

Fusion of the Cults of War God Skanda with Tribal God Murugan in Tamil Country

Haripriya Rangrajan

In Tamil country Lord Murugan is popularly named as Kandan, Skandan, Ṣaṇmugan, Kumaran, Kadamban, ḷḷaiya Piḷḷaiyār (younger brother of Gaṇeśa who is called as Piḷḷaiyār in Tamil), Subrahmanian, Svāmināthan, Gugan (Guhan), Kārttikeyan, Velen, Velāyudhan (holder of spear “Vel”) and Ārumugan (six faced). In spite of having all these names and some more other names, he is very fondly called by the Tamilians as Murugan only. In fact addressing the deity as Murugan or Muruga is found exclusively in the Tamil speaking people. In fact his shrine is in every village of Tamilnadu whether big or small or independent or subsidiary in Śiva temple or Devī temple. His most famous six war houses or camps called Āruppaḍai Veeḍu in Tamil are dedicated to him in Tirupparaṅkundram, Tirucchendūr, Tiruttaṅigai, Paḷani, Svāmimalai and Palamudirśolai. In Tamil language, Āru means six, paḍai means army and veeḍu denotes house or camps. In these temples though the deity is named in kṣetra names, the devotees first address him Murugan and then only utter his kṣetra name. For example, in Paḷani, the kṣetra name of the deity is Daṇḍapāṇi because of his holding daṇḍa in his hand. It must be noted that among the Āruppaḍai Veeḍu exclusively in this temple the deity is shown holding daṇḍa. Otherwise in the other five temples Murugan is depicted with Vel (spear) only. In Paḷani people will first address the deity Muruga and then wiN continue with his kṣetra name Daṇḍapāṇi and Paḷaniāṇḍava.

In Tamilnadu deity Murugan is named according to his different aspects of characteristic features. As a young boy he is called Bālakumāran, Bāla Murugan, Muthukumāran (very fondly called) and Bālasvami etc. In Paḷani as a brahmacāri deity, the same deity is addressed by the devotees as Paḷani Āṇḍavan, Paḷani Āṇḍi, Kovaṇathāṇḍi (wearing only kaupīna) and Daṇḍapāṇi. The Paḷani shrine of Muruga is considered to be the symbol of jñāna. Then in Svāmimalai he has the epithet name 'Tagappan Svāmi'. Because only in this place he explained the metaphysical essence of the praṇava mantra to his father Śiva. In Tamil language “Tagappan” means father. Murugan has another epithet 'Brahmaśāstā'. According

to the purāṇas once he was in the abode of Śiva. All the devas except Brahmā after worshipping Śiva showed respectful gesture to Murugan. Bāla Murugan became angry and asked Brahmā to explain the meaning of “Praṇava om”. When Brahmā could not explain, Bāla Murugan took away the responsibility of creation from Brahmā and kept him in his custody. Then he taught the meaning of Praṇava om to Brahmā because of which Lord Murugan got the epithet Brahmaśāstā. An ideal example of the representation of Brahmaśāstā is found and placed near the temple of Āñjaneya in Āvani (Karnata) datable to the 10th century CE (Fig. 1). The same Brahmaśāstā is called as Tagappan Svāmi



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

in Tamilnadu. The reason is when young Murugan kept the creator under his custody, Lord Śiva asked him to release the creator and at the same time he asked the young Murugan to explain to him the meaning of Praṇava om. Murugan put the condition to his father Śiva that in order to listen to the meaning of Praṇava mantra, Śiva should become his disciple. Śiva agreed. Then Murugan explained it in his father's ear. That is why in Tamilnadu, devotees address Lord Murugan as “Oduvel Murugan”, which means chanting and explaining the mantra secretly to the other person. He is also called Jñāna Guru, Gurusvāmi and Jñāna Deśikan. Even today we witness the realistic representation of this divine occurrence in Svāmimalai, one of the six abodes of Lord Murugan in Tamilnadu. Here his kṣetra name is Svāminātha. Thus in the

pretext of Upadeśa to his father Primordial Guru Dakṣiṇāmūrti, Young Murugan revealed his real identity with Lord Śiva (Fig. 2).

Then in Tamil country Murugan is worshipped by those women who are childless. There is a popular belief among the women devotees that by following the Śaṣṭi-vrata their pot like womb would also be filled with the new born foetus. In this aspect of fulfilling the wish of barren women Murugan is very fondly called by the women devotees as “Śaravaṇa Śaṣṭi”.

