

## **Worship of the Hindu war-god Skanda-Karttikeya- Subrahmanya**

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### **Abstract**

Skanda-Karttikeya, the war god in Hindu pantheon, has been in worship from ancient times. From being the tutelary and spiritual head of the Yaudheyas, to being frequently represented on coins and as murtis with separate shrines by the Kushanas and Guptas, this god had been in popular worship. As Shaivism became stronger with greater royal patronage in northern India, in the post Gupta period the sect of Skanda got merged with the Saiva sect and the god became a part of the Shaiva family as a *parsadevata*, seen only in the niche of the central shrine of a Shiva temple. This paper explores the now largely forgotten war god Skanda, as he is found described in the old texts and depicted on seals and coins from ancient India.

**Keywords:** iconography, Karttikeya, Skanda, Subrahmanya, war-god.

### **Introduction:**

Skanda or Karttikeya, the war god, has been a part of Hindu worship from early times. This is evident from Patanjali's comments on Panini's Astadhyayi (sutra V.3.99), which reads:

*apanya ityucyate tatredam na sidhyati | Sivah Skandah Visakha iti | kim Karanam |  
mauryairhirahyarthibhirarcah prakalpitha | bhavet tasu na syat | yastvetah  
sampratipujarthastasu bhavisyati.*

Here we find the mention of Skanda along with Shiva and others as whose images were being made for worship. In a separate context Patanjali mentions Skanda as a popular *laukika devata* or a folk deity. In later coins and books, Skanda is referred by various names, such as, Kumara, Guha, Subrahmanya, Mahasena, Brahmanya, etc. Taking into context these various names, scholars believe that many associated god concepts were at the base of the what was later Skanda-Karttikeya. This finds support in the rather hazy accounts given in the epics about the origin of Skanda, and his parentage too finds different explanations in different contexts.

Karttikeya's association with war is also quite ancient, which is evident from the Yaudheyas placing him as their corporeal and spiritual head. The Yaudheyas were a martial republican clan (*ayudhajivi ksatriyas*- livelihood based on weapons) that were at the peak of their power from 500 BCE to around 4<sup>th</sup> century CE. In the *Bhagavadgita*, Ch. 10, lord Krishna says he is Skanda among the warriors (*senaninamaham Skandah*). In the context of

his parentage, *Mahabharata* refers to a theory where Karttikeya is identified with Sanatkumara, the oldest son of Brahman. This story can be traced to the *Chandogya Upanishad* (VII. 26) where Sanatkumara is said to be the same as Skanda (*Bhagavan-Sanatkumarastam Skanda ityacaksate*). Sanatkumara is the instructor of Brahmavidya, and from this another aspect of the Karttikeya is revealed, which is that of an instructor deity, a concept popular in south India. Interestingly, Skanda is also the popular god among dacoits and thieves, as evident from the old Sanskrit drama, *Mrcchakatikaby* Sudraka. He is also described as goat headed or *Chagavakra/Naingameya*, and many of these aspects have been ascribed to him from the various traits seen in Rudra-Shiva.

Skanda- Karttikeya's worship was well in place in northern India from ancient times, and this is clear from the mention of a shrine for Svami Mahasena or Brahmanya deva (another name for Karttikeya) in the Bilsad stone pillar inscription of Kumaragupta period (415-16 CE). A stone pillar inscription from Bihar of Skandagupta period, also speaks of a shrine dedicated to Skanda and the Saptamatrikas, where he is the protector of the matrikas. Despite the importance of Skanda as the war god in ancient India, he lost his relevance and got merged within the Saiva form of worship in northern India during the post Gupta period. Thereafter, rarely separate shrines were dedicated to Karttikeya, and he became one of the *parsadevatas* of Shiva (along with Parvati and Ganesha), occupying the western central niche of the main shrine in a Shiva temple. However interestingly, Skanda retained his importance in south India, and separate shrines were dedicated to him by many ruling dynasties. Karttikeya as Subrahmanya (Sanskrit name) and Murugan (Tamil name) is still held in great reverence in southern parts of India and worshipped daily in temples dedicated solely to him; while in comparison, Bengal worships him as a separate deity only once a year on the last day of Kartika mash (October - November) where married women pray to him for having children.

