

Ardhanarishvara as a Humanistic Construct of Hindu Philosophy: A Paradigm Shift beyond Spirituality.

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ABSTRACT

The idea of *Ardhanarishvara* (A Sanskrit term for half female and half male spiritual manifestation of the Hindu God Shiva) offers a fascinating investigation of gender dichotomy and its cohesion within the divine. This paper, “*Ardhanarishvara as a Humanistic Construct of Hindu Philosophy: A Paradigm Shift beyond Spirituality*” examines metaphorically, the mythological androgynous composite of Shiva and his consort *Parvati* from a humanistic angle. The present research explores this unusual depiction of divinities from allegorical, biological and social viewpoints. *Ardhanarishvara*, although a Hindu divine concept, finds parallels in Greek, Christian, Chinese and Japanese philosophies. Taking all such studies into consideration, the paper attempts to establish a shift from the existing popular notion of Shiva’s spiritualism to a more relatable idea of humanism, thus establishing Shiva as a deity with humanistic attributes. The paper correlates the theories of Humanism to the idea of *Ardhanarishvara* and consequently, presents the latter as, not only a spiritual belief, but also an earthly ideology and thus very relevant to the mundane realities of human beings.

Keywords: androgynous, *Ardhanarishvara*, cohesion, divinity, gender dichotomy, humanism.

Introduction

Ardhanarishvara (transliterated from Sanskrit) is one of the sixty-four manifestations of the Hindu God, Shiva. The uniqueness that makes it peculiar and different from other expressions of Shiva, is its androgynous form. This typical form of Shiva incorporates the male and the female principals and extends further than genders. The androgynous philosophy gets reflected in the following *shloka* of *Ardhanarishwara Stotra* [a hymn for *Ardhanarishwara*] composed by Sri Adi Shankar Bhagavatpada:

“चाम्पेयगौरार्धशरीरकायै कर्पूरगौरार्धशरीरकाय ।

धम्मिल्लकायै च जटाधराय नमः शिवायै च नमः शिवाय” (*Astromantra*. 2024)

Translated as [‘One shines with golden yellow colour like *champa* flower [*Plumeria*] and other half shines in white *karpura* [*Camphor*]. One side of the head is decorated with beautiful braided decoration and other sports an unkept *jatamakutam*[crown]. I bow to *Amba* Shiva and Lord Shiva in the form of *Ardhnareshwar*’] (Quoted in Mayavarm & Trans. 2014).

Ardhanarishwara ‘represents a constructive and a generative power. God is beyond the concept of any sex. God can be male, female, and even neuter too. So god existing in this intrinsic condition is referred as *Ardhanarishwara*’ (*Astromantra*. 2024). Although, the idea of Shiva’s androgyny is *Vedic* in its origin, it has always existed in other forms in the majority of prehistoric myths and ancient philosophies. In addition to Hindu

mythology, the divine androgyny can be noticed in Greek, Christian, Chinese and Japanese theological beliefs. *Ardhanarishvara* alludes to the spiritual and the physical conglomeration of Shiva and *Shakti* figuratively, where *Shakti* is the universal power that underlines and sustains all existence, and is personified as the wife of Shiva (Rosen 2006, p 166). In order to demonstrate the inseparability of *Shakti* from Shiva, the male representation of God, this union is the concoction of male and female forces.

Objective

The aim of the present research is to deepen the understanding of Shiva's manifestation of *Ardhanarishwara* through mythical narratives found in the *Siva-Purana*, and the ancient Eastern and Western concepts of male-female duality inherent in their philosophical interpretations. The researcher mainly seeks to study the humanistic construct of *Ardhanarishwara* from the point of view of various approaches of humanism, exploring the intersections between mythology, spirituality, and human values. The paper also assesses the contemporary relevance of Shiva's humanistic attributes as a challenge or a reinforcement of traditional and the present day conceptions of divinity.

It, finally, plans to underscore the timeless relevance of *Ardhanarishwara* and its capacity to inspire a more humane and ethical way of living, thus offering valuable insights for both scholars and practitioners of humanism today.

