

An Exploration into the Divine Gender Balance Between Goddess Meenakshi and Lord Sundareshwarar in Indian Mythology

Adhisakthi P K^{1*}, Dr Padmalochana R², Dr P S Mayurappriyan³

^{1*}Research Scholar, Presidency University, Bengaluru

²Associate Professor, Presidency University, Bengaluru

³Professor, Kumaraguru College of Technology, Coimbatore

How to cite this article: Adhisakthi P K, Padmalochana R, P S Mayurappriyan (2024). An Exploration into the Divine Gender Balance Between Goddess Meenakshi and Lord Sundareshwarar in Indian Mythology. *Library Progress International*, 44(3), 3307-3310.

Abstract

Gender Studies is an evolving interdisciplinary academic field that explores the roles, experiences and social constructions of gender, sexuality, and related identities. It examines how gender influences various aspects of human life, including culture, politics, economics, and social interactions. The field also focuses on understanding power dynamics, inequalities, and systems of oppression based on gender, and it often intersects with studies on race, class, ethnicity, and sexuality. Though traditional gender roles frequently dominate Indian mythology, certain narratives subtly challenge these binary constructs by presenting characters who display fluidity and flexibility in their identities. Through their distinctive experiences and relationships, these figures invite a deeper understanding of gender as a spectrum rather than a fixed binary. They remind us that both human and divine experiences are far more intricate and nuanced than rigid categories suggest. This paper tries to delve into the intricate and multifaceted nature of gender construct within the vast tapestry of Indian mythology drawing examples from Shiva – Parvati (Meenakshi and Sundareshwarar) and explore how gender roles, identities, and societal expectations are portrayed, challenged, and reinterpreted across diverse narratives and deities, providing a nuanced understanding of the complexities of gender within this rich cultural tradition.

Key words: Gender, fluidity, Indian mythology, Meenakshi, Sundareshwarar

Introduction

In Indian mythology, gender is understood as a complex and fluid construct that goes beyond the binary notions of male and female. Various mythological stories and figures depict gender as something that can be fluid, changeable, or transcend the typical boundaries. This perspective on gender is deeply intertwined with spiritual, cosmic, and philosophical ideas in Hinduism, Buddhism, and other indigenous traditions of the Indian subcontinent.

One of the most iconic depictions of gender fluidity is the figure of Ardhanarishvarar, a composite form of Shiva and Parvati. The deity is portrayed as half male and half female, symbolizing the inseparable union of masculine and feminine energies. This representation

challenges the binary idea of gender by suggesting that the divine encompasses both genders in a harmonious balance. It represents the idea of Shiva as the cosmic consciousness and Sakthi as the dynamic force of creation, both necessary for the functioning of the universe.

Vishnu, the preserver god, takes on the form of Mohini, a beautiful woman, on several occasions in Hindu mythology. Mohini plays a key role in the Samudra Manthan (churning of the ocean), where she helps the gods by deceiving the demons and distributing the nectar of immortality (amrita) only to the gods. Vishnu's transformation into Mohini is not seen as a mere disguise, but as a true embodiment of feminine power and beauty. In some stories, Shiva is himself is captivated by Mohini, and their union leads to the birth of Ayyappa, a deity worshiped in South India. Mohini represents the idea that divinity transcends gender, and gods can embody both masculine and feminine forms when needed.

Shikhandi, a character from the Mahabharata, is often cited as an example of a transgender figure in Indian mythology. Born as a girl named Amba, Shikhandi is reincarnated as a male to fulfil a vow of vengeance against Bhishma, who had wronged Amba in her previous life. Shikhandi's gender transition plays a crucial role in the Kurukshetra war, where Bhishma, bound by his code of honour not to fight a woman, is fatally wounded. Shikhandi's story illustrates the fluidity of gender identity and its impact on destiny and dharma (duty).

Another example of gender fluidity in the Mahabharata is Arjuna's year-long exile as Brihannala, a eunuch and dance teacher in the kingdom of Virata. This transformation is part of Arjuna's thirteen-year exile, during which he must live

incognito to fulfil his oath. Arjuna, one of the greatest warriors of his time, takes on the role of a feminine dance teacher, demonstrating that the boundaries between masculine and feminine can be fluid depending on circumstance and destiny. These tales provide insight into how Indian culture has historically viewed gender, offering a perspective that is both inclusive and complex.

