CHAPTER XI

USHA BHASANI: A FOLKRITE ASSOCIATED WITH THE KARTIK WORSHIP.
In Gajan the annual ceremonial worship of Kartik, the Brahmanical war-god, takes place on the last day of the Bengali month Kartik. The worship is conducted in accordance with satriya or scriptural instructions by a Brahmin priest, but also there is a folkrite that essentially accompanies the ceremony. This rite is called the Usha Bhasani or the immersion of Usha.

A fortnight before the actual ceremony, peasant women bring clay or sticky earth from the river-bed or low-land with which an earthen tray or saucer is thickly covered. Then some seeds of paddy are sown there and this miniature nursery is tended with utmost care and is watered daily. The seeds germinate within three or four days and on the day of the puja, the seedlings attain a height of 10 to 12 inches. On that day, an effigy, small in size and made of earth or rags, is placed in the saucer garden. The effigy is decorated in the fashion of a maiden or a bride, though in a crude way. It is to be kept hidden under the seedlings and not to be seen from outside. This effigy is called Usha. The saucer garden along with Usha is kept near the image of Kartik, though not formally worshipped. In the evening the womenfolk take the saucer garden in a procession to the nearest pond or river and
ceremonially immerse it there along with Usha.

The sowing of corn-seeds in a miniature garden for ritualistic purpose is not an isolated feature. In ancient Greece and West Asian countries, such gardens were raised in connection with the worship of Adonis and so J.G. Frazer has used the term 'garden of Adonis' in a general sense to denote all such miniature gardens tended for similar purposes. In India the gardens of Adonis are a popular feature of a number of ceremonies throughout the country. It appears that though the ceremonies vary somewhat in the manner and in the season of their celebration, the essence of all these rites is the same. As to the significance of these rites, Frazer observes that all these rites "were originally intended as charms to promote the growth or revival of vegetation; and the principle by which they were supposed to produce this effect was homoeopathic or imitative magic. ... the throwing of the gardens and of the images into the water was a charm to secure a due supply of fertilising rain."  

The real significance of the association between this fertility rite and the worship of Kartik is somewhat obscure. In order to justify Usha's association with Kartik as well as to explain her uncommon conduct of taking shelter in a hideout, a myth is told by the local womenfolk. The myth is presumably native in origin and localised. It is told that Usha was a divine maiden and Kartik saw her while returning from one of his expeditions. Moved by her enchanting beauty, Kartik proposed marriage to which Usha agreed. So she accompanied Kartik who on reaching his home asked Usha to hide herself in the nearby paddy field, since it would look obnoxious if she accompanied him to his home before formalities of the marriage were completed. He however assured Usha that he would soon arrange for their formal marriage. Usha agreed and acted accordingly. Kartik, true to his word, approached his mother Durga and sought her permission to marry the maiden. Apparently Durga consented but a few moments later, Kartik was started to find his divine mother in the kitchen frantically busy with all her ten hands in gobbling up a huge buffalo, dead but uncooked. On enquiry Kartik came to know that his mother was taking this unusual meal on the apprehension that on the arrival of her son's wife she would lose her control over the
household and might not have the liberty to take a full meal at her will. So she was taking this buffalo as her last free meal. Bewildered and shocked, Kartik assured his mother that since she was so much apprehensive of her would-be daughter-in-law, he would not marry at all. Usha waited in vain for Kartik's arrival and when ultimately she came to know of Kartik's vow, shame and grief overpowered her. In utter frustration she decided not to come out from her hideout so that her shameful face could never be seen by any living being.

The myth has been inherited by the present day peasants of the region through oral tradition and presumably it had undergone considerable changes in the process. There is a conscious effort to rationalise Kartik's apathy towards marriage, but still the original motif and essence of the myth has been retained by depicting Kartik as a champion of misogamy. This aspect of Kartik's character has a significant bearing on local women. It is revealing that in spite of his Puranic glory, Kartik does not command much respect from the local womenfolk. In fact, unmarried girls are forbidden strictly to participate in any way in his worship except and they are never allowed to bow their heads before an image of Kartik. If they do so, it is believed, they would be
compelled to lead a spinster's life like that of Usha.
Married women also reluctantly participate in his worship
only under the influence of apprehension that the rage of
Kartik may make them widow or deprive them of any offspring.

II

It can be said that this constraint that exists
between womenfolk and Kartik is neither a recent nor an
isolated phenomenon. It goes back to the age of the Guptas
and is prevalent at present in some other parts of the
country. A.K. Chatterjee's observations throw some inter­
esting light on the point. "As a true Kumara and ascetic,
Skanda-Kartikeya is often pictured as shunning the company
of women. They were not allowed to enter the shrines of
Skanda. According to Kalidasa's Vikramorvasiyam, Skanda's
place is forbidden to women. Kalidasa's testimony is
supported by the evidence of Kathasaritsagar. According
to the Marathi work Sivalilamrita, a woman gets widowhood
for seven successive births, if she looks at the image of
the god Skanda. Even at present women are not permitted
to visit the famous ancient temple of Kumarsvamin near
Sandur in Mysore."

