



## Ardhanārīśvara and Decolonizing Feminism: Rethinking Gender Beyond Western Binaries in Indian Thought

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### ABSTRACT

Contemporary feminist discourse in India has largely been shaped through the selective application of Western feminist theories, often rooted in liberal, post-Enlightenment, and individualistic epistemologies. While these frameworks have been instrumental in addressing gender inequality, their universalizing tendencies frequently overlook the cultural, philosophical, and historical specificities of non-Western societies. This paper seeks to critique the uncritical applicability of Western feminist paradigms in the Indian context by engaging with the indigenous concept of Ardhanarishvara as a decolonial alternative for rethinking gender and power.

Ardhanarishvara, a combination of three words “Ardha,” “Nari,” and “Ishwara” which when combined means the lord whose half is a woman. It is a composite form of Shiva and Shakti, representing a non-dual metaphysical vision wherein masculine and feminine principles are inseparable, co-equal, and mutually constitutive. Drawing upon Shaiva–Shakta philosophy, Sāṃkhya metaphysics, Puranic narratives, and Tantric traditions, the paper argues that Indian thought conceptualizes gender not as a rigid binary or hierarchical opposition but as a fluid and relational continuum. Through textual analysis and iconographic interpretation of classical representations, the study demonstrates how Ardhanarishvara challenges Western gender binaries that often underpin feminist theory, such as male/female, subject/object, and nature/culture..

At the same time, the study does not romanticize tradition. It critically examines the paradox wherein the divine feminine is symbolically exalted while real women continue to face structural marginalization. This tension underscores the necessity of a contextual feminist critique that neither rejects tradition wholesale nor accepts it uncritically. By addressing the contemporary relevance of Ardhanarishvara in debates on gender fluidity and non-binary identities within the Indian context, The paper concludes that Ardhanarishvara offers a culturally grounded yet philosophically radical framework that can contribute to decolonial feminist discourse in India, enabling a more plural, inclusive, and context-sensitive understanding of gender beyond Western universalisms.

## INTRODUCTION

Ardhanārīśvara is derived from the Sanskrit words “ardha” (half), “nari” (woman), and “ishwara” (lord). It is the composite form of the Hindu deities Shiva (male) and Parvati (female, also known as Shakti, meaning power or energy), depicted as a single body split vertically into two halves - one male, the other female. It symbolizes the inseparability and interdependence of the masculine (Purusha or Consciousness) and feminine (Prakriti or Nature) principles, embodying the cosmic balance necessary for creation and existence. It is philosophically rooted in non-dualistic traditions, such as Advaita Vedanta, which believes that there is no essential division between the masculine and the feminine. The androgynous philosophy gets reflected in the following shloka of Ardhanārīśvara Stotra [a hymn for Ardhanārīśvara] composed by Sri Adi Shankar Bhagavatpada:

*Chāmpeya-gaurārdha-śarīra-kāyai*  
*Karpūra-gaurārdha-śarīra-kāya*  
*Dhammillakāyai ca jaṭādhārāya*  
*Namaḥ śivāyai ca namaḥ śivāya*

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*”. The form dissolves the rigid boundaries between male and female, suggesting that all beings contain both energies. Ardhanārīśvarathus transcends gender binaries, offering a vision of unity, harmony, and fluid identity.

## OBJECTIVE

1. To examine the philosophical foundations of Ardhanārīśvara as an embodiment of Śiva-Śakti non-duality in Indian metaphysical and theological traditions.
2. To position Ardhanārīśvara as a symbolic and philosophical resource for addressing sexual inequality, gender bias, and exclusion, grounded in indigenous epistemological traditions.
3. To analyze Purāṇic, Tantric, and epic narratives that articulate the interdependence and complementarity of masculine and feminine principles, rather than hierarchical gender structures.
4. To explore how concepts such as Śiva-Śakti unity, Mohinī, Vinayaki and androgynous forms challenge sexual inequality and gender hierarchy by presenting gender as a shared cosmic function rather than a basis for dominance or subordination.