This article studies the antiquity of worship and iconography of Skanda through a literature study and a study of seals and coins, in an attempt to bring focus on the now largely forgotten war-god. As a special theme the paper will briefly discuss the link between Skanda and Surya as found in some texts. Worship of Skanda stands as a testimony of the constantly evolving themes that particularly characterize Hinduism, where it has been observed that often once popular deities lose relevance with the passage of time, as other deities more suitable to that era and context replace them and become the primary gods.

## Discussion

### *Karttikeya or Skanda in Vedic literature*

The concept of a war god was common across all ancient cultures. The ancient Greeks had Ares as their god of war, while the Romans had Mars. In early Vedic literature Indra and Agni were held as the gods of war, and Indra has been repeatedly referred as the *Purandara*

or the defeater of *puras*. In the *Rig Veda*, Agni too is seen as an important war god and he is invoked in *RV 8. 43. 21* to lead the war. Agni is said to destroy the enemies like a fire consumes wild bushes and as trees are struck down by lightning. He is called *Sahasrajit* (conqueror of thousands) who is the mighty vanquisher of the Panis and Dasyus, and receives the title of ‘*Vrtra-slayer*’. In *Atharvaveda* Agni is seen taking part in and leading many wars, and he is often invoked for success in battles, where he helps his worshippers by confusing their enemies. Thus, it is not surprising that Skanda or Kartikeya, who is shown as the son of Agni in many of the kathas in the Epics and Puranas, should also figure as a war god. Skanda’s connection with wisdom and learning can also be attributed to Agni’s characteristics as depicted in the *Rig Veda*, where he is termed as “all-knowing” (*Visvavid*), “possessor of all knowledge” (*Visvavedas*), and “with the intelligence of a sage” (*kavikratu*).

With the passage of time, as religion evolved, there appeared a new god of war, who was more comprehensive than Agni or Indra and with a younger and greater romantic appeal. This new god of war was variously known as Skanda, Kumara, and Karttikeya. In *Satapatha Brahmana*, Kumara is said to be the ninth form of Agni or Rudra (in early Vedic literature Rudra is often associated with Agni); thus, appearing as one of the aspects of the *Rig Vedic* Agni. The *Maittrayani Samhita* contains three names for Skanda in the form of gayatri mantra - *tat Kumaraya vidmahe Karttikeyaya dhimayi tannah Skandah pracodayae* (MS 2-9.1.11-12). In *Taittiriya Aranyaka* Skanda is referred to both as Mahasena and Sanmukha; while in *Chandogya Upanisad*, Skanda is identified with Sanatkumara, and this association continues in the epics and the puranas. In *Skandayaga* or *Dhurtakalpa*, which is a part of the *Parisistas* of the *Atharvaveda*, his description is similar to what we find in the epics and puranas. He is associated with the peacock (*yam vahanti mayurah*), and with bells and banners (*ghanta-patakini*) and is surrounded by the matrikas or mothers (*matrganaunityam parivrtte yuva*). Here Skanda has six faces, ten eyes, golden skin, and is filled with a glorious brightness. Agni, Shiva, and Kritikas are all described as his parents. Skanda is also identified with Visakha, and is repeatedly termed as *dhurta* (rogue), even though he is also shown as a boon-granting, auspicious god. The term *dhurta* can also be translated as ‘Master-thief, as in other literary works Skanda is often connected with thieves. By the time the sutras (generally dated between 600 BCE- 200 BCE) were compiled as the Vedanga literature, it is seen that Skanda had become one of the important deities, and in *Hiryanakesin Grhyasutra*, Skanda is mentioned along with Visnu and Rudra, where it is said that along with these two supreme gods Skanda should also be worshipped during tarpana.