In Tamilnadu people love Murugan so much that in every family the name of the deity is kept for the new born child. They are called as Murugan, Ārumugan, Śaṇmugan, Vel Murugan, Veṭṭrivel Murugan, Śaktivel Murugan, etc.

In Tirucchendur, where Murugan fought with the demon Sūrapadman is called as Sendil Kumaran and Bālasubrahmanian. This is his name in this kṣetra. In Tamil, Sendil denotes red faced because of anger and fierceful action. In this context, attention of the readers should be brought to two important factors. Firstly, in the Svāmimalai Lord Murugan in the ritualistic manner of preaching praṇava mantra to his father Śiva, showed his real form to the world that he is the Life Spirit. At the same time the same deity Murugan who is called as Skanda, the commander-in-chief devas, wanted the world to understand that he is not only a warrior god of violence but also a benevolent god who is always waiting to transform an ignorant individual by showering kindness on him. Even today in Tirucchendūr the demonstration of the fight between Lord Murugan and the demon Sūrapadman is an exuberant scene to witness.

Actually speaking demon Sūrapadman was a great Śiva bhakta but was the embodiment of hatred, anger, fear, jealousy, lust the whole lower nature of any individual being. Lord Murugan, the Supreme spirit channelized the mental caliber and altered the Kārmic patterns of the asura. That is the reason instead of killing him, Lord Murugan transformed the asura in two kinds of creatures, i.e., cock and peacock and kept with him. That is why even today in Tamilnadu when devotees suffer from any ailment of mental or physical problems they come to Tirucchendūr to charge their body mind and soul. Here Lord Murugan is addressed as Subrahmaṇya. The deity is accompanied by his two consorts Valli and Devayānai and his Vel. The consorts are the personifications of Icchāśakti and Kriyāśakti respectively. His Vel is Jñānaśakti Thus the deity Subrahmaṇya of Tirucchendur is the embodiment of triśaktis.

Origin of Murugan Cult in Tamil Country

In Tamil country long before the birth of advanced cults, the local demons or the spirits inhabiting the trees, rivers and hills occupied independently in each region according to their acclimatization of their characteristic aspects. In this process the god of hilly region was addressed as Red God (Seyon) who was fondly called by the devotees as Muruga or Murugan. In Tamil language the name

Murugan has different meanings which exclusively indicate the same deity Murugan.

The earliest reference to Murugan as Red god and the presiding deity of the hillock or mountain is found in the Saṅgam work Tolkāppiam.¹ During this period he was considered merely as a tribal god and not as the son of Śiva. His great devotees belonged to the Kuravar tribe which is said to be belonging to the semi-nomadic group and which in the later Tamil literature became very popular because of the association with Murugan's worship. The poet Nakkīrar in his poem called Tirumurugaṭṭruppaḍai supplied fantastic description of Lord Murugan and his various characteristic aspects which really helped the elite society to accept Lord Murugan in the Hindu pantheon of gods. The poet clearly indicated in his poem that Murugan is the Life Principle, his six faces symbolize five elements, i.e., ether (ākāśa), fire (agni), air (vāyu), water (jala) and earth (pṛthvī) and Life Principle. As a result while in the Saṅgam period Lord Murugan was considered just as a tribal god and was not at all admitted in the social elite of that period, the same deity after a few centuries in post Saṅgam period became very popular and powerful that the higher class people in the society had no other option but to accept him in the pantheon of five gods, Brahmā, Viṣṇu, Śiva, Sūrya and Gaṇapati. In the post Saṅgam period Lord Murugan was accepted as the son of Śiva. In the last Saṅgam poem, Tirumurugaṭṭruppaḍai for the first time, the Tamil Murugan is identified with the six faced Kārttikeya, the forster child of the six Kṛttikā mothers. In Tamil they are called Kārttigai Pengal.

Once six faced Murugan was accepted as the son of Śiva, śāstras described the significance of his each face. Accordingly one face represents praṇava, second face teaches jñāna to Parama Śiva, who is sat (truth). Third face is always looking forward to help his devotees, who are ardently pray to him to relieve them from their karmas of their previous births. Fourth face with compassion removes the ignorance of the devotees. The fifth face looks forward to lead the devotee to obtain intuitive knowledge of Brahman. For the sixth face the yogīs say that they are happily waiting to drink and experience the joy of the divine bliss of 'sat cit ānanda' of 'Śiva Śakti' union, that is the inner consciousness.² The Tamil poets Nakkīrar, Aruṇagirinathar, and Kumāra Gurupara Svāmigal have very vividly described the significances of six faces and twelve arms of Lord Murugan in the name of Ṣaṇmugan (six faced lord). In Tirucchendur temple, six priests stand in the garbhagrha and chant six different mantras for six faces of the deity. I am told that they chant particular mantra for particular face which is prescribed in the Ṣaṇmuga sahasranāma. In Tamil, the spelling of Ṣaṇmukha is spelled as Ṣaṇmuga.