Methodology

The present research on *Ardhanarishwara*, employs a qualitative methodology through textual analysis of sources that are primary and secondary in nature. Literature review approach has been used to ascertain the research gap, and to determine the novelty of the research. The ancient Vedic treatise of the *Siva Purana* has been thematically explored. It is further studied through the lens of secondary sources that comprise of the Eastern and the Western philosophies of gender duality, along with the previous studies done on *Ardhanarishwara*. The research takes an interdisciplinary approach by incorporating mythological, iconographical, cultural, biological and gender perspectives of this concept. The theoretical framework encompassing humanistic studies of both Western and Indian origin has been employed to visualize *Ardhanarishwara* from this angle.

Literature Survey

Lord Shiva has been one of the most loved, worshipped and enigmatic Gods from the Hindu mythology and have been explored academically from varied perspectives. The study of the available sources reveals that the accessible material mainly deals with Shiva's mythology and iconography. Shiva's various manifestations, like the *Nataraja* (the cosmic dancer) and *Ardhanarishwara* (half-man, half-woman) have been explored from symbolic and iconographical angles. Studies on Shiva's representation in different art forms, including sculptures, paintings, and carvings, his binaries of asceticism and earthliness, retellings of Shiva's myths by writers like Amish Tripathi and Ashok Banker, and relevance of Shiva in the modern technological world, have also been attempted. In addition, the available literature also deals with archaeological findings related to Shiva's worship as in the Indus Valley Civilization seals depicting proto-Shiva figures, and study of ancient temples dedicated to Shiva. There are analyses on Shiva's influence on music, dance, and other performing arts, and festivals dedicated to Shiva.

Research Gap

As far as the much debated field of Humanism is concerned, it has not been applied yet on mythology, particularly on Lord Shiva and his manifestation of *Ardhanarishwara*. The present literature survey on Shiva shows, although the studies have been done in the form of papers, articles, books, mythological fiction, retellings etc on Shiva, no comprehensive research has been taken up on the application of the concept of Humanism on Shiva's mythology, particularly in relation to *Ardhanarishwara*. This is the gap that the current research intends to fill. The aim to provide a humanistic orientation to Shiva will instil a new energy, form and fresh outlook to

view as well as worship Shiva, and make Shiva more relatable to the contemporary scenario. As the studies of the dimensions of humanism in *Ardhanarishwara* have remained unexplored, the present paper is a fresh attempt of its kind.

The Myth of *Ardhanarishwara* as per the *Siva Purana*

There are various mythical stories related to *Ardhanarishwara*, however, the one narrated in the *Siva Purana* [the ancient Hindu seminal text on Shiva] is being taken for this study. Brahma failed to produce human creations through mating because till that time no women had taken birth from *Isana* [human being]. He, then, pondered over uniting Lord Shiva with the great *Shakti*. Consequently, *Brahama* performed a penance for Shiva because he knew that without his power, the subjects will not be born. Shiva, having been pleased by *Brahama*'s penance and realizing the need of the hour assumed the 'the wish-yielding form of *Isana* - the perfect consciousness, and in the guise of half-male and half-female form, *Siva* approached *Brahama*' (Shastri trans.1970: Part III, 1075). Shiva, henceforth, detached *Shakti* from his body. *Brahama* requested *Shakti* to be born of Lord *Daksha* to procreate mobile and immobile beings only as *Isana*. Thus, the supreme goddess consented and constituting the universe, created a *Shakti* equal in lustre to herself from the middle of her eyebrows. Having completed the task, she once again entered Shiva's body (1075-78).

The name *Ardhanarishwara* means 'The Lord whose half is a woman. This form of Shiva represents the totality that lies beyond duality and is associated with communication between mortals and gods and between men and women' (Conner & Sparks, 1997). As a result, *Ardhanarishwara* represents the dual presence of male and female inside a single body. It illustrates the significance and relationship between *purusha* [men] and *prakriti* [women], their 'necessary interdependence' (Pande, 2004), their inseparability, and their incompleteness without one another. Women, in a popular Hindu belief, are portrayed as manifestations of the divine mother, elevating women to the status of Goddesses like *Kali*, *Sati*, and *Parvati*. The belief, symbolically, provides an equal status to females as that of males.