5. A.K. Chatterjee, *The Cult of Skanda-Kartikeya in
Ancient India*, pp. 102-103
Hence it is evident that though Kartik holds an honourable position in the Brahmanical pantheon as the supreme commander of the celestial army, some traits of misogyny has been intermingled with his concept at a very early date. So the womenfolk of some regions have acquired a traditional reservation in accepting Kartik as a benevolent deity. Here we are confronted with a confusing problem. Why should the exalted Brahmanical war-god be treated with awe and mistrust by a section of the people? The answer can be sought from the origin of the cult of Kartik.

It is not known for certain amongst whom the cult of Kartik actually originated. But it has been agreed upon by scholars that the Yaudheyas, an ancient tribe of northern India whose history can be traced from as early as the date of Panini, did regard Kartik as the guardian deity of their community. It can be safely assumed that these people were one of the earliest promoters of Kartik worship. The name Yaudheya itself suggests that they were a war-like people. Moreover, they were also described as an Ayudhajivisancha or the community that lives on weapons. From these epithets, it can be assumed that these

6. A.K. Chatterjee, Ibid., p. 37
7. Ibid.
people were originally a violent tribe and like all other such tribes they also probably lived on hunting, raid and plunder. In such a community, women as a rule were treated with scant respect, if not with definite hatred. Physically weaker, they were not of any significant material help to their male counterparts in their stormy expeditions. Moreover, the primitive belief in sympathetic magic might have had some contribution in determining or moulding their attitude towards women. Fraser, while furnishing some recent examples of the prevalence of such an attitude, makes the following observation: "Why exactly many savages have made it a rule to refrain from women in times of war, we cannot say for certain, but we may conjecture that their motive was a superstitious fear least on the principle of sympathetic magic, close contact with a woman should infact them with feminine weakness and cowardice. Similarly some savages imagine that contact with a woman in childhood enervates warriors and enfeebles their weapons. Indeed the Kayans of Central Borneo go so far as to hold that to touch a loom of women's clothes would so weaken a man that he would have no success in hunting, fishing and war. Hence it is not merely sexual intercourse

8. J.G. Fraser, Ibid., p. 278
with women that the savage warrior sometimes shuns; he is careful to avoid the sex altogether. We think this observation of the renowned cultural anthropologist holds the key to the solution of our problem regarding the estranged relationship that exists between Kartik and womenfolk. The Yaudheyas, being a warlike tribe, were in all probability not favourably disposed towards women and it was only natural that they would impute the same trait to their guardian deity. So it can reasonably be presumed that Kartik derived some misogynous traits from his earliest promoters at the very inception of the cult.

III

At a later date the cult made a breakthrough from its tribal fold and a conscious effort was set afoot to popularise Kartik among the masses. The tribal deity of the Yaudheyas gradually assumed the rank of the commander-in-chief of the celestial army and the Brahmanical pantheon made room for him. Literary evidences suggest that this process of upgradation started from the days of the Mauryas and during the reign of the Sungas the cult became quite popular. And the popularity of Kartik worship reached its zenith during the period of the Imperial

9. A.K. Chatterjee, Ibid., p. 29
10. Ibid.
Hence it can be said that the growth and rise of the Kartik-cult was essentially linked with the formation and ascendancy of the first stable ruling class of the country who were mainly warriors. Since the hegemony of this ruling class depended completely on military strength, it was a political necessity to patronise or popularise some kind of war-cult in order to ensure regular recruitment to the royal militia. For this purpose a deity with a combatant background was required and perhaps Kartik, the guardian deity of a warlike tribe, was installed to fill in the vacuum. The cult grew with the patronage of the rulers and it received a further boost during the days of the Imperial Guptas when resurgent Hinduism was very much in need of a mythical hero from whom society could draw inspiration to combat the threat posed by the hordes of Huns on the borders.

From the evidence of ancient literature, and sculptures, it can be said that this religio-political bid to propagate the cult of Kartik attained considerable success amongst the upper strata who were more directly concerned with the affairs of the State. But we do not know for certain how far the attempt was hailed by the rural masses.

In all probability, their reaction was not so favourable. We have already seen that in some of the ancient texts Kartik was depicted as a deity who shunned the company of women and did not hesitate to bestow widowhood on them. There are other references where the deity was described as fearful to children and to pregnant women. He was branded as a licentious god and also as the presiding deity of the bandits and thieves. These references tend to suggest that even a glorified Kartik could not completely do away with his malevolent traits though these texts were composed by the very people who were keen to propagate his cult. This significant phenomenon presupposes that the propagation of the Kartik cult did not have a smooth passage at the beginning, there was an undercurrent of resistance. The sporadic mention in the Brahanical texts of his malevolent traits bears testimony to that resistance, which was so deep-rooted that the scripture writers could not altogether ignore it. Can it be suggested that the early agricultural community were the people who branded Kartik with these traits since they had their own reasons to resist the advent of

12. A.K. Chatterjee, Ibid., p. 106
13. Ibid., p. 107
14. Ibid.
the cult? Such a possibility cannot completely be ruled out in the light of the following facts.