In the Saṅgam period his worshippers offered him rice balls mixed with red

blood of goats killed on his behalf. Murugan was called by the devotees as Velan (spearman) because he was a hunter god and always carried his Vel in his hand. His priest was also called Velan. The main character of Lord Murugan was to create love frenzy feelings in the young girls. Then, once they were obsessed by him, the priest Velan would perform magical rites for curing love sick girls. It is interesting to inform the readers that there is a village called Elanji located nearby two miles away from Tirukkuṭṭrālam in Tirunelveli district. It is also spelled as Ilanji. Here the deity Murugan is popularly addressed as Elanji Kumaran. Even today people have great faith in this god because they believe that by coming and worshipping Elanji Kumaran, unmarried girls will get the blessings for their marriage bells, and barren women will be blessed with offspring. On the sixth day of festival of Dīpāvalī that is on "Kanda ṣaṣṭi", people celebrate his festival with great pomp and show.³

In the Murugan cult the main ritual is very ordeal one. There is a very difficult ordeal practice called "Kāvaḍi" in which those devotees who take vow to perform, pierce, their tongue with a small Vel. It is still in practice in the modern time. Secondly, some devotees according to their vow and prayer go round the temple prākāra by doing aṅgapradakṣiṇā. In this process the devotees by lying on the floor roll their body with full devotion, go round the huge prākāra of the temple. Even today this practice is also still followed in the Murugan's temples. Thirdly, and most importantly the earliest type of Murugan worship in Tamilnadu used to be in the name of Velan Veriāṭṭam. Actually this is a kind of ritual dance of Velan-priest possessed by the spirit of Murugan. It is in practice in the villages in Tamilnadu. I am told that this practice is still present in Kerala. Here the modern Velan priest called as Velichappad is both a performer and the conducting priest of a ritual. He is said to be the descendant of the Velan (priest). It is to be noted that Velan Veriāṭṭam (Devil dance) is the quintessence of the Murugan cult of Tamil country which dates back to the first few centuries before Christ.⁴ It is very necessary to write here that in the modern days it is not easy to believe the process of Veriāṭṭam and the influence of god's presence on the body of the priest. But it is still witnessed by the devotees in Tamilnadu. During the Veriāṭṭam because of too much of divine force enters the soul of the priest, he would be completely empowered by the divine energy which would be exhibited in fierceful manner without his own knowledge. I purposely write this because I have myself witnessed this experience of the priest in my native place.

It is very important to note that Veriāṭṭam was performed only when the priest was in communion with the god and he himself also seized with the divine frenzy. That time he would sing and dance which is called devil dance - Veriāṭṭam.

On this occasion those love frenzy girls who would be obsessed by Velan Murugan would also take part. Then the priest would perform magic rites for curing love sick girls. Women also would take part in priestly functions. When men and women both would be under the influence of the god they not only would sing and dance but also read the dim past, would predict the future, diagnose the disease and most importantly they would find out the particular evil spirit that caused the disease and cured all the ills by which the flesh and the brain were affected. In this process the early Kuravar tribe priest of Murugan cult was not only just acted as a priest but also as a medicine man in Tamil country who had a flourishing trade even among the elite of the society.⁵

Regarding the Murugan cult Nilakantha Shastri writes “The undoubted antiquity of his cult among the Tamils is attested to by the discovery in prehistoric urn fields at Adichanallur in Tirunelveli District of bronze cocks, iron spears and other objects similar to those employed by modern worshippers of Murugan when they are on a pilgrimage carrying the Kāvaḍi in fulfillment of a vow.⁶ On this basis he opines that the cult of Murugan must have taken shape from pre historic times. The other scholar is N. Vanamamalai. He also finds some evidences for the existence of the Murugan cult in Adichanallur in Tirunelveli District. He with his personal observation has found iron ploughshares, sickles and iron lamp chains and pottery making by the inhabitants of the place. He writes “Inside the urns a small pot with husks of a kind of grain was found. They were mainly the agricultural tribe, now and then going on expedition of hunting.”⁷