Nonetheless, women's identities and lives have completely transformed in the metropolitan environment. She is seen as the victim of patriarchy and male dominance in both the private and personal spheres of life. The *Manusmriti* implies that the construction of gendered identity is a sociocultural construct that is acquired through 'repeated stylization of the body' (Butler 1988: 519). It states that 'A woman who controls her mind, speech, and body and is never unfaithful to her husband attains the worlds of her husband, and virtuous people call her a good woman' (Olivelle 2005: 165). However, Butler refers to this acculturation of the body to its assigned gender as 'punitive consequences'. *Ardhanarishwara* explores the grey spaces between masculine and femininity and views gender as complementing qualities rather than a binary concept. It alludes to the coexistence of a male and a female entity inside a single body.

Numerous tales of gods and goddesses, including demi-gods, semi-gods, personal gods, forest gods, and gods of the air, fire, and water, may be found in Indian philosophy. Within the *Vedas* and *Puranas*, each of them had a significant position and held certain ideas. It is said that the cosmos, in concert with the trinity of *Brahma* (the world's creator), *Vishnu* (the world's administrator), and *Mahesh* (the remover of ills), created our universe. Modern writers have a sharp eye for these mythical subjects and have shown a profound interest in the literature of authors such as Kabir Das, Tulsi Das, and Kali Das, as well as in important and minor characters from the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. They are not only adopting a contemporary perspective to recount the tales on it, but they are also lending their voices to a number of poignant and compelling characters from these epics that have direct relevance to present society. These authors are attempting to elevate women who were portrayed as victims of exploitation in reality. Many authors like Devdutt Pattanaik, Kavita Kane, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, and Amish Tripathi, have written mythological fiction. *Myth = Mithya* (Pattanaik, 2014b), tells the tale of Shiva and *Shankara*, two gods and goddesses, along with the myth surrounding their qualities. Many characters from the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* have stories to tell, which are expressed in the book *Shikhandi: and Other Queer Tales They Don't Tell You* (Pattanaik, 2014a). Its short tales addresses feminism, mythology, and LGBT ideologies.

Devdutt Pattanaik depicts a glimpse of *Ardhanarishwara* in relation to the account of Shiva, 'In Hindu mythology, the male form represents mind and the female is representation of nature. He went on to remark that as the mind can only process the presence of things and must see and feel them in order to know they exist, it is

entirely reliant on nature. Therefore, nature does not rely on the mind; rather, the mind grows when it comes in contact with nature' (Pattanaik 2014: 57).

Ravish, interestingly, gives a biological interpretation of *Ardhanarishwara*. He mentions, 'A human being is not a pure unisexual organism. Each human organism bears the potentiality of both male and female sex. Neuro-hormonal mechanisms have been found to be greatly influencing the sexual behavior With this unity of two biological opposite sexes the universe completes their energies' (Raveesh 2013: 263).

1.1 Equivalents in Other Ancient Philosophies

In addition to Hindu mythology, the divine confluence of male and female principles are noticeable in Greek, Christian, Chinese and Japanese theological ideologies.

1.2 Greek Mythology

In Greek mythology, the deity Hermaphroditus (God of love) is a symbol of androgyny, and in Greco-Roman art it is depicted having a female body with male genitalia (Panormita 2001: 17). Initially a male, Hermaphroditus was a child of Hermes (God of trade, wealth, luck and fertility) and Aphrodite (Goddess of love and sexuality) – a combination of his parents' names. He / She is shown as a deity pursuing a hare which symbolizes *Hermaphroditus*' love desire (Panormita 2001). This legend of the Hellenistic era was alluded to by Ovid in his narrative Epic poem *Metamorphoses* (Ovid, 2000, *Metamorphoses*, Book IV: lines 274-388).

Salmacis, a nymph, gets sexually enamoured of handsome Hermaphroditus and tries to seduce him. However, when he rebuffs her, she prays to the gods to forever merge her with him. The gods obliged, and the result was the formation of a divine half man, half woman being. Not only did their bodies unite, Hermaphroditus turned soft and feminine; and Salmacis's nature became a part of him (Ovid, 2000, *Metamorphoses*).



(1) Hermaphroditus. September 2024. *Theoi Greek Mythology*.