Objective

The body of literature on gender constructs in Indian mythology presents a complex and multifaceted picture of gender identity. Mythological figures like Ardhhanarishvarar, Shikhandi, Mohini and Brihannala reveal that ancient Indian narratives often embrace gender fluidity and non-binary identities. Scholars from various fields—religious studies, anthropology, feminist theory, and queer studies—have contributed to a deeper understanding of how gender is constructed, contested, and celebrated in Indian mythology. This literature not only enhances our understanding of the past but also provides valuable insights into contemporary discussions on gender diversity in South Asian cultures. The exploration of divine gender balance in Indian mythology reveals a complex and fascinating tapestry of representations. While there are instances where traditional gender roles are reinforced, the pantheon also showcases a powerful and multifaceted divine feminine. The goddesses, with their diverse attributes and roles, contribute significantly to the richness and depth of Hindu mythology, highlighting the importance of understanding and celebrating the full spectrum of feminine energies within the divine realm. This paper explores the fascinating and complex topic of divine gender balance in Indian mythology delving into the representations of the divine: Madurai Meenakshi and Sundareshwarar (her consort) and much known Radha and Krishna, examining both male and female deities and their roles within the intricate web of Hindu mythology.

Key ideas

The Hindu pantheon boasts a diverse array of goddesses, each representing unique attributes and playing crucial roles in the mythology. These goddesses are not just reflections of the masculine divine; they possess distinct personalities, powers, and functions. Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and prosperity, embodies the nurturing and abundant aspects of the feminine. Saraswati, the goddess of knowledge and art, represents creativity and wisdom. Parvati, the consort of Shiva, embodies love, devotion, and domesticity.

Furthermore, the concept of the divine feminine extends beyond the traditional goddesses. The Gopis, the female devotees of Krishna, are often portrayed as embodying the ideals of love, devotion, and spiritual longing. They represent a more earthly aspect of the divine feminine, showcasing the power of devotion and the human capacity for spiritual connection. The interplay between masculine and feminine energies is a recurring theme in Indian mythology. It is often represented through the stories of divine couples, such as Shiva and Parvati (Madurai Meenakshi and her Consort Sundareshwarar), Vishnu and Lakshmi (in the form of Krishna and Radha), and Brahma and Saraswati. These couples, despite their distinct personalities, embody a balanced and complementary union of masculine and feminine energies. Their interactions demonstrate the importance of collaboration, harmony, and mutual respect in the creation and maintenance of the cosmic order.

Literature review

Wendy Doniger in her work “The Origins of Evil in Hindu Mythology”, presents the idea that Indian mythology frequently presents deities and heroes who transcend gender binaries, as seen in figures like Ardhhanarishvarar - the half-male, half-female form of Shiva and Parvati (Doniger, 1980). Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai’s anthology “Same-Sex Love in India: Readings from Literature and History” highlights figures like Shikhandi in the Mahabharata and Mohini, the female form of Vishnu, as exemplars of how mythology offers a non-binary understanding of gender (Vanita and Kidwai, 2001), Madhavi Menon in her work “Infinite Variety: A History of Desire in India”, discusses how the story of Shikhandi allows for the recognition of transgender identities in ancient Indian society, viewing them as empowered and significant in religious and social contexts (Menon, 2015). Ellen Goldberg in her work “The Lord Who Is Half Woman: Ardhhanarishvarar in Indian and Feminist Perspective” provides an in-depth analysis of Ardhhanarishvarar, exploring how the androgynous form of Shiva and Parvati reflects the unity of opposites in Hindu metaphysics (Goldberg, 2002). In “The Man Who Was a Woman and Other Queer Tales from Hindu Lore”, Devdutt Pattanaik examines how Mohini is used as a narrative device to transcend gender, often manipulating gender norms to achieve divine purposes. Pattanaik argues that Mohini’s gender-switching reflects the ability of gods to transcend human limitations, including gender (Pattanaik, 2001).

Findings

The relationship between Madurai Meenakshi and Sundareshwarar (Lord Sundareshwarar) in Tamil mythology represents a significant divine couple in Hinduism, especially in the context of gender relations and the balance of masculine and feminine energies. Meenakshi, the goddess, is one of the forms of the Mother Goddess Parvati, who is widely worshiped in Tamil Nadu, particularly in the Madurai Meenakshi Amman Temple. She is revered not only for her divine beauty but also for her strength, wisdom, and leadership as a queen and warrior.

Meenakshi represents feminine power and is an embodiment the powerful, independent, and sovereign feminine principle. As a warrior goddess, she challenges traditional gender norms by being a protector and leader, showing that women can also possess authority and strength. Besides her martial prowess, Meenakshi is also seen as a nurturer and guide, embodying compassion and wisdom, often associated with the divine feminine in Hindu theology.