In *Baudhyana Dharma Sastra* (a sutra), various names have been attributed to Skanda, along with mentions of his male and female attendants, the latter being described in elaborate details in the *Mahabharata*. The various names attributed to the god are Sanmukha, Sanatkumara, Skanda, Mahasena, Visakha, and Subrahmanya, the last name being popular for Skanda in south India. The name Viskaha, oldest evidences of it from epigraphical records

go back to 3rd century BCE, while the testimony of *Baudhyana Dharma Sastra* shows that the worship of Skanda was well in place before 400 BCE.

According to Moriz Winternitz the name Neamesa found in one of the Khilas of the *Rig Veda* is none other than Naigameya, which is an aspect of Skanda. The deity Neamesa, as found mentioned in the *Rig Veda* and in various *Ghrya Sutras*, is a son-granting god, and is worshipped by people who are desirous of sons. Therefore, it is not surprising to see women in West Bengal still worshipping *ksanika* (clay) murtis of Karttikeya during the Karttik Sankranti, seeking children.

### *Skanda/ Karttikeya on coins and seals*

From the various Vedic literature, it is clear that Karttikeya worship was in place well before the start of the Common Era, and a study of the coins of ancient India also says the same (Banerjea, 2016). While Skanda is not a part of the five principal gods or *Pancadevata* (Shiva, Vishnu, Surya, Devi, and Ganpati) of the Smarta form of worship once popular in ancient India, numismatic evidences show he was highly revered by many at the same time. He was worshipped by many kings and the republican tribes in ancient India, namely among them are Kumaragupta I (Gupta dynasty), and the Yaudheyas, a martial republican tribe, with their centre of power being at what is now the state of Haryana. Among other kings that held Skanda in reverence is a local ruler of Ayodhya, Devamitra (1<sup>st</sup> c. CE), who issued round copper coins with a symbol that depicted a cock on a pillar. Similar symbol was also seen on the coins issued by Vijaymitra, and this pillar with a cock crest is typically associated with Karttikeya. In a series of coins (one silver and few copper) issued by the Yaudheyas (2<sup>nd</sup> century CE) we find 6 headed representations of Karttikeya. Among this series, one class type bears the two armed, six headed Skanda or *Sadanana*, holding *sakti* (spear) in his right hand while the left hand is on the hips in *katihasta* mudra (Banerjea, 2016). In this series the silver coin inscription reads as *Yaudheya-bhagavata-svamin Brahmanya* (of Brahmnaya, the divine lord of the Yaudheyas); while the copper coins carry inscriptions that read *Bhagavata-svamin Brahmanya-devasya Kumarasya* (of Kumara, the divine lord Brahmanya-deva). Both the coin types show that they were issued in name of Karttikeya, thus denoting the Yaudheyas had dedicated their kingdom or state to Karttikeya, who was considered as both their divine and corporeal ruler. The Yaudheyas who were *ayudhajivi* kshtriyas, ruled over what was known as Rohitaka as is described in a *Mahabharata* passage (II. 32. 4-5)-

*Tato bahudhanam ramyam gavadhyam dhanadhanyavat |*

*Karttikeyasya dayita, Rohitakamupadrava |*

*Tatra yuddham mahaccasit surairmattamayurakaih.*

Rohitake or modern Rohtak being referred to in the passage as being specially favoured by Karttikeya, shows that this was the area ruled by the Yaudheyas where Skanda was the primary deity in worship with possibilities of many shrines dedicated to him. Similarly, *Mahamayuri* (a Buddhist text) also tells us that Kumara Karttikeya was the chief patron god of Rohitaka – *Rohitake Karttikeyah Kumaro lokavisrutah*, v. 21). The name Svami Brahmanya or Svami Brahmanyadeva Kumara is found in the Bilsad stone pillar inscription of Kumaragupta I (415-16 CE), which mentions addition to an older temple dedicated to Svami Mahasena. The later period Yaudheya coins of 3<sup>rd</sup> -4<sup>th</sup> century CE show a change in the iconography of Karttikeya with distinct Kushana influence, where he is one faced, with his right hand holding the spear and left hand resting on his hip (Banerjea, 2016). In Kumaragupta I coins another iconography of Karttikeya is seen where he is riding his vahana, a peacock. He holds a spear in his left hand and his right hand is in *varada* mudra, while standing on an elaborate *pancharatha* pedestal.