5. To evaluate the limitations of Western feminist and gender theories when applied to Indian mythological and philosophical contexts, particularly in relation to sexuality and gender roles.
6. To contribute to contemporary discussions on gender justice and sexual equality by recovering and reinterpreting classical Indian philosophical models of unity, balance, and mutual dependence.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, interdisciplinary methodology combining textual, iconographic, philosophical, and critical approaches to examine Ardhanārīśvara and the broader Śiva-Śakti paradigm beyond reductive gender binaries.

A close reading of primary Sanskrit sources forms the foundation of this research. **Texts** examined include the Śiva Purāṇa, Devī Māhātmya, Skanda Purāṇa, Matsya Purāṇa, Mahānirvāṇa Tantra, and the Ardhanārīśvara Stotra attributed to Ādi Śaṅkarācārya. These texts are analyzed to trace theological, cosmological, and symbolic articulations of Śiva-Śakti unity. The study employs comparative **philosophical analysis** to interpret Ardhanārīśvara through the frameworks of Sāṃkhya, Yoga, Vedānta, and Tantra. Concepts such as puruṣa-prakṛti dualism, non-dual absorption, consciousness-energy polarity, and yogic epistemology are critically examined. This allows Ardhanārīśvara to be understood not merely as an artistic motif, but as a metaphysical principle expressing ontological unity beyond biological gender. An **iconographic methodology**, grounded in the study of śilpa śāstras such as the Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa, is employed to analyze the formal attributes of Ardhanārīśvara images. Visual data from temple sculptures, coins, mural paintings (especially from Kerala), and regional artistic traditions are examined. Diagnostic features such as body division, postures (bhaṅgas), gestures (mudrās), attributes, costume, and ornamentation are analyzed to understand how masculinity and femininity are visually encoded and symbolically balance. The research incorporates **archaeological material culture** to trace the historical emergence and regional development of Ardhanārīśvara imagery. Sculptural remains, temple reliefs, from key sites such as Mathurā, Kuṣāṇa-period Gandhāra, Udayagiri, Ajanta, Thanjavur and Aihole, enables an understanding of how metaphysical ideas were materialized in stone and bronze. **Traditional narratives** are treated as case studies of lived metaphysics, rather than allegorical tales. These include the Mohinī-Śiva episode, the Pandavas' Agyātavāsa with Arjuna as Brihannalā, and Devi-centric narratives that destabilize fixed gender identities. These traditional stories are analyzed to demonstrate how ontological fluidity is narrativized within the tradition, reinforcing the philosophical foundations of Ardhanārīśvara. **A critical interpretive approach** informed by gender studies is used to engage with feminist and sociological critiques of Ardhanārīśvara. Scholarly arguments by Kalidos, Goldberg, and others are examined to assess claims of gender hierarchy, symbolism of the left-hand side, and patriarchal normativity. These critiques are evaluated contextually rather than prescriptively, allowing for both affirmation and reassessment.



## RESEARCH GAP

Despite the extensive scholarship on Ardhanārīśvara across textual, iconographic, and philosophical traditions, several significant gaps remain. Early studies in art history—such as those by Gopinath Rao, Peter Bisschop and Marguerite Adiceam treat Ardhanārīśvara as a subsidiary aspect of Śiva, rather than as an independent and complex theological construct with deep pre-Purāṇic roots. Subsequent studies by scholars such as Jan Gonda, Doris Srinivasan, and R. Nagaswamy have convincingly traced the conceptual origins of dual and androgynous deities to early Vedic dvidevatā systems and metaphysical binaries such as prakṛti–puruṣa. However, these insights have not been sufficiently integrated into mainstream art historical and religious studies, resulting in a disconnect between Vedic cosmology and later iconographic manifestations of Ardhanārīśvara. Apart from these, There are many examples depicting interdependence as in Ardhanārīśvara. But No case studies have been examined from different episodes of the various puranas or epics which are depicting the concept of Ardhanārīśvara & challenging patriarchy

## CO-ORIGIN OF MASCULINE AND FEMININE DIVINITY

The textual traditions describing the co-origination of Śiva and Sarasvatī from a single cosmic source, often identified as the same egg of Mahālakṣmī, foreground a metaphysics of simultaneity rather than hierarchy. These narratives depict masculine and feminine divinities emerging simultaneously, rather than sequentially, thus challenging any notion of male-first or female-second logic. By presenting divine masculinity and femininity as co-existent and mutually dependent, these texts undermine patriarchal creation narratives common in Western theological frameworks. In this sense, these accounts resonate with both the philosophical and biological understanding of Ardhanārīśvara, where unity precedes division, and the integration of complementary forces is necessary for the existence and functioning of the cosmos.