Regarding the Murugan worship, the Tamil work Paripāḍal (circa 450 CE) informs an important message. It says that there were two different types of worship of Murugan performed inside the garbhagr̥ha of structural temple and outside the temple. Accordingly in the cella the deity Murugan was worshipped with six faces and twelve hands. The worshippers were exclusively kings, nobles, soldiers and women who prayed for victory, long life, joining the lovers, etc. They belonged to the elite group. Then outside the temple, the worship of Murugan was conducted not for the idol of Murugan but for his Vel. This was done in the name of Velan Murugan. Accordingly, a spear adorned with garlands and a red cloth was carried by Velan, the tribal priest. The Vel was smeared with sandal paste. A sheep was tied with a rope to a Kadamba tree which was very sacred to Murugan. People prostrate themselves before the tree and Vel. There was plenty of food and drink ready to be served to the worshippers. The devotees and worshippers were strong believers in the Vel worship that they would say that the happiness, one hoped to enjoy in heaven could not equal the happiness of the worshippers who ate sacrificial food and danced in ecstasy, before the tree and spear.⁸ The description

of the Paripāḍal clearly informs us that during the early centuries two different conceptions of the elite group and tribal group with regard to the worship of the deity did prevail in the Murugan cult. The Paripāḍal emphatically states that Murugan was the God of love especially connected with pre-marital and clandestine love. The Paripāḍal and the Śilappadikāram (6.49.51) described that Murugan was a wonderful dancer, performed the tuti dance after he had cut the head of the enemy Sūrapadman into two pieces and thrown them in the ocean. The poets of these works say that Murugan used the ocean as the stage and played on it the tuti drum. The Śilappadikāram (6.52-53) says when the Asuras stood ready for battle, Murugan performed the Kuḍai dance. Regarding his vāhana till the 12th century CE, the elephant was considered to be his vāhana and after the 12th century CE, elephant was replaced by peacock. The elephant was called Pinimukam. In the modern days as a symbolic ritual, in the temple at Tirucchendūr where Sūra-samhāra happened on the fifth day of the Masi festival, Murugan rides an elephant vāhana made of silver.⁹ In Tamilnadu Masi month falls from the 15th of February and ends by 15th of March. In Hindi it is called Magh month. Even today in the garbhagṛha the priests worship the deity Skanda Murugan only in Sanskrit ślokas. It is the perfect evidence of the fusion of both deities - war god Skand and hunter god Murugan.

The deity Murugan is not a war god, rather we can say lovable god. In the ancient period, even in a small village during the major religious rites people especially Kuravai tribal men with their matrons used to dance beautifully their tribal dance called Kuravai dance with the Tondaga drum. During such time they used to offer sacrifices also to the deity Murugan in the form of Vel. The Tamil work Āgam (118.II, 1-5 and 232.II, 6-11) very realistically describes about the ritual.¹⁰ According to Vanamamalai, Murugan worship was practiced in sacrificial sites and sites of tribal assemblies (Kalam and Manru). The tribal mode of ritual-sacrificial worship was far more common than worship in a temple.¹¹ Initially Murugan was the patron deity of a particular hunting tribe Kuravar but in the later period he became the most popular deity of all classes of people.

Synthesis of Murugan with War God Skanda

Skanda was a war god. In North India the original inhabitants who were of non-Aryan stock must have been worshipping their regional gods like their Tamilian brethren in that remote epoch. During the third century BCE there was a band of totem groups and tribals who had special veneration for war god Skanda. After the advent of Aryans, gradually the original inhabitants of North India left their place and moved towards South India. It is possible from that time onwards

the exclusive worships of this war god Skanda might have taken its roots in the similar kind of inhabitants of South India like Kuravar, Irular, Maravar, etc. who had a liking for hunting and waging war. In this process, it is possible that after some time the concept of the hunter god Murugan might have been transferred to the war god Skanda Kārttikeya of north India. Secondly, among the many other tribal groups inhabited in north east, north west, the central and south India, the only cult which merged with Murugan cult was Nāga cult. As a result Murugan was identified with Subrahmaṇya of the Āryans. Even today the deity Subrahmaṇya is represented in Nāga form in some temples. He is called Subrahmaṇya. There is a temple in a place called Subrahmaṇyasthala named after the deity, located near Mangalore, Karnataka. In Andhra Pradesh Subrahmaṇya is being worshipped in the Nāgasvarūpa also. In Kerala Subrahmaṇya is worshipped in the name of Palaniāṇḍavar (Tamil Palaniāṇḍavar) by a tribe called Madhuvans. In Kerala there are many number of inscriptions found in the temple of Subrahmaṇya in Haripad.