Sundaeswarar, another name for Lord Shiva, represents the masculine principle in the divine couple. His qualities are those of a cosmic ascetic, yet in his form as Sundareshwarar, he is also the graceful, loving consort of Meenakshi. He is often shown as a devoted husband, surrendering to Meenakshi's power and authority. This dynamic reverses traditional gender roles.

Sundareshwarar in his union with Sakthi is often seen as incomplete without Her, his female counterpart. In this mythological narrative, their union symbolizes the harmony of opposites, where masculine and feminine forces are complementary rather than hierarchical.

Gender Relations in Meenakshi and Sundareshwarar

Equality and Balance: The divine marriage of Meenakshi and Sundareshwarar symbolizes the idea of gender balance in the cosmos. While Meenakshi is a powerful ruler in her own right, her union with Sundareshwarar is seen as a merging of equals, each with distinct but complementary qualities. This reflects the Hindu theological belief in the interdependence of male and female energies. Meenakshi embodies feminine power, while Sundareshwarar represents a more fluid, receptive masculinity. Their relationship celebrates the harmony and interdependence of opposites.

Feminine Sovereignty: The worship of Meenakshi, particularly in Madurai, elevates the status of the feminine as powerful and independent. Unlike some other traditions where the feminine is primarily passive or nurturing, Meenakshi's story shows that women can be both protectors and nurturers. Meenakshi is revered as a powerful, independent goddess who chose Sundareshwarar as her consort. This narrative subverts the conventional patriarchal norms.

Sacred Marriage: Their marriage is celebrated as a divine event that reinforces the idea that gender roles, though distinct in some ways, are equally important. In this myth, gender relations are not seen through a lens of dominance or subordination, but rather as a harmonious partnership necessary for cosmic balance.

Egalitarian partnership: Meenakshi and Sundareshwarar are often depicted as equals, with Meenakshi being the dominant figure in the temple's iconography. This contrasts with traditional Hindu mythology, where the male deity typically takes center stage.

Regional cultural influences: The unique cultural and social context of Tamil Nadu, where the temple is located, has shaped the mythology and worship of Meenakshi and Sundareshwarar, reflecting more egalitarian and matriarchal traditions.

The relationship between Meenakshi and Sundareshwarar reflects a nuanced view of gender relations in Hinduism, particularly in the Tamil tradition. It emphasizes equality, balance, and the complementarity of masculine and feminine energies, with Meenakshi being celebrated as an empowered female deity who stands equally with her consort Sundareshwarar.

Scope for further study

Indian mythology offers a vast and diverse scope for gender studies, with numerous themes, characters, and narratives that can be explored through a gender lens. It would be interesting to study how mythological narratives reinforce or challenge patriarchal norms, including the distribution of power, authority, and control drawing examples from the not only Ramayana and Mahabharata, but, different avatars of Vishnu as well. A reading into the other stories of Shiva and Parvati (Ardhanarisvarar), Love story of Lord Subramanya and his Consort Valli Nayaki, the construction of masculinity and femininity in these narratives, including the characteristics, roles, and expectations associated with each would offer a rich and diverse scope for gender studies in Indian mythology, inviting scholars to explore and interpret the complex and multifaceted nature of gender in these ancient narratives.

Conclusion

In conclusion, a gender studies analysis of the Meenakshi - Sundareshwar myth offers a nuanced understanding of how traditional gender roles are both reinforced and challenged within the context of Indian mythology.

The narrative challenges rigid definitions of gender and highlights the potential for more fluid, complementary relationships between men and women, even within traditional frameworks. This analysis provides a valuable perspective on how mythology reflects and influences gender constructs in both historical and contemporary contexts.

References

1. Krishnan, Ra. The Great Temple of Madurai Meenakshi: Arulmigu Meenakshi Sundareshwarar Temple, Tamilnadu, 2023
2. Thiagarajan, K. Meenakshi Temple, Madurai. India, Meenakshi Sundareshwarar Temple Renovation Committee, 1965.
3. Doniger, Wendy. The Origins of Evil In Hindu Mythology. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1980
4. Vanita, Ruth, and Saleem Kidwai. Same-Sex Love in India: Readings from Literature and History: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2000

5. Menon, Madhavi. *Infinite Variety: A History of Desire in India*: Speaking Tiger Books, 2018
6. Goldberg, Ellen. *The Lord Who Is Half Woman: Ardhhanarisvara in Indian and Feminist Perspective*: State University of New York Press, 2002
7. Pattanaik, Devdutt. *The Man Who Was a Woman and Other Queer Tales from Hindu Lore*: Routledge, 2001