## ŚHIVA-ŚHAKTI NON-DUALISM AND PHILOSOPHICAL BASIS OF ARDHANĀRĪŚVARA

1. Sāṅkhya philosophy presents a clear dualistic view(Dvaita) of reality, asserting that it consists of two eternal principles: Purusha and Prakriti. Purusha is pure consciousness, the witness, the experiencer, devoid of qualities (nirguna), eternal and unchanging. It does not create, act, think, or change; it simply illuminates. To understand this, one can think of a movie screen that allows images to appear without acting in the movie. In essence, Purusha is conscious but inactive. On the other hand, Prakriti is the material cause of the universe, encompassing mind, ego, intellect, senses, and matter. It is dynamic and changing, governed by three gunas: Sattva (balance), Rajas (activity), and Tamas



(inertia). Prakriti evolves into the entire cosmos, producing thoughts, emotions, and the body-mind complex, yet it remains unconscious of itself. Analogies such as Electricity powering a machine, machine moves but it is not conscious. So, the **Prakriti is active but unconscious**.

**Samkhya Karika 21 text: “Purushasya darshanaartham kaivalyaartham tathā pradhanasya Pangva-andhavat ubhyorapi samyoghāt krtah sargah”**

According to Samkhya, as already said, this universe is the result of the conjunction of two independent entities – **Purusha** and **Prakriti**. **Each has its own role but is deficient without the other. Like the example of a lame man and a blind man**, who get isolated from their group in a forest and wander about haphazardly. In course of time, they encountered each other. The blind man mounted the lame man on his shoulder. Thus, the blind man was able to walk on the path as guided by the lame man. This union of theirs served the purpose of walking and seeing. **Similarly, the Spirit (Purusha), like the lame man, has the power of contemplation but not of action and Prakriti, like the blind man, has the power of action but not contemplation.** Moreover, it is **this union which causes or brings about creation and lasts till their mutual objectives are achieved.**

#### **Purpose of Union:**

From the above description it looks like that the aim of coming together of the Purusha and the Prakriti is to **create the material world**, but as per this **Samkhya Karika 21, Isvara krsna explains that the two form a union**, and the ensuing evolution, **so that Prakriti could reveal itself to the Purusha and thus the de-identification of one from the other takes place. This union provides experiences which enable both, Prakriti and Purusha to be in the state of who they are and independent from the influences of each other.**

This clearly states that the experiences generated by Prakriti (material world) are for the spirit to see, understand their transitory nature, and ultimately de-identify itself with it.

2. **Many shiva philosophical texts especially, Kashmir Shaiva text believe,** creation is not something external to consciousness; rather, it is the self-expression of consciousness through its own power. **Śakti and Śiva are one and inseparable:** without Śakti, there would be no manifestation, and without Śiva, there would be no awareness to witness that manifestation. **Shiva is the existential aspect of Chit while Shakti is the functional aspect of Chit.** Together, they **form the non-dual source (Advaita)** of all existence, perfectly symbolized in the Ardhanārīśvara form, where the male and female principles are shown as complementary aspects of the one ultimate reality.
3. The precise nature of the Śiva-Śakti identity reaches its most concrete and philosophically suggestive expression in the concept of Ardhanārīśvara, which visualizes in form what **Śākta-Tantra metaphysics** asserts in principle. Ardhanārīśvara is not a symbolic compromise between masculinity



and femininity, nor a mythological assertion of gender equality in a social sense; rather, it embodies the ontological truth that **Being** and **Power** are inseparable.

- **Śiva** represents pure Being–Consciousness–Bliss (**Sat–Cit–Ānanda**), unchanging, transcendent, and formless.
- while **Śakti** represents consciousness as dynamic, creative, and self-manifesting. It is **Sati, Citi, and Paramānanda-laharī**.