1.3 The Hindu deity *Ardhanarishwara*, and the Greek, *Hermaphroditus*, both represent biological synthesis of the male and female bodies, and the confluence of the archetypal principles of maleness and femaleness in perpetual harmony. Although, *Hermaphroditus* has sexual overtones, *Ardhanarishwara* is more of a spiritual orientation, and is, henceforth, interpreted in this paper from the perspective of Vedic or Integral Humanism (See below).

1.4 Eastern Tradition

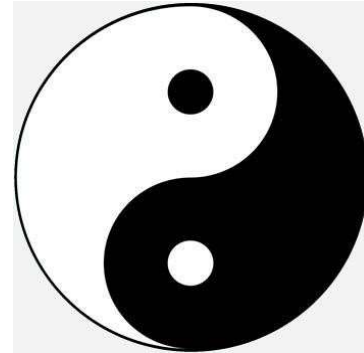
The notion of *Ardhanarishwara* also finds parallel (with some basic differences) in Chinese philosophy of *Yin* and *Yang*, and in Japanese *In* and *Yo* (*Britannica*, Dec 2023). Both are of Eastern origin and may differ in the time of their genesis. '*Yin* is the symbol of earth, femaleness, darkness passivity and absorption. It is present in even numbers in valleys and streams. *Yang* is conceived of as heaven, maleness, light, activity, and penetration. It is present in odd numbers, in mountains'. They are depicted in harmony as the light and the dark halves of a circle. It illustrates how the opposing polar energies of black and white are essentially complimentary to each other.

Both the Eastern beliefs have symbolic representations developed in unison with their respective cultural manifestations. *Ardhanarishwara* is represented through male and female bodies, infused to form one single entity, however, visible as the female on the left, while the male on the right. The Chinese *Yin* and *Yang* is represented by white and black areas depicted in a harmonious fusion enclosed in a circle [Chinese: *Taijitu*]. The black area with a white spot symbolizes *Yin*, while the white area with black spot represents *Yang*. However, there is a difference in their reciprocal positioning. In the Indian thought process, the male principal is on the

right, representing the mind that is the reason, while the female counterpart is on the left, which signifies the heart, a symbolic seat of emotionality. In Chinese, *Taijitu*, the male part is on the left, while the female in on the right.



1.5 (2) *Ardhanarishvara*



(3) *Yin and Yang*

1.6 (Ardhanarishvara. Aug 2024. Exotic India)

(Yin Yang. Aug 2024. Britannica)

1.7 The concept entered into Japan in early times as '*in-yo*' ('in' is equivalent to Chinese '*Yin*', and '*yo*' corresponds to '*Yang*'). Every level of Japanese culture was infused with the idea of '*in-yo*', which continues even to this day. It is believed to influence both fortunate and unfortunate days, decisions, as well as marriage arrangements that take the zodiac signs into account. Male-Female Confluence in Christian Theology

The male-female integration as one body also finds expression in the Western philosophy through Christian theology: 'Therefore, the man slept in a profound slumber, which was brought on by the Lord God; after that, he removed one of his ribs and sealed its place with flesh. And the lady that the Lord God created from the man's rib was brought to the man' (Brueggemann 1986: 2). This chronicle of Eve's creation through Adam's ribs is highlighted in the verses from the *Book of Genesis*. The narrative indicates towards a cosmological presence of an initial male-female unison in God's body, which was later unglued to create Adam and Eve. According to the *Bible*, it is implied that after creating hell and heaven, *Yahweh* [God] desired to create mankind, therefore, he made Adam and Eve. Humanistic Interpretation of *Ardhanarishvara*

Customarily, as also given in The *Siva Purana*, *Ardhanarishvara* is looked upon as one of the spiritual or mythological manifestation of Shiva. However, in addition, there are metaphorical or symbolic interpretations that define it as a figurative confluence of masculine and feminine energies, offering profound dynamics of duality and unity present in nature. In addition, there are studies which provide a biological elucidation of *Ardhanarishvara* (See Ravish above). It is also considered as a symbol of Gender Equality. But, one aspect appears to be common in all, that is, all the approaches are humanistic in spirit. They reveal that the values of humanism are inherent in the philosophy of *Ardhanarishvara*.

