

Skanda — unique manifestation

The six-day Maha Skanda Sashti festival begins tomorrow. LAKSHMI DEVNATH writes on the significance of the concept.

THEY EMBARKED on a massive rampage and devastation sowing fear and instilling terror wherever they trod. The Devas were terrified and that is probably an inadequate adjective to describe a frozen state of mind.

Surapadma had established his capital at Mahendrapuri in the South, Simhamukha was ruling from Asuram in the North and Tarakasura had built his capital near Ernakoodam. But yet, the thirst of the three Asuras for destruction was not quenched for they had yet another important mission to complete — torture of the Devas. Soon they achieved this too, and the celestial beings were at Mount Kailasa-the domain of Lord Siva seeking refuge.

Siva was in deep meditation and so was Parvati. Brahma suggested that Manmatha deploy his arrows of flowers to wake up the Lord and instil some passion in Him for the

benefit of the world. In the process, Manmatha no doubt got burnt into ashes by the fury of Lord Siva but the mission was accomplished.

To cut a long story short, a divine spark emanated from Lord Siva. The Spark got divided into six, which were deposited in the Ganges by Vayu, the wind god and Agni, the fire god. The river carried them and placed them in a cluster of weeds (Sara) in a thicket (vana).

Here, the sparks assumed the form of six beautiful children. Each baby, now, lying on a lotus was lulled to sleep by the Devis of the Karthikai (the third constellation of the 27 stars). Parvati, the mother, realising that the manifestation had taken place, rushed to the spot and endearingly uttering "Skanda" lifted the babies. They, true to the appellation, merged as one with six faces and twelve hands. Thus was born Shanmukha (with six faces), also known as

Kartikeya (nurtured by the devis of the Karthikai), Saravanabhava (born in the forest of reeds), Velayudha (one whose weapon is the spear-Vel), Gangeya (of Ganga), Subrahmanya (who expounded on Brahman), Senapat (commander-in-chief), Swaminatha (one who explained the meaning of the Pranava (OM) to Siva, Dandapani (in this aspect, He stands only with His spear and without His consorts) and so on...The purpose of His manifestation-of course, the annihilation of the three asuras.

Skanda, a born General, represented the acme of valour. So much so that Lord Krishna declared in the Gita- "Senaninam Aham Skandah" (amongst generals, I am Skanda).

The Skanda Purana, the longest of the 18 Mahapuranas, elaborates on the story of Skanda. An ancient classic of the Sangam Age, Tirumurugatrupadai of Nakkeerar, also narrates a similar story on this Lord. Yes, Shanmukha has, since ancient times, been a very popular God in the Tamil country, probably even commanding the maximum number of devotees.

Muruga, as Skanda is popularly known in South India, is

known in ancient literature as Seyon, the God with the Red complexion and as the God of the hill tribes. But myth and mythology aside, seers, sages and savants dwell extensively on the esoteric significance of this unique manifestation.

The six faces, they say, represent the five elements, ether, fire, water and earth and the sixth represents the Spirit that infuses life into beings formed by these elements.

The Sanskrit word, "Bhagavan", means one who possesses the six godly attributes. In continuation of this thought, Nakkirar elaborates, "the first (face) removes the darkness and ignorance of the world and bathes it in light, the second grants boons to His devotees, the third protects yajnas, the fourth discourses upon the knowledge of the Self; the fifth destroys evil demons and the sixth glances lovingly at the face of Valli, (His bride from the hills)." His 12 hands of course, work in concurrence with His six faces. Esoteric meanings are also given to the other symbols of this Lord. The Vel, his weapon, is said to be representative of Jnana or knowledge and therefore capable of destroying ignorance. His two other symbols — the Peacock and the Cock — it is interpreted, are symbolic respectively of mental equipoise and approach of knowledge.

His two consorts, Valli and Deivayanai, epitomise Icha Sakti (the Power of Will) and Kriya Sakti (the Power of Action) respectively.

Yogis further explain that the six heads of Lord Subrahmanya represent the six centres or Chakras within the human body. Meditation on Lord Subrahmanya, according to the

Bhaktas is the surest way to obtain intuitive knowledge of Brahman. Over the years, lyricists and litterateurs have abundantly offered their skills to eulogise this God. Nakkirar of the Sangam Age, Kachiyappa Sivachariyar, a Vaishnava called Pakalli Koottar who became a devotee of Skanda, Murugammaiyar, a lady devotee, the famous devotee of Tiruvannamalai, Arunagirinathar, Kumaragurupara Swamigal of Tirunelveli and Muthuswamy Dikshitar (of the music Trinity) are just a few examples of this vast legion. Temples for His worship rose in several places in Tamil Nadu. The most famous amongst them is the Aarupadaiveedu (a collective name for a group of six temples).

Temples for Him have sprung up even at distant places, such as Achalesvar in the Punjab and Kathirkamam in Sri Lanka.

Festivals to celebrate Skanda's glory and vratas (fasts and other vows) to obtain His blessings have over the years, gained popularity among the masses and the classes and there are

several stories behind these too. It is said that Ganesha instructed Narada to observe the Krittikai Vrata to achieve his aim of being the most exalted among the Rishis. Another story relates that a King of South India called Muchukunda approached sage Vasishtha and requested him for initiation into the correct observances of the vratas. The sage explained to the king the importance of observing the Sukravara (Friday fast), Krittikai and the most important, the Skanda Sashti Vrata of Lord Subrahmanya. Sashti is a Sanskrit word meaning six.

It was on the sixth day of the battle that the asura, Surapadma, was killed by Skanda. The fast is to be commenced on the Prathama Tithi (the day immediately following Dipavali) of the Sukla Paksha (bright fortnight) in the month of Aippasi (Oct-Nov).

It is said that such were the benefits that King Muchukunda obtained from observing the Skanda Sashti vratas that at a point even Devendra sought his help for defeating the Asuras. Skanda Sashti is thus a joyous occasion to worship the Lord in His triumphant aspect and signals the victory of Divinity.

Yogis recommend that bhaktas fast at least on the sixth day of this festival period sparingly eating on the other five days. Karthigai star, Tuesdays and Fridays are special days for the worship of this Lord. Skanda Sashti, this year begins on October 25, culminating in Surasamharam on Thursday next, October 30. The festival concludes on a pleasant note with Tirukalyanam. Pujas and rituals marking the festival have begun in all the Subramanya temples.



Thousands of devotees gather every year to witness the "Soora Samharam" at Thiruchendur. — Pic. by. A. Shaik Mohideen