**Their division into two halves within a single body** does not indicate duality, but rather a distinction without separation, showing that consciousness cannot exist without its power of self-expression, nor can power subsist independently of consciousness. This is why Śākta ācāryas insist that **Śakti is distinguishable from Śiva only at the level of empirical analysis (vyavahāra), not at the level of realization (paramārtha).** Thus, if Śiva is Sat, Cit, and Ānanda, Śakti is Sati, Citi, and Paramānanda-laharī—the very movement and plenitude of that reality. **Ardhanārīśvara therefore visually negates both strict Advaita and Dvaita: it is not Advaita** because there is genuine dynamism, manifestation, polarity, **nor Dvaita** because it admits no independent second reality. **As stated in the Mahānirvāṇa Tantra, the relation is dvaitādvaitavivarjita—beyond both one and two—since numerical categories themselves arise only after manifestation.** Even the world, in this framework, is not other than Śiva–Śakti, but their continuous self-unfolding. **In Tantric tradition, Manifestation** does not just mean the physical universe appearing. **It means, The arising of differentiation, The appearance of subject–object, The emergence of mind, The beginning of conceptual thinking.**

#### **Before manifestation:**

- No subject / object
- No knower / known
- No separation
- No counting
- No conceptual categories

**At that level, even calling reality “One” is already too much — because “one” is still a number. And numbers require Distinction, Comparison and Mental structure.**

#### **After Manifestation:**

- Consciousness appears as the world.
- Distinction appears.
- Mind arises.
- Language arises.
- Numbers arise.

Only then can we say: “This is one.” “This is two.”



So yes — **after creation, categories like one and two become meaningful. But the Absolute itself is prior to creation.** To claim that one is not the other would be to misunderstand both; Ardhanārīśvara stands precisely to deny such a separation, affirming a metaphysics in which transcendence and immanence, stillness and movement, consciousness and creativity coexist as a single, indivisible reality.

**Shaiva philosophical texts** emphasize that **Shiva** remains transcendent before creation, during its manifestation, and at its dissolution, yet **becomes saguna- and thus capable of creative action only through association with Shakti.** This articulation foregrounds a metaphysics in which the masculine principle is incomplete in isolation and attains agency solely through its integration with the feminine. Such an understanding finds its most visible expression in the figure of Ardhanārīśvara, where creation itself is imagined as the outcome of gendered interdependence. This challenges Western feminist assumptions that equate power with autonomy, and instead proposes a decolonial framework in which relationality forms the basis of agency and existence.

In the metaphysical hierarchy described in the scriptures, reality unfolds in successive layers:

“Indriyebhyah paraa hi arthaah  
arthebhyah cha param manah,  
manasah tu paraa buddhih  
buddheh aatmaa mahaan parah,  
Purushaat na param kinchit.  
Saa kaashthaa saa paraa gatih.”

The above verse means, Beyond the senses lie the sense objects, beyond the objects is the mind, beyond the mind is the intellect (**buddhi**), and beyond the intellect is the Great Self (**ātman**). Beyond the manifested (**mahat or Hiranvagarbha**) is the unmanifest (**avyakta**), and beyond the unmanifest is Purusha, the supreme consciousness. Nothing exists beyond Purusha, which represents the ultimate goal (**para-gati**). The cause of the manifested world is Prakriti, the primal creative power, from which arises Mahat, containing all the conditions necessary for creation. While **Purusha** is described as immutable and transcendent, Prakriti—identified with Shakti and Māyā—enables movement, evolution, and experiential reality. **Prakriti** is thus like a seed containing the potential of the entire banyan tree, holding within itself all powers for manifestation. **This philosophical framework directly parallels the Siva–Sakti metaphysics: Siva (Purusha) embodies the transcendent consciousness, while Sakti (Prakriti) is the dynamic, creative energy that manifests the cosmos.** Shaiva philosophical texts emphasize that knowledge of Shiva culminates in yoga, devotion, and ultimately liberation, a process mediated through Shakti as divine power. Crucially, Shiva remains beyond time and action, yet **it is through Shakti that consciousness engages with creation and returns to its**



**purified state of Shivahood.** This inseparability, repeatedly affirmed in the Shiva Purāṇa through metaphors such as the moon and its light, underscores a non-dual ontology in which masculine and feminine principles are indistinguishable at the highest level.