One must remember the fact. In the beginning the Āryans called the indigenous people as Dasyus. But in the later period when the same Aryans started mingling with the Dasyus in south India they adopted and identified the regional gods of South India with the Āryan gods. For example, the red god Murugan with Subrahmaṇya and black god Kṛṣṇa of Tamil country with Viṣṇu, the sea god with Varuṇa, the sky god with Indra and the desert goddess, the goddess of victory Korravai (of Tamil) with Durgā.¹² Because of such adoption of two different approaches in Tamil country, the society experienced the presence of two parallel currents in religious principles, one that of the native Tamils and the other that of the Southern Āryans. However, their approach towards life was thoroughly different. First of all, the Tamil temperament was optimistic. The early Tamils accepted the seen world. The Tamil poets were satisfied with the joys of the present living. Hence in their poems they produced concrete facts of the actualities of life as men knew it. On the other hand, southern Āryans had different approach of life. Their temperament was pessimistic with regard to the world. They were constantly thinking of some method to get relief from the wheel of birth and rebirth which created literally the idea of detachment 'vairāgya' from the worldly affairs. In fact such detached thinking of life resulted in the formation of ascetic life among the Vaidikas, the Vaisnavas and Śaiva Āgamikas and the Buddhist monks. Secondly, the Tamils had no rigid idea about the caste division in the society. On the other hand southern Āryans had four divisions or varṇas and their literature was in Sanskrit. In spite of their differences of opinions, the Tamils and the southern Āryans lived their life without affecting each other's culture.

Fortunately, during the second-third century CE there came a change in both

sides. The Gangetic folks who settled on the banks of the rivers in Tamil country brought out some changes in their own culture and religious thinking. At the same time the Tamil Velan priest had also adopted some changes to adjust with the new values of their life. This resulted in exchanging of material and cultural themes and activities in a very amicable manner between the people of the south and north India during the second third century CE. Furthermore during the same time there came a radical change with regard to the concept of war god which resulted in mingling of two concepts i.e. war god and hunter god and gave birth to a new concept of Murugan in the name of six headed Ṣaṇmukha.

Readers should remember that even though new concepts were introduced and accepted from both sides, yet the old concept with regard to Murugan worship such as sacrifices, rituals, music and dance with drums also remained as a relic among the rural folk in Tamil country. Thus the new concept gave birth to the synthesis of the war god Skanda Kārttikeya of Āryans of north with the hunter god Murugan of the tribal people of the Tamil country. In fact this was the final absorption of Āryanism in Tamil country and that by the sixth century CE the Tamil poem expressed a change in the description of Murugan. It clearly exhibited the identification of the pre-Āryan god Murugan with that of the six faced Ṣaṇmukha Kārttikeya of Aryan culture. It described fully about the six-faced and twelve-armed Ṣaṇmukha-Kārttikeya in the name of Murugan. Thus it is possible that the identification as well as the synthesis of two different



Fig. 3

cult gods could have taken place in the sixth century CE. The poet Nakkīrar in his work, elaborately explained the functions of the deity Ṣaṇmukha who is adorned with six faces and twelve hands and the presiding deity of Tirucchendūr. It is very important to note that until the beginning of the sixth century CE the concept of Ṣaṇmukha was not known to Tamil literature. For the first time the poet Nakkīrar described the deity Ṣaṇmukha with six faces and twelve arms and thus he was identified with Murugan. It is to be noted that only in Tirucchendur, in the centre of the right hand palm of Murugan-Ṣaṇmukha image the yantra of Ṣaṇmukha is inscribed in the sculpture itself. Hence the priest puts flower in the palm and worships it. One must see the beauty of Murugan-Ṣaṇmukha in the garbhagrha and experience the divine bliss in his image (Fig. 3). The deity is also called Subrahmaṇya Murugan.

