

SIGNIFICANCE OF SKANDA WORSHIP

By Dr.E.S.Neelakantan

ANY religious practice, according to me, should be one of the six that were prevalent in pre-Sankara India. Before Sankara (8th Century AD), the Vedic practice existed as six independent practices: *Sauryam* with the principal deity *Surya*, *Saaktam* with *Sakti*, *Vaishnavam* with *Vishnu*, *Gaanapatyam* with *Ganapati*, *Saivam* with *Sivam*, and *Kaumaaram* with *Kumara*. The greatest thinker and literary master of India, Sankara unified these edifices into one, although he did not provide a single name for it.

The present article refers to *Skanda* and *Skanda* worship. *Skanda* worship is more popular among the Southern-Indian Hindus, than those of Northern India. Most of us – Southern Indians – are familiar that *Skanda* gained the name *Swaaminaata*, when he explained the 'pravana tatva' to *Maheswara*. In that sense, He is the *Acharya (Guru)* of *Treta yuga*, other *yugas* being *Satya Sivam*, *Dwapara Krsna*; and *Kali Sankara*. *Skanda* is known by several names, *Subrahmanyan*, *Baahuleyan*, *Guhan*, *Shanmukan*, *Phalaneetra-sudan*, *Krauncha-daaranan*, *Kartikeyan*, *Shiki-vaahanan*, *Velayudan*, *Pranadaartiharan*, *Devasenaatipati*, and many others (Refer *Subramanya Sahasra-naamaavali*).

The puranas and epics drive home the messages relayed in the Vedas and Upanishads. To Lord Skanda, the spear, peacock, and the rooster are the items that enable Him to fulfill His functions. The veiling power is *maya*. The symbolic items adorning Skanda enable the *jivan* to transcend *maya*. The compassionate Deity showers His grace on the *jivan* and restores it to the supreme abode.

Nonetheless, *Murugan* is the most popular name in southern India. *Murugan* is the most handsome and charming youthful Divinity.

References to Skanda in Astrology

Does *Skanda* control Astrology or Astrology control *Skanda*? We know that when governments pass a rule, then everyone, the Prime Minister included, is bound by that rule. In that sense, *Skanda* is also bound by Astrology's rules. If Mars is affected in a particular horoscope, we suggest propitiation of *Skanda*. In such contexts, it is inferable that *Skanda* controls the planets, e.g., Mars, which influences human lives much. *Mantreswara* in his treatise *Phaladiptika* indicates that for one who follows *ahimsa*, who earns wealth only through fair means, and who observes *niyama* (dharmic rules) in every day life, all planets always remain benevolent.

Object of temple worship

While we are discussing *Skanda* and Skanda worship, I think it would be pertinent to briefly refer to the significance of temple worship. Our ancestors have enlightened us that. Human body, in one sense, is the abode of God. *Jivan* (soul) is the equivalent of the Divine. In *Viveka-Chudamani*, where Sankara expounds his 'no two' principle, he explores *Bhramara-kita nyaya*. *Bhramara* is bee (commonly seen as a 'wasp'); *kita* is caterpillar. When the caterpillar recognizes a wasp, it is 'frightened'; however, for a split second, the caterpillar's total attention is on the wasp, and for that brief time, it gets transformed into the wasp. Earlier I had alluded to that the *jivan* is the same as the universal vibration (the *Paramaatman*). All that the *jivan* has to do is to focus on the *Paramaatman* to shed its *jiva* status. Similar to a caterpillar's transformation into a wasp, in a jiffy, *jivan* could, and can, realize its inimitable identity with the *Paramaatman* (the *Brahmam*). Is this easy? Yes and no.

Enlightenment is achievable, but how many of us are ready to undertake the journey to it? We have heard of William Shakespeare's dramas; but how many of us have read them? Someone defined a book becomes a *classic*, when everyone admires, but none reads. Similarly, more and

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more of us talk of spiritual *sadhana*, but none practises to attain it. An old joke comes to my mind: a person was called to help in quelling a fire. The called person said, "I will bring a bucket of water to quell the fire". "From where would you get water?" "By digging a well", he said. In a similar sense, a temple is a ready-made, tailored solution for our spiritual journey, and it offers an easy, ready-made pathway to what we consider salvation and enlightenment.

To contemplate on God, many path-ways exist. One popular pathway is through worshipping in a temple.

Pre-requisite for descent of divine grace

Getting back to *Skanda* and *Skanda* worship, how do we become eligible to earn His grace? Do food and dietary practices play any role? How could we make sense out of *Sura Samharam*, the annihilation of the demon *Surapadman* by *Skanda*? Some pointers are offered here. The object of slaying *Surapadman* was to free the devas, who were hassled and harassed by *Surapadman*. The devas were eligible to be freed by Divine action. The pre-requisite here is that the recipient of Divine action should be eligible to receive it. Unless the *karmic* balance remains favourable, none is eligible to receive Divine grace. Unless appropriate money value occurs in the bank, the cheque will not be honoured. Moreover, one should strive to achieve the celestial '*deva*' traits (*sura guna*) to be eligible for Divine

grace. This eligibility can be procured by the one, who leads a life meticulously following what have been dictated in the Sastras. In *Ayurveda*, a concept says that once food is digested, its essence gets absorbed into the body; the last portion of food is absorbed into 'mind'. Our action-dictating thoughts germinate from consciousness, and consciousness is influenced by the food we consume. When *Rahu* was beheaded by *Vishnu*, a drop of nectar spilt on the ground. A plant grew out of that, which we know, today, as Garlic. Because it grew out of nectar, it includes multiple medicinal virtues. But onion and garlic are unsuitable for spiritual pursuits, because of their origins from *Rahu*.

Skanda as Preceptor

Guru plays a key role in leading us on spiritual path. The spiritual mentor helps us to burn Aignorance and meanness. *Skanda* is the *guru*. In *Swamimalai* near *Kumbakonam*, *Skanda* becomes the *guru* to his father. In the unfolding of *Skanda Lila*, two factors are valuable. First is that the lower self, regulated by lower instincts, must be recognized as an evil force, which blocks self-realization. An alignment with Divine forces to fight the lower instincts should be achieved. Second is that we need to fight the basic mean nature. Merely seeking Divine

grace will not serve our purpose, Unless we demonstrate our sincerity in seeking. Divine grace will not be ensuing.

Kandar anubhuti as a mantra sastra

Saint Arunagiri's *Kandar anubhuti* is *mantra sastra*. This composition bestows wishes of the seeker; it is widely read.

Symbolism of Skanda

Valli and *Deivaanai* are represented as consorts of *Skanda* — when He becomes *Subramanya*. *Valli* represents the *jivan*, which exists separated from the *paramatman* — *Skanda*. The separated *jivan* roams about in wilderness — symbolized by the forest in this context. The *guru*'s task is to enable the *jivan* (*jivatman*) to join the *Paramaatman* — the *Brahmam*. Here the *Guru* is Sage *Narada*. Integral parts of *Skanda* are the spear, which denotes *gnana sakti*, *Valli* represents *ichcha sakti* — the power of desire —, and *Deivaanai* represents *ichcha sakti* — the power of action. Any legitimate desire will automatically be fulfilled, thus say our *sastras*. It is the Almighty who plants desire in the heart of humans at the first instance. This is *ichcha sakti*. The *Lalita Sahasranama* praises *Sri Mata* as the embodiment of the mighty powers, *ichcha*, *gnana*, and *kriya*.

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9388556053 Zodiac East Guruvayur - 0487 2552851