From the **Shiva Purāṇa** (Vāyu Saṁhitā), four decisive claims could be made:

1. **Shakti is supreme and revelatory:** The Uma–Indra episode (from Kena Upaniṣad) is reused to assert that divine power (Shakti) reveals truth even to gods. Knowledge and authority are mediated through the feminine.
2. The Purāṇa repeatedly emphasizes the **absolute non-difference (abheda)** between Shiva and Shakti, comparing their inseparability to that of the moon and its beams or the sun and its rays. Shakti, whether as vidyā or avidyā, eternally abides in Shiva, who possesses infinite powers. The central doctrine thus affirms that neither Shiva nor Shakti can exist independently of the other; their relationship is one of perfect mutual dependence and ontological equality.
3. **All existence contains both tattvas:** Every atom, pure or impure, subtle or gross, embodies Shiva–Shakti together. Gendered principles are ontological, not biological.
4. **Mutual dependence, not hierarchy:** There can be no Shiva without Shakti and no Shakti without Shiva. Thus, It is the assertion of the fact that the creation is instrumented only when duality merges into absolute oneness.

The **Śhiva-līṅga** represents the same non-dual Shiva–Shakti unity that Ardhanārīśvara embodies in anthropomorphic form. While Western feminist readings often sexualize the līṅga, reduce it to phallic symbolism and ignore indigenous metaphysics. In Shiv-Purana, The Śhiva-līṅga is conceived as a composite metaphysical form consisting of the **līṅga** and the **līṅga-pīṭha/yoni**. In shiv puran,

1. **LINGA: is understood through a three-level ontology rather than as a mere physical object.**
  - At the **gross (sthūla) level** the līṅga is the entire empirical universe—everything perceptible is a manifestation of Shiva, so the cosmos itself becomes the līṅga.
  - At the **subtle (sūkṣma) level**, the līṅga is identified with Praṇava (Om), the primordial sound, which functions as the bridge between pure consciousness and material form, showing how vibration precedes and structures matter.
  - At the **causal (kāraṇa) level**, the līṅga is cinmaya, pure consciousness itself, beyond form, sound, and differentiation.

**2. LINGA-PITHA/YONI:** stands for Prakṛti / Pārvatī

Creation emerges from their inseparable union. the Shiva-līṅga does not signify masculine supremacy but rather the inseparability of consciousness and materiality. The pīṭha, identified with **Prakṛti** or Pārvatī, is not a passive base but the enabling ground without which the līṅga remains unmanifest. The relation between līṅga and pīṭha is not spatial or biological but ontological. The līṅga does not “rest upon” the pīṭha in a physical



sense; rather, consciousness becomes manifest only through Shakti. Hence, Shiva without Shakti can't even vibrate.

The metaphysics of Ardhanārīśvara do not emerge abruptly in later Śaiva traditions but are deeply rooted in earlier **Vedic conceptions of dual divinity (dvidevatā)**. One of the earliest and most significant expressions of this dual ontology is found in the Ṛg Vedic deity **Dyāvā-Prthivī** (Sky–Earth), who generates the universe through division into two interdependent halves. The prototype for such Vedic dual deities is frequently articulated through the gendered marital relation of husband and wife, forming what he terms a “pair system”—a symbolic structure that encodes functional complementarity rather than opposition. The Vedic imagination also preserves explicitly androgynous or self-generative figures. The Ṛg Veda describes **Viśvarūpa**, the bull-cow Asura, as a half-male, half-female principle capable of self-generation. Similarly, the **Purusa of the Purusa Sūkta** (Ṛg Veda 10.90) embodies the cosmos in his all-pervading body, from which multiplicity unfolds. This theme is further philosophically refined in the **Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad** (1.4.3–1.4.4), where the primordial ātman, initially a single body shaped like a man (puruṣa), divides itself into male (pati) and female (patnī) in order to create the world. Creation here proceeds not through external agency but through internal differentiation within unity.