Humanism is a stance that emphasizes upon the agency of human beings and their individuality as central to everything in nature. The Western dictum of humanism, whose roots can be traced to ancient Greek philosophical thoughts, advocates 'Unity of human and scientific culture' (Mueller 1936: 457); rationality, equality, human welfare, commitment to moral values, individualism and agnosticism as its major tenets (Law 2011: 1-2). However, the Indian thought process takes a route of integration, which conveys that man's consciousness works in cohesion with God, Nature and spiritualism - a plan where the material and the spiritual are complimentary and work together for the well-being of society. The *Vedas* and the *Puranas* have been propagating this idea which is recognized as Vedic Humanism today (Vedalkar 2001:352). Indian humanists like Swami Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo, Rabindranath Tagore, and Pandit Deen Dayal Upadhyaya are some of the later advocates of this assimilation.

Having deliberated briefly upon the theoretical aspects of humanism, particularly the Indian reflections, one can see that *Ardhanarishvara* transcends its boundaries of spirituality to assimilate with it the mundane realities and desires of man. *Ardhanarishvara* balances the two contrasting treatments of life: the spiritual way of a *yogi* [ascetic], as embodied by Shiva, and the humanly way of a homemaker, represented by his consort, *Parvati*. Moreover, this confluence of male and female is precisely earthly in nature as it also has the undertones

of corporal intimacy of a wedded couple. Metaphorically, this manifestation of Shiva, gel human beings with God, and thus, demonstrates the *Advaita Vedanta* philosophy of ‘*अहम् ब्रह्मास्मि*’, translated as [I and God] (*Brham*) are one’, as mentioned in *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* (Tr. Madhavananda, Swami, 1950: 557). Subsequently, it can be stated that *Ardhanarishvara* is an earthly concept, and that is what makes Lord Shiva very much a humanistic God.

The humanism in *Ardhanarishwara* gets once again evident, when it is studied as a symbol of gender equality. Human welfare and equivalence of sexes have been noteworthy parameters of Social Humanism (Law 2011: 1-2).

Though Hindu religious beliefs elevate women to a goddess’ status; patriarchy, sadly, fails to acknowledge them as fellow human beings. The times have completely changed for women; the *Shakti* or the *Prakriti* [nature] is now the target of discrimination and harassment, wherein women are exploited as mothers, spouses, and daughters. Men are supposed to act in a manly manner, while women are expected to display feminine demeanour. If they do not conform to these societal standards, it is believed that they are queer.

Ironically, it is the dictum of *Ardhanarishwara*, that conveys the spirit of gender equality. *Ardhanarishwara* dispels myths about subordination of women while shedding light on equality. The concepts of *Ardhanarishwara*, including Hermaphroditus, Adam-Eve, Yin-Yang, and ‘In-Yo’, dismisses the very notion of male-female inequality. Nevertheless, it demonstrates the equality of the two poles, ‘neither pole is superior to the other’ (*World History Encyclopedia*, 2018). So, the ideology of *Ardhanarishwara*’s gender equality subverts patriarchy, and, at the same time, is a vital reflection of Social Humanism,

2. Conclusion

Although several laws promote gender equality, nonetheless, patriarchy maintains its own set of commandments even in the twenty-first century. While women are well supported by legal systems, in some social sections they are still subverted, and regrettably, the ancient Hindu concept of *Ardhanarishwara* is perpetually challenged by the contemporary and still- surviving notion of patriarchy.

In such a scenario, *Ardhanarishwara* emerges not merely as a figure of mythic lore, but as a metaphor for equality and the essential unity of opposites, presenting a nuanced understanding of the interconnectedness of all existence. It enriches our understanding of divine duality, offering insights into the complex interplay between masculinity and femininity.

The present research explores the idea from various angles – mythological, spiritual, metaphorical, archetypal, biological, as well as social, and finally concludes that *Ardhanarishwara* is basically a humanistic construct that incorporates the values of humanism. It depicts the unity of spirituality and earthliness, man and scientific culture (see the biological interpretation by Ravish); equality and human welfare, commitment to moral values and individualism. Simultaneously, *Ardhanarishwara* provides an unbiased message to lead a peaceful worldly life with the confluence of spirituality.

Therefore, *Ardhanarishwara* is just not an age old belief, but a highly relevant humanistic philosophy from the modern context, which also establishes Lord Shiva as a humanistic God.

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