It was Huvishka, the Kushana king (r. 155-189 CE), who had issued Karttikeya coins using various names for the same god, such as Kumara, Skanda, Mahasena, and Visakha. These various names ascribed to Karttikeya refer to the various aspects of the deity, which finds support in the great epic Mahabharata, where it is mentioned that Skanda's various forms are his brothers or sons, such as Naigameya, Visakha, Kumara, Sakha, and Mahasena (Rao, 2017). The various names of Karttikeya stand as a testimony to the fact that different god-concepts of an associated character were integrated together to compose what we now know as Skanda- Karttikeya. Huvishka's coins tell us that these different god-concepts had not yet lost their separate identities (each name had a different iconography on his coins), even though they were all associated with one god Karttikeya. However, the *Mahamayuri* verse (given earlier) show us that by the time it was written (around 100-150 years after Huvishka) Kumara and Karttikeya had merged to become one deity without retaining any separate identities.

The name of Skanda-Karttikeya was found on an oval seal from Bhitia, mentioned as *Sri Skandasurasya*, which had a peacock on the left with a fanned-out tail. Another seal from Kumaragupta I period also has a peacock with fanned out tail facing the typical Gupta emblem of eastern mintage. An ivory seal from Rajghat also depicts a fan tailed peacock, where the name and emblem can be associated with Karttikeya.

Interestingly few decades back there were found some interesting stone artefacts at Lala Bhagat, a village in Kanpur district- Uttar Pradesh. Among these artefacts were a red sandstone cock on a broken red sandstone pillar, which originally must have been the capital of a stambha or a column, similar to what is seen as garuda stambha or nandi stambha. According to *Vishnudharmottara*, Skanda- Karttikeya carries *kukkuta* (cock) and ghanta in his right hands; while the *Mahabharata* (III. 231, 16) also associates a cock with him (*Tvam kridase sanmukha kukkutena yathesta nanavidha kamarupi*). This finding thus clearly

indicates the presence of a Karttikeya sect whose temple existed somewhere near the Lala Bhagat site at around 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE.

The coins and seals bearing the name and figure of the war god Skanda- Karttikeya show the popularity of the god among various dynasties, which continued up to the end of the Gupta period. Post Gupta the worship of Skanda slowly lost its earlier popularity and got merged with the Saiva sect.

## Iconography of Skanda-Karttikeya

Among the earliest iconographic references to Skanda is found in v. 41, Chapter 57 of Brhatsamhita – *Skandah Kumararupah saktidharo barhiketusa*. Skanda's main feature of identification is his vahana peacock (*barhiketu*), while other prominent characteristics being the spear or sakti in his hand; and his charming boyish face. In such depictions of the god, he is generally shown as two armed. *Vishnudharmottora*, which refers to him as Kumara, describes him as six faced (*Sanmukha*), hair arranged decoratively in 3 or 5 locks (*sikhandaka or kakapaksa*), wearing red clothes, his vahana peacock as mount, his two right hands hold a cock (*kukkuta*) and bell, and his left hands carrying a spear (*sakti*) and a *raijayanti pataka* or a victory flag. Here it is further mentioned that the three aspects of Kumara, known as Visakha, Skanda, and Guha, would be the same as the description given for Kumara, except for the six faces and his peacock vahana. The Puranas also give almost the same description of the god.