Building on this lineage, Srinivasan argues that the emergence of Ardhanārīśvara in Śaiva traditions represents a visual crystallization of long-standing Vedic and Upaniṣadic metaphysics. Ardhanārīśvara does not merely juxtapose Śiva and Śakti but embodies the ancient idea of a two-sided, self-sufficient cosmic principle in which masculinity and femininity coexist without hierarchy. Thus, the Śaiva image inherits and transforms the Vedic pair system into a mature iconographic and philosophical statement: difference without dualism, plurality without fragmentation.

**The Skanda Purāṇa** emphasizes that not a part of the world is devoid of Śiva and Śakti, affirming their cosmic pervasiveness and inseparability. Śiva himself declares that his play or sport occurs with Parvati, highlighting that all activity, even divine leisure, presupposes Śakti. Texts like the **Sūta Saṁhitā** further elaborate this principle through a series of dualities:

- One is Masculine and other is feminine,
- Siva is Ishwar, she is Maya, inseparable from him.
- Shiva is Purusha of Samkhya- , She is Prakrti.
- Siva is Ātman(Sairri) while she is body (Sariram).
- One is Brahmā and the other is Savitrī, his power.
- One is identified with Visnu and other is Laksmi.
- One is material and an other is purity.
- creator and creation,
- night and day,



- sky and earth, and
- speech and meaning. Each pairing demonstrates that Śiva and Śakti are mutually dependent and complementary, yet ontologically non-different.

**The Kūrma Purāṇa** presents a rigorously non-dual metaphysics of Shiva and Shakti. Shiva is one and eternally possessed of Shakti; yet **Shiva** and **Shakti**, described respectively as the possessor of power (**Shaktimān**) and **power itself (Shakti)**, are said to be different only at the level of conceptual distinction. In ultimate reality, the Yogin realizes their essential non-difference (abheda). Shakti is fundamentally one, though she appears manifold due to upādhis (limiting adjuncts), which create the illusion of plurality.

There is thus no real dualism between Shiva and Shakti, for Shakti is non-different from Shiva and exists within Him as the power of consciousness (Cit-Shakti) present in the heart of all beings. ***Shiva is the existential aspect of Chit while Shakti is the functional aspect of Chit.*** She is infinite, intelligent, sovereign, and inherently auspicious, without origin or end. As the source of all powers and existences, Shakti gives rise to **Mūla Prakṛti**, the primal root-evolvent of the cosmos, while herself remaining spotless, pure, and beyond Māyā (Mayātīta). Shakti is described through multiple metaphysical registers: as Nāda (logos or cosmic vibration), Mahāmāyā (cosmic nescience), and Prakṛti, composed of the three guṇas—sattva, rajas, and tamas. Yet paradoxically, she is also said to be beyond guṇas. She is both Prakṛti and Puruṣa, and yet transcends both. Existing beyond past, present, and future, Shakti abides in Brahman and springs from Shiva, while also ruling over Prakṛti, Puruṣa, and individual souls. She functions as the witness of Shiva, expressing consciousness and bliss, and generating individual selves. In this exalted portrayal, the Kūrma Purāṇa elevates Shakti to the highest ontological status, affirming her as the ground of the universe and the dynamic expression of absolute reality itself.

The theological vision of the **Devī Māhātmya** finds a profound conceptual parallel in the icon and philosophy of Ardhanārīśvara, where Shiva and Shakti are presented as inseparable halves of a single ontological reality. While the Devī Māhātmya emphasizes the autonomous and fearsome power of the Goddess as **Cāṇḍī**—capable of creating, sustaining, and dissolving the cosmos independently—Ardhanārīśvara visually and philosophically expresses the same truth through unity rather than polarity. The Goddess of the **Saptasatī**, though depicted in fierce and militant forms, is not a subordinate or derivative force; rather, she is the very energy without which Shiva remains inert. This directly resonates with the Ardhanārīśvara doctrine, which asserts that there can be no Shiva without Shakti and no Shakti without Shiva.