The Tirumurugaṭṭruppaḍai belongs to the period when finally Tamils absorbed the Āryanism in their culture and Tamil Murugan had just been identified with the six-faced Kārttikeya the foster child of the stars of the Pleiades. In the Tirumurugaṭṭruppaḍai (II, 47-56) the verses clearly indicate towards the gradual fading Tamil rite of Murugan worship and its adoption of the Āryan worship of Ṣaṇmukha. In fact the poet Nakkīrar explains the mystic significance of the deity Ṣaṇmukha of his six faces and twelve hands.¹³ The poet in the fourth part of the poem entitled “Tiruveragam” narrates the Brāhmaṇa worship of Murugan. The poem describes “The twice born descendants on both sides from families which have earned the respect of the world, who have not failed to discharge the three kinds of Brahmanical duties and who have trodden on the path of Brahmacharya and who possess the eternal principles of dharma and the spiritual wealth of maintaining the triple fire, praise the god in proper season. They wear nine strands of thread twisted in three and wet clothes which dry on the body; they join their hands above their heads, praise him and sing the six lettered mantra Saravaṇabhava as long as their tongue can move. Then they take sweet smelling flowers in their hands and scatter them before the god who lives joyfully at Eargam (Tiruveragam).¹⁴ The beauty of the poem lies in the fact that while in the 4th part of the poem Tiruveragam, the poet writes that Murugan's worship was done purely in the Āryan style, in the next part called “Kuṇḍrutoradal” he explains how the worship of the same deity Murugan was conducted in the pure Tamil style on the hills. In English it is named as “Dancing on the hills.”¹⁵ The last part of the poem “Pazhamudirsolai” in Tamil is named as “the garden where fruit is matured”.¹⁶ The last part of the poem is very important for the readers because through this part the poet clearly indicates the happy fusion of two cultures of North and South. It echoes the perfect synthesis with regard to the worship of two cults - one of Tamil god and the other of Āryan god. The fusion of two cults gave birth to a new mythology about the birth of Murugan in the name of Subrahmaṇya-Skanda-Kumāra-Kārttikeya.

In conclusion the following observations made by the author are given below:

1. Firstly, Murugan is called Cevvel Murugan. In the name, the term Cevvel is originally rooted in the prehistoric civilization of the people of South India. On the other hand, the same Murugan is called as Subrahmaṇya in Tamil country in Sanskrit which indicates its parentage of Āryan god.
2. Secondly, the characteristic traits common to both Murugan and Skanda are spirit of youth, heroism, power to destroy the evil and sympathy and compassion for all creatures.

3. Thirdly, for both Skanda and Murugan the presence of two birds - peacock and cock - with them are compulsory but with one difference. While Skanda-Kārttikeya always accompanied by peacock and cock which were given to him as gifts from Garuḍa and Aruṇa, Murugan with his Vel fought with Padmāsura and pierced him into two pieces to change them as peacock and cock and thus made peacock as his vāhana and accepted cock in his banner. In Tamilnadu, people address Murugan as Mayilvāhanan having peacock (Mayil) vehicle and Sevalkoḍiyon having cock (Seval) in his banner.
4. Fourthly, while the Sanskrit literature helped in developing the myths of war god into legends and called him as Deva Senāpati (commander-in-chief of celestial devas), in Tamil we do not find any kind of myth or legend about the origin of Murugan in the earliest period. Only in the fifth century CE, Murugan was associated with war legends and myths of Sanskrit literature and in slightly altered version to suit the native perception of Murugan a kind of synthesis was made. Thus only in the fifth century CE, Murugan was introduced to the Tamils as a war god by the realistic description brought out in the great Tamil works Paripāḍal and Tirumurugaṭṭruppaḍai.
5. Fifthly, most importantly, after the Gupta period the Vedic Brahmins and the priestly Āryan community of succeeding generations belonging to the Sanskrit tradition living in North India brought with them two important elements when they migrated to South India. One is orthodoxy and the second is authenticity which are explained in the Vedic and post Vedic literature. They slowly tried to introduce them to their changing religious community. At the same time, these migrated priests from North and their main stream also incorporated into itself some of the elements of the cult of hunter god Murugan. This resulted in a good approach towards synthesis of two cults. Murugan came to be called Subrahmaṇya due to the northern Vedic influence. In Tamil, the name Subrahmaṇya is pronounced as Subramaṇyam or Subramaṇian.

This actually happened when the northern religious ideas mingled enough with the southern Brahmin community.

Lastly, coming to the historical evidences, in the post-Gupta period Circa 600-700 CE, the Brāhmaṇas either might have migrated to Tamil country on their own seeking royal patronage or might have been invited by the royal dynasties which encouraged them to settle down permanently in villages and towns. Their living places, agrahāras were being called as Bhaṭṭa agrahārams. Even today if we go to Kumbakonam, Tiruvarur, Tiruvaiyaru, etc. one can still find the priests staying