In south India where Skanda is worshipped as Subrahmanya, is still highly revered and a popularly worshipped god, a study of the iconography of Subrahmanya as collected by T.A.G. Rao (2017) show that the text *Amsumadbhedagama* has described as many as four types of Sanmukha; two, four, six and twelve armed. Various other texts such as the *Suprabhedagama*, *Uttarakamikagama*, *Kumaratantra*, etc contain detailed descriptions of the different varieties of Skanda-Subrahmanya, with various names, such as *Senani*, *Saktidhara*, *Senapati*, *Tarakari*, *Gajavahana*, *Brahmansasta*, *Balasvami*, and many more.

The emblems of the god seen commonly such as *sakti*, *sikhi*, and *kukkuta* are associated with him from early times, even though the cock was not placed directly in his hands, and the peacock was not his mount. In the coins of Kumaragupta I the god is seen riding a peacock and a sandstone relief of the Gupta period depicting Skanda shows him on his peacock mount. In the sandstone relief. Skanda is shown sitting on the back of a peacock, which has its tail open and outstretched at the back that acts almost as a prabhavali. The peacock is shown pecking at a fruit (*matulunga*) held by Skanda in his right hand, while there is spear (*sakti*) in his left hand (Banerjee, 2016). However later period Skanda murtis, especially from eastern parts of India (8<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> centuries), show him as a two-armed god, standing in a *dvibhanga* posture, with his vahana by his side.

Looking down south the skills of the artisans are expressed through the Tiruvorriyur group of bronze castings of Subrahmanya with his consorts Mahavalli and Devasena, Tirupparankunram Devasena- Kalyanasundramurti, the Ellora Subrahmanya murti, and the Aihole murti of Tarakari- Subrahmanya (Rao, 2017). The Ellora relief of the god is shown as four-armed, one arm holding a cock, with two animal headed figures on two sides. On his right is a goat headed human figure that is likely to be Chagavaktra or Naigameya, a form of Skanda; while on his left is a human figure with the head of a donkey, which could be representative of Parisadas- Skanda.

## Skanda and the Surya connection

The most signifying weapon of Skanda-Karttikeya is the sakti or spear. While there is a common belief that the Sakti is associated with Skanda's mother Devi Parvati; a study of *Markandeya-purana* tells us a different story (Rao, 2017). As per *Markandeya-purana*, Surya was once extremely powerful and his heat had become unbearable to the world, causing damage. To make the heat bearable, Visvakarma, decided to remove some of the solar power and make the god harmless. From this extracted solar power Visvakarma created the *saktayudha* for Skanda to carry as his weapon.

Skanda is also associated closely with Surya in another way which is explained in *Bhavishyat-purana*. Once the daityas attacked Surya, and as the gods came to him for support it was Skanda who took his place right beside Surya in order to protect him. It is for this reason in many medieval sculptures of Surya, there are two figures at the lower part, of which the figure standing on the left side of Surya is that of Skanda. The same purana tells us that the dwarapalas or gatekeepers of Skanda are Surya and Shiva under the names Rajna and Srausha respectively (Rao, 2017). A dhyana sloka used in some parts of southern India directly refers to Skanda-Subrahmanya as Surya.

Thus, it is evident that there is a close association of Skanda with Surya, and as Rao tell us, it is likely that the six heads of Karttikeya represent the six seasons, the 12 arms represent the 12 months, Skanda's cock or kukkuta heralds the rising sun, the peacock feathers represent a beautiful blend of all colours symbolic of sunlight, and his saktayudha is nothing but solar power.

## Conclusion

Skanda, the war god in the Hindu pantheon, was once a revered figure and held in great esteem by many kings from different dynasties. The martial Kshatriya clan yaudheyas made Skanda their tutelary and spiritual head and issued many coins with his figure on them. The Kushanas and Gupta period also saw coins and sculptures of Skanda, with temples dedicated to him. However, post Gupta as Saivism became stronger in north India with greater royal patronage, Skanda who was the son of Shiva, was soon turned into a *parsadevata* of the Saiva

family and was relegated into the western niche of the main shrine in a Shiva temple. South India, despite acknowledging Shiva as Skanda's father, however has kept alive the tradition of separate shrines and regular worship for the war god.

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