Moreover, the **mountain symbolism associated with Umā** in the Devī Māhātmya—her identity as Pārvatī, the daughter of the Himalayas—reinforces this metaphysical complementarity. Mountains symbolize immovability and transcendence, qualities traditionally associated with Shiva, while simultaneously serving as sites of fertility, power, and generative force identified with the Goddess. It reflects a trinitarian conception of the Goddess, wherein **Umā, Ekaparnā, and Aparnā** are not independent deities but three names of a single



Śakti. This triadic manifestation corresponds directly to Śiva's form as *Tryambaka*, the three-eyed Lord, thereby establishing a structural parallel between the masculine and feminine principles. Such correspondence becomes fully intelligible within the metaphysical framework of Ardhanārīśvara, where Śiva and Śakti exist not as hierarchical opposites but as co-constitutive realities within a single ontological body. **Thus, the fierce autonomy of Devī in the Devī Māhātmya and the ontological unity articulated through Ardhanārīśvara are not contradictory but represent two complementary modes of expressing the same non-dual Śaiva-Śākta metaphysics, where gendered principles function not as biological categories but as cosmic and philosophical necessities.**

The **Agni Purana** provides significant evidence regarding the prevalence and development of the Śakti cult in India. In this text, Śakti is described as **Para-Śakti**, the supreme and ultimate power that pervades the entire universe. The Purana presents the universe itself as a manifestation of divine power arising from the union of Shiva and Śakti, who, though appearing as two distinct principles, are essentially one in their ultimate reality. This theological idea reflects the broader philosophical understanding of the inseparable relationship between consciousness and energy.

In the **Markandeya Purana**, the goddess Durga is described in highly philosophical and metaphysical terms, portraying her as the ultimate cosmic reality.

The Devi Mahatmya (part of the Markandeya Purana) contains a famous verse praising the Goddess.

या देवी सर्वभूतेषु शक्तिरूपेण संस्थिता

नमस्तस्यै नमस्तस्यै नमस्तस्यै नमो नमः

Meaning: **"Salutations again and again to the Goddess who resides in all beings in the form of Shakti (power)."**

She is identified with Chiti, or pure consciousness, and is also presented as the dynamic power (Śakti) of Shiva and the Māyā of Vishnu. In this theological framework, the goddess is understood as the primordial source from which the three gunas—Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas—emerge, thereby initiating the process of cosmic manifestation. She is described as Prakṛti, the primal root and fundamental cause of the universe, the undifferentiated and homogeneous ground from which all creation arises. At the same time, she is the creative energy (Śakti) responsible for the creation, preservation, and destruction of the universe. Although she is inherently beyond the gunas and therefore immutable, she assumes these qualities in order to produce the phenomenal world. The universe itself is thus understood as a transformation or manifestation of her power. The goddess is also depicted as eternal and all-pervading, taking the form of time and generating the various modifications of Prakṛti, which she ultimately withdraws back into herself during cosmic dissolution. In this sense, she is described as **Viśvātmikā**, the essence of the universe; **Viśvāśraya**, the foundation of the cosmos;



and Viśveśvarī, the sovereign ruler of the world. Furthermore, she is portrayed as the omnipotent power underlying both Vishnu and Shiva, as well as Mahāmāyā, the cosmic principle of illusion that generates and sustains the universe, while also being its ultimate seed and source.

## CASE STUDY: ŚAKTI METAPHYSICS THROUGH VAIṢṆAVA–ŚAIVA & OTHER TRADITIONAL NARRATIVES

### 1. Śiva–Śakti Role Reversal and Sectarian Synthesis: Incarnations as Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa

A significant Purāṇic narrative presents a radical reversal of gendered divine roles, further reinforcing the non-dual Śiva–Śakti metaphysics. In this account, Śiva, seated on Kailāsa, expresses his desire to assume a female form, while Devī agrees to incarnate in a male form. This inversion is not merely narrative but philosophically suggestive, as it dissolves fixed associations between gender and divine function. Devī consents to descend to earth as Śrī Kṛṣṇa, while Śiva incarnates as Rādhā, thereby subverting conventional masculine–feminine binaries. The stated purposes of Devī’s incarnation as Kṛṣṇa are twofold:

- **first**, to participate in divine play (līlā) with Śiva in the form of Rādhā; and
- **second**, to destroy oppressive rulers—identified as manifestations of demonic forces—in response to appeals from the Earth and Brahmā to relieve cosmic burden.