First, we have already seen that the cult of Kartik might have originated amongst the people known and described as the Yauddheyas and the Ayudhajivisangha, i.e., a warlike tribe of armed raiders. Such hordes had always been a threat to the settled agricultural population who were destined to fall an easy prey to the former's plundering expeditions. It was also natural that the victims of such plunders would hold in disdain these raiders and their deity. The brading of Kartik as the ignominious presiding deity of the bandits and thieves might be interpreted as remnant of his early association with these turbulent people.

Secondly, Kartik's misogyny was also an aspect to which the agricultural people were prone to react adversely. Because, these communities, particularly the primitive and early agriculturists, held a quite different attitude towards women. Robert Briffault narrates in detail the reasons why the women enjoyed a privileged position in agricultural communities.15 First, "the art of cultivation has developed exclusively in the hands of women." Secondly, "the magical or religious rites intended

to secure the fertility of the fields were naturally within the special competence of women who cultivated them. Thirdly, the fecundity of women and the fecundity of earth were regarded as one and the same quality by them. Fraser quotes a statement of a Red Indian who enlightened a Catholic priest on the issue in plain language, "You know that women are accustomed to bear children and that we are not. When the women sow, the stalk of the maize bears two or three ears, the root of the yucca yields two or three basketfuls, and everything multiplies in proportion. Now why is that? Simply because the women know how to bring forth and know how to make the seed which they sow bring forth also. Let them sow, then; we men don't know as much about it as they do."  

Hence, it is no wonder that the early agricultural folk treated women as sacred and instrumental in bringing about fertility in their soil. Such people would naturally equate misogyny with hatred for agriculture, since they believed in the identical qualities of the soil and women. Hence, to them a misogynous Kartik might have assumed the form of a deity directly opposed to the very process of fertilisation. So, when for socio-political reasons, there

was a conscious effort to popularise the cult of Kartik, it faced some difficulties to make a clean breakthrough amongst the agricultural communities. To combat these difficulties, some fertilising traits, quite alien to his cult, was perhaps superimposed on him. Perhaps at this stage, Kartik was identified with Nejamesa, the Vedic god of fertility. In spite of these efforts, Kartik was not accepted as a full-fledged benevolent deity, particularly by rural womenfolk, the more conservative section of the agricultural people.

IV

In the above context, the practice prevalent in Cachar to keep the effigy of a maiden hidden in Adonis's garden and the associated myth that tells us of a proposed but abandoned marriage between Kartik and the maiden appear significant as well as revealing. Usha, the maiden, is perhaps the creation of the native imagination since no Brahmanical account mentions her name in connection with Kartik. Her abode in the miniature garden suggests her association with agricultural magic. Probably she symbolises a corn-maiden. The ritualistic use of the corn-maiden in connection with agricultural magic is widely prevalent. Normal these corn-maidens are made of the

17. J.G. Frazer, Ibid., pp. 535-542
ears of the corns but the use of rags or earth to make a replica is not also uncommon. In the majority of cases these corn-maidens are also dressed as brides. The name Usha is perhaps a derivation from the root Aush, the name of the local early crop that ripens in July and August. Actually Aush is the only paddy available at that time of the season to use as seed to sow in the miniature garden. The corn-maiden that represents the spirit of the Aush crop tended in the miniature garden was perhaps originally known as Ausha, the normal feminine form of the term.

It may be presumed that originally the ceremonies associated with Usha constituted an independent rite performed as a charm to promote the growth of corn and to secure fertilising rain. Later, when the cult of Kartik was somewhat imposed on the rural communities, perhaps the corn-maiden was tagged on to Kartik since the date of this rite coincides with that of Kartik-worship. The belligerent votaries of Kartik tried to interpret the corn-maiden Ausha as the spouse of Kartik as this was the surest way to popularise a non-agricultural deity amongst an agricultural people. The cultural history of this country is full of examples bearing testimony to the

18. Lawrette Sejourne, *Burning water*, p. 52
efficacy of such method. To accomplish this objective, perhaps it was thought prudent to wrap the low-originated corn-maiden in a more honourable garb and to associate and identify her with a recognised deity of Brahmanical origin. It was almost obvious that the Vedic Usha would be considered best suited for the purpose. In addition to phonetic similarity, Usha has been described as a beautiful maiden in the Vedic text. Also there are references where the same goddess has been hailed as the producer of food. So, Ausha, the humble corn-maiden of the local peasant, was sanskritised by dropping the prefix a and thereby the primary pre-requisite to identify her with the Vedic Usha was accomplished.

But the bid to associate the upgraded corn-maiden with Kartik could only attain a moderate success. With their deep-rooted belief in the magical competence of women, the peasant folk were not expected to accept a misogynous deity unhesitatingly. And it was more improbable that the notion of a supposed union between Kartik and their sacred corn-maiden would easily be conceded. Under the pressure of the upper strata, Kartik was somehow accommodated by the agricultural people as a deity;

20. Pushpendra Kumar, Sakti Cult in Ancient India, pp. 11-12
21. Ibid.
but the myth that tells us of her abandoned marriage with Kartik bears traces of a tacit resistance that was offered by them to an invading war-god.