in agrahārams and the priests are called Bhaṭṭāchāriyār or Bhaṭṭar or Bhaṭṭarar. In fact, there are still priests living in an agrahāram named as Gaṇeśa agrahāram in Kumbakonam. This place is worth to see because it really opens our eyes and thinking to realize the synthesis of two cultures and how it totally changed in a new manner. To make it clear, the priests are Tamilians but their prayers to the deities in the temples are filled with Sanskrit ślokas in an exuberant and energetic voice which enters the soul through ears. There is no doubt about the fact that these Brāhmaṇas had superior knowledge because of which they formed an important class in the social system in the Tamil country. More than that they got great support from the royal houses by entrusting the responsibility of administration and maintaining law and order in the society. It is because in those days majority of people in Tamil country were not that much literate, and had lack of administrative knowledge. As a result these northern Brāhmaṇas served as ministers, secretaries, generals of the armed force and helped the kings in all activities including in expelling the enemy. In this process the scholarly Brāhmaṇas of north gradually introduced the worship of Subrahmaṇya in the form of hunter god Murugan with dhyāna ślokas and other necessary rituals written in Sanskrit language. This was a perfect turning point in the religious atmosphere of Tamil people. Because with the Brāhmaṇas being in ministerial service beginning to worship Skanda-Muruga in the company of Tamil speaking people paved way to construct structural temples for the deity Murugan. In this manner the migration of Brāhmaṇas from one part of India to another part formed an interesting feature of socio-economic history of India.

It is understood from Sadasiva Ambadas Dange that the Tamil deity Murugan and northern god Subrahmaṇya appeared to be two different gods until the reign of Ugrasena Pāṇḍyan who was the fifth descendant of the Pāṇḍya dynasty. He was a great Śiva bhakta. According to one tradition, in the temple of Tirucchendūr, the idol of Murugan seated on a peacock was sculptured on the right wall whereas on the left wall the image of Subrahmaṇya with his wife on an elephant was depicted.¹⁷ S.A. Dange says that this was the beginning of the assimilation of two cults started by the Pāṇḍyas. Actually, they were great followers of the Vedic religious cult from the north. It is possible that the integration of these two cults must have started at the period of the Pāṇḍya King. He says that when the followers of the Vedic sacrificial cult met the south Indian deity Murugan “they realized in the latter the second of their own new and dashing leader.”¹⁸ This is a remarkable assimilation which is beautifully described in the Tirumurugaṭṭruppaḍai.

Before we conclude there are three important issues to be analyzed. The first

issue is about spear. If we look into the remote past, one can say that the earliest men who started using the spear realized it as a super man's skill. Therefore they tried to conceive a spiritual counterpart that is god who could wield the spear. Philosophically Vel connotes both a god and spear. In Tamil country the tribal group as well as elite Vedic Brhmins considered Vel as god Murugan himself and is an object of worship. That may be the reason that not a single image of Murugan in South is sculptured with spear in his hand. Actually, his Vel is made of metal and is always kept near his chest to show his great love for it because it was said to be given by his mother Pārvatī at the time of his going to fight with Padamāsura. There is no doubt that Murugan's Vel was exclusively the power of hunter god. In the similar fashion war god Skanda used the spear for killing the demons. Therefore the first common attribute Vel or spear of both gods made the people to realize the oneness of two cults. But in South India they could not distinguish Vel and Murugan as two different objects of worship. On the other hand in the North India, Skanda was considered to be a war god. To show this aspect the images of Skanda were sculptured with spear in his left hand. It is fixed in the original image itself. A fine specimen of the image of Skanda is preserved in Bharat Kala Bhavan in Banaras. Moreover the totemic symbols of peacock and cock also help to prove the fusion of the cultures of different tribes of north and south.

Second issue is pertaining to the parentage of Skanda and Murugan. According to Sanskrit texts, Skanda was born of no woman. On the other hand, the Tamil texts especially of the Sangam period considered Murugan as the son of Mother Goddess Korravai who was the goddess of Victory and fertility. In the early Sangam literature there is no mention of Murugan's father. Therefore the issue before us is - who is the mother of Skanda and who is the father of Murugan?

Regarding the birth of Skanda, the puranas and other Sanskrit texts clearly mention that Skanda's birth is associated with the seed of Agni or Rudra. He is said to be created for killing the demon Tāraka. It indicates the patriarchal conception. In the case of Murugan he had a mother who was an archaic goddess called Korravai. When the Tamil literature realized that Korravai was an archaic goddess they accepted six Kṛttikās as his mothers and in Tamil country they were called Kārttigai Peṅgal. Because of this occurrence Murugan got the name Kārttikeyan and because six Kṛttikā mothers wished to nurse him the spirit of Murugan manifested himself with six faces. Thus Murugan got the causal name Ārumugan which means six-faced. In Tamil Āru means six. For his father's name the early Tamil literature could not imagine anybody. In the later period, however, the Tamil myth makers brought to the notice of the society regarding his father. They said that his father was the God who ate cloud 'Kari Uṇḍa Kaḍavul'. The

Paripādal said that Murugan's natural father was Śiva but his consort Umā was not his mother but six Kṛttikā peṅgal were his mothers who were the wives of six ṛṣis. The seventh wife Arundati of the seventh ṛṣi was not taken as his mother.

