace, the feeling of hate and enmity disappeared from the heart of Curapatman. The cock serves Skanda as his standard, while the peacock serves as his vehicle.

Regarding the question of how to interpret the various forms assumed by

Curapatman such as bird, mango tree etc., Jnanaprakasas argues that since Curapatman was a historical personality these assumed forms could be considered as the symbols denoting the powerful tribes that supported Curapatman in his battle against Skanda<sup>6</sup>. On the problem of assimilation of Skanda with Tamil Murukan, observes Jnanaprakasas, Murukan is essentially an ancient Dravidian Tamil deity with characteristics not dissimilar to those of Arayn Skanda and finally merged with Marukan as a result of north Indian influence. However, mention must be made here of the recent researches on Skanda – Murukan assimilation which has revealed that “Skanda arrived in Tamil Nadu in about the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D, and was assimilated with the Tamil Murukan before 5<sup>th</sup> century A.D. By about the 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D, Murukan/ Skanda had become a pre eminent Tamil god who acquires the popular title of Subramanya”<sup>7</sup>.

### 03. Theological reading:

The reading of Skanda myth by Sabaratha mudalier (1913) - another Srilankan traditional scholar, is based on a religious plane. He argues that the lord Skanda is no other than lord Siva himself, the difference being only a slight variation in the form assumed by him. His six faces represent the five faces of Siva plus the face of Vinayaka or the pranava. His two saktis represent the ichcha sakti and kriya sakti of Siva. His vel (spear) represents the trident of Siva. His form and actions are resplendent with grace, which is

accessible to the high and the low alike. On account of his profuse grace, he is considered to be the chief god of the kali era, and is also considered to be the friend and lord of the hill tribes. The Vedic literature refers to him as the god of war, but the profusion of his grace and his spiritual sublimity are elaborately treated in the Agamas and Puranas, especially in the Skandapurana. Vedas are concerned more with the material interests of the souls than with their spiritual advancement; and this is the reason why they speak of the warlike spirit of lord Subramanya and are silent on his spiritual excellence. Lord Subramanya's sports with the giant called Curan are full of spiritual lore. The three brothers Tharugan, Cinkan and Curan represent the three kinds of mala known as Anavam, Maya and Karma, and his killing them with his jnanasakti (spear) represents his killing of the three kinds of mala with pure jnanam<sup>8</sup>.

### 04. Structuralist reading

Structuralist reading of Skanda myth is given by Kamil Zvelebil (1978) based on the method proposed by Levi Strauss. He argues that the purpose of any myth is to provide a logical model capable of overcoming a real contradiction<sup>9</sup>. According to this theory the war between Curapatman and Murukan represents the struggle between nature and culture.

Murukan (Skanda) is the symbol of eternal youth, of procreation, and of culture. Cur/Curapatman denotes the wild, untamed, inimical, threatening nature and the possession of the most destructive quality. The victory of Skanda over Curapatman, according to

Zvelebil, is the destruction of the evil qualities of the human beings and the transformation of the wild, inimical, untamed human nature into cultured, non-inimical and tamed.

However, Zvelebil himself accepts the possibility of several interpretations of the Skanda myth and I attempt to explore one in the following section.

## 05. Myths and Societal Facts

The depiction of Asuras and Devas in the early Vedic literature emphasize the fact that they belonged to different social groups and different cultic systems with enmity to each other. Edward Hale has revealed the fact that the Asuras are the human enemies of the Aryan people. They were described by the text (Vedic) as enemies of the god Indra, and became mythologized into a class of beings who opposed the class of being called gods<sup>10</sup>. The matriarchal forms were observed chiefly by the Asura culture upon which patriarchal forms of Devas set their imprint. The meaning of Skanda myth seems to be a mythological description of the victory of patriarchal authority of Devas over the matriarchal system of the Asuras. Matriarchal system is a historical phenomena which belonged to a cultural period preceding that of the patriarchal system and it began to decline with the victorious development of the paternal order of the Devas. In order to investigate and understand it, one has to decode the myth of Skanda and find out how this myth utters its message. What is given in the present form of the story is the patriarchal version of the skanda myth and it has to be decoded to underneath the older layers. Identifying

the older layers is not an easy task – except tracing the elements of antiquity from the isolated events and phenomena in the motifs of Skanda myth.

The thesis of matriarchal society was first proposed and developed by Bachofen (1861) in the nineteenth century<sup>11</sup>. Sixteen years latter the discovery of Bachofen was confirmed by and American ethnologist L.W Morgan (1877) who demonstrated the existence of a matriarchal social stucture among the American Indians. Both Bachofen and Morgan's works were thoroughly studied by F. Engels and served as the basis of his work on family. Erich Fromm (1952) used it as a theoretical principle in his study of Oedipus myth.

Bochofen showed that the difference between the patriarchal and the matriarchal order went far beyond the social supremacy of men and women, respectively, but was one of social and moral principles<sup>12</sup>.

Now let us state in brief the principles and values of the matriarchal and patriarchal systems. Matriarchal system is characterized by an emphasis on ties of blood ties to the soil and a passive acceptance of all natural phenomena. It recognizes the natural and biological values as opposed to intellectional ones. The aim of life according to matriarchal world based on the physical side of man (corporeal life), his happiness and there is nothing more important or dignified than human existence and life. On the other hand, patriarchal system is characterized by respect for man made law, by a predominance of rational thought and by man's effort to change natural phenomena. It considers obedience to authority to be the main

virtue. Instead of the principle of equality, here we find the concept of favorite son and a hierarchical order in society.