Coming to the question of two consorts Valli and Devasenā who was called Devayānai also as Deivayānai or Devayāni. Murugan had a tribal wife named Valli who was the personification of the food, fertility and joy. On the other hand, Murugan is also said to have married Devasenā, Indira's adopted daughter in Tirupparaṅkundram. At same time the Sanskrit texts describe that Skanda married Devasenā. To solve this confusion, we may say that until Murugan was being considered as hunter god and hill god his having one wife Valli was alright. But when he had killed Sūrapadman and conceived as a war god, Sangam tradition expected that the hero as war god must win a bride as a war trophy. Thus he married Devasenā and took her as his first wife and Valli as his second wife. In the case of Skanda, Devasenā was the only wife who became the first wife of Murugan.

In a nutshell, the seed of the synthesis of two concepts appear to have been originated in the 2nd and 3rd cen. CE. In this, several beliefs, different cults and different concepts mingled together in such a manner that they brought out an amicable synthesis of two cults of hunter god and war god of south and north respectively. The great Ādi Śaṅkarācārya gave a new name for this cult as Kumāram and he included the Skanda Murugan into the pantheon of five Hindu gods such as Viṣṇu, Śiva, Śakti, Sūrya, and Gaṇapati and called it Ṣaṅmadam (Ṣaṅmadam means six cults).

In the modern time, the worship of Murugan in Tamilnadu is widespread. No doubt people call him with so many names but by calling him as Murugan, people get full satisfaction. According to Gopinatha Rao, "Subrahmaṇya is almost exclusively a south Indian deity. There is not a village, however small, which does not possess a shrine for Subrahmaṇya. In fact, the popularity of this deity with the South Indian is so great as to induce him to build shrines for him in all places such as towns, villages, gardens, mountain tops and other odd places.¹⁹ According to A.K. Chatterjee, the earliest reference to the name Subrahmaṇya in the South Indian inscriptions is found only in the 8th Century CE.²⁰

Thus, the Tamil Murugan is identified with ever youthful Skanda Kumāra, ultimately emerged as Subrahmaṇya. In fact Murugan-Skanda is the spirit. Subrahmaṇya is jñāna. He is in the form of kuṇḍalini lying in the snake form in our body. He only can awake the soul to tune with knowledge.

References:

1. N. Vanamamalai, "Skanda-Murugan Synthesis: A Social Anthropological View", in South Indian Studies, Part II, p.1 (ed.) by Dr. R. Nagaswamy, Madras, 1979.
2. Tattvalok, June-July 1990.
3. Haripriya Rangarajan, Images of Skanda-Kārttikeya-Murugan: An iconographic Study, p. 63 and 117.
4. Vanamamala, op.cit., p. 13.
5. P.T. Srinivasa Iyengar, History of the Tamils from the Earliest Times to 600 AD, p. 66, New Delhi, 1982.
6. Nilakantha Shastri, Development of Religion in South India, pp. 21f; Bombay Gazetteer, Vol. I, part 2; Imperial Gazetteer of India, Vol. XXIII,
7. Vanamamalai, op.cit., p.12.
8. Vanamamalai, op.cit., p. 26.
9. Kamil Zvelebil, Tamil Traditions on Subrahmaṇya-Murugan, pp. 34f, institute of Ancient Studies, 1991, Madras.
10. P.T. Srinivasa Iyengar, op.cit., p. 278, fn 53 and 54.
11. Vanamamalai, op.cit., p. 17.
12. P.T. Srinivasa Iyengar. op. cit., p. 75
13. Nakkirar Tirucciralaival in Tirumurugattruppada (ed.) by Arumuganavalargal, p. 34, Chennai, 2003, also see Pope, Tamilian Antiquary, pp. 17-19, 1910.
14. P.T. Srinivasa Iyengar, op.cit., p. 559.
15. Tirumurugattruppada "Kundrutoradal", verses 190-219; P.T. Srinivasa Iyengar, op.cit., p.560
16. Tirumurugattruppada "Pazhamudirsolai". verses 220-317
17. A.K. Chatterjee, The Cult of Skanda Kārttikeya in Ancient India, p. 61.
18. Sadasiva Ambadas Dange, Myths from the Mahābhārata, Vol. 2, p. 257f., Aryan Books International, New Delhi.
19. Gopinatha Rao, Elements of Hindu Iconography, Vol. 2, Part II, p. 45.
20. A.K. Chatterjee, Cult of Skanda Kārttikeya in Ancient India, p. 76.