Skanda as the son, more precisely the surrogate son of Lord Siva enforced the hierarchical order among the Devas. Curapatman represents the matriarchal principle and thus he is the uncompromising adversary to the representative of patriarchal authority. The sport of Skanda in the early days of his birth; i.e., disordering the nature (Kantapurānam :verses 1074-1084), his war against Intiran (Kantapurānam: verses 1098-1110), the incident of putting Piraman in jail (Kantapurānam: verses 1205 – 1219) exemplify the emerging nature of patriarchal leadership of Skanda from his childhood itself. In contrast to this individualistic character of the patriarchal system, matriarchal culture emphasizes the exclusive respect for the bond of blood which plays an important role in Asura culture. Violation of this blood which plays an important role in Asura culture. Violation of this blood bond is considered as a crime. Curapatman and his brothers ruled in different places with equal status. They had greater love for their mother and sister. This is one of the noblest aspects of matriarchal culture. In the matriarchal system says Bachofen, the idea of motherhood produce a sense of universal fraternity among all men, which dies with the development of paternity. The family based on father right is a closed individual organism, whereas the matriarchal family bears the typically universal character that stands at the beginning of all development and

distinguishes material life from lugher spiritual life.<sup>14</sup>

The puranas generally follow the story of the birth of Skanda as contained in Kantapurānam, viz that he is not born from a mother's womb, but from the fiery energy of Siva (Kanthapurānam: verses 894 –902). According to this story, even though Parvati desired to obtain a son from her husband her desire was deprived, whereas curacai or mayai desired and obtained children from Kacipar who is not her conjugal husband. Curapatman and his brothers were born from the union of Kacipar and Curacai (Kanthapurānam: verses 1922-1955). This fact leads us to a conclusion that the motherhood without marriage prevailed in Asura culture.

But in the case of patriarchal culture marriage bond seems to be so essential to the childbearing motherhood. It stresses completely different forms of sexual relation based on the concept of chastity. In the episode of Acamuki (sister of Curapatman) – Intirani dialogue in Kantapurānam, Acamuki advocate maternal – tellurian way of life (kanthapurānam; verses 3320–3332), whereas Intirani expresses paternal – uranian attitude towards the life (Kantapurānam : verses 3333-3344). Paternal conception of chastity obviously expressed in connection with the birth story of Skankda in Skandapurana in which it was said, that the power of penance as well as the regular services rendered by Arundhati to her husband, Svaha could not assume the form of Arundahi<sup>14</sup>. She has accepted male authority as her ultimate norm and her loyalty to her husband exemplified as an

ideal for the womanhood in patriarchal culture.

The value system of matriarchal culture, says Bachofen, is based on naturalism, its thinking is material and its development predominantly physical<sup>15</sup>. In accordance with this line of thought only the natural and biological needs become worthwhile; spiritual and other higher needs are worthless. The exclusive description of this matriarchal principle was illustrated in detail in the episode of Curacai's advice to her sons and in the section of Cukkiracariyar's teaching to Curapatman in Kantapuranam. When Kacepar explains the spiritual path to his sons to attain liberation, Curacai intervened and said, only the sages who seeks release from bondage are interested in this path of liberation, not our children. They belong to the Asura race, acknowledge only corporeal life, their morality based on material welfare and worldly happiness, not the spiritual development (kantapuranam: verses 2270 - 2293). The teaching of Cukkiracariyar to Curapatman characterize the matriarchy as dominated by the instintual and natural values. There is neither the guilt and atonement nor the distinction between good and bad act (in the patriarchal sense) for Asura race. They are enemies of Devas, their life style dominated by the principle of talion (Kantapuranam: verses 2455 - 2505)

With the triumph of patriarchal culture of Devas the primacy of motherhood vanishes and with it inconsequence disappears the bond of blood, equality and fraternity. Individualism, obedience to authority and the

hierarchical order formulates the basic norms of patriarchal morality in which the rise of spiritual life over corporeal existence is emphasized. Cinkamukan appeal to Curapatman to accept the patriarchal authoritarian leadership of Skanda (Kanthapuram: verses 4799-4815), and the Iraniyan - a son of Curapatman, request to release the Devas who are in the prison and to surrender to Lord Siva (Kanthpur-anam: verses 6059 - 6095) denote the degeneration of the matriarchal culture. Skanda - Curapatman war is the final assault on the matriarchal culture of Asura in which matriarchy was defeated and forced to disengage.

## 06. Concluding Remarks

Janaprakasara interpreted Skanda myth by the object of its message and hence, he considered it as a historical event and the hero of this myth as historical personality. Sabaratna mudiliyar views it on a religious basis and argue for a metaphysical interpretation. On the other side, Kamil Zveleebil seeks a permanent structure of the human mind in the skanda myth and concluded that the purpose of this myth is to provide a logical model capable of overcoming a real human contradiction. However, all these interpretations are neither adequate nor satisfactory for anyone who wants to study the occurrence of the paradigm changes symbolically reflected in the myth of Skanda. The present reading of Skanda myth lends itself to an analysis on the basis of societal paradigm, which I believe is more or less satisfactory from the socio philosophical point of view.

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