Prior to incarnation, Devī consults Viṣṇu and divides herself into two manifestations: one born as a girl to Yaśodā, later worshipped as Vindhyavāsīnī, and the other born as Kṛṣṇa to Devakī and temporarily exchanged with Yaśodā’s child. Devakī alone is said to perceive Kṛṣṇa’s true identity as Kālī. The life of Kṛṣṇa—his destruction of Pūtānā, Bakāsura, and Kaṁsa; his liberation of his parents; his participation in rāsa-līlā; and his decisive role in the Mahābhārata war—is thus interpreted as the activity of Devī herself. The narrative ultimately collapses sectarian distinctions by identifying Kṛṣṇa with Kālī, affirming the essential unity of Vaisnava and Śākta traditions. The Purāṇic narrative of Śiva and Devī exchanging gendered forms through their incarnations as Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa must be read not as literal mythology but as a theological extension of the Ardhanārīśvara principle. Ardhanārīśvara represents the simultaneous presence of Śiva and Śakti within a single divine body, thereby negating any essential or fixed association between gender and cosmic function. The narrative radicalizes this metaphysical unity by temporalizing it through incarnation, allowing Śiva and Śakti to alternate embodied roles while remaining ontologically non-different.

In Ardhanārīśvara, masculine and feminine principles coexist synchronically; in the Rādhā–Kṛṣṇa narrative, this coexistence becomes diachronic and performative, enacted across time through divine play (līlā). The assumption of a female form by Śiva and a male form by Devī does not imply a reversal of hierarchy but a deliberate destabilization of gender fixity, reinforcing the Purāṇic assertion that gender is a mode of manifestation, not an attribute of essence. Just as Ardhanārīśvara unites consciousness and power within a single form, the narrative disperses that unity across multiple incarnations without compromising non-duality.



Critically, this narrative also serves a sectarian harmonizing function, collapsing the boundaries between Śākta and Vaiṣṇava traditions by identifying Kṛṣṇa with Kālī and Rādhā with Śiva. Ardhanārīśvara similarly operates as a theological bridge, integrating Śaiva and Śākta metaphysics into a single symbolic expression. However, while Ardhanārīśvara affirms ontological equality, the narrative remains embedded within social and devotional frameworks that may reinscribe conventional gender roles at the level of practice. Therefore, its emancipatory potential lies primarily in its metaphysical vision, not in its immediate social implications. Thus, both Ardhanārīśvara and the Rādhā–Kṛṣṇa–Kālī narrative articulate a non-dual, fluid conception of divinity in which gender functions as a symbolic and functional category rather than a fixed biological or hierarchical determinant.

## 2. Rāma–Devī Episode

The Purāṇic narrative presents Rāvaṇa not merely as a villain but as a formidable devotee of the Goddess, whose power and invincibility stem directly from her grace. His downfall, therefore, is not caused by lack of devotion but by ethical transgression and cosmic imbalance. Rāma’s emergence as his destroyer is framed not as a purely Vaiṣṇava triumph but as an event decisively enabled by Śakti. Rāma himself is initiated into Devī-mantra in childhood, signaling that his authority is incomplete without the Goddess’s sanction. When Sītā—explicitly identified as a manifestation of Devī—is abducted by Rāvaṇa, the act is interpreted as a direct affront to Śakti herself, transforming the conflict from a personal or political struggle into a cosmic one.

The episode of Akāla Bodhana, the untimely worship of the Goddess, is particularly significant. It disrupts ritual convention and asserts Śakti’s autonomy over calendrical and institutional norms. Devī’s appearance and her granting of the boon to Rāma make it clear that Rāvaṇa’s destruction is possible only through her consent, reinforcing the idea that masculine heroism alone is insufficient without divine power (śakti). The institutionalization of Śārādīya Navarātra from this episode embeds Śāktism deeply within the broader Hindu ritual landscape, even within narratives centered on Vaiṣṇava figures.

From a critical perspective, this narrative challenges sectarian hierarchies by subordinating a major Vaiṣṇava deity’s success to Śakti’s intervention. Rather than portraying Śakti as subordinate or auxiliary, the text positions her as the decisive cosmic agent. In decolonizing terms, this resists later interpretive frameworks—often influenced by Western binaries—that isolate traditions into rigid theological compartments. Instead, the Purāṇa reflects an integrative Indic worldview, where Śakti functions as the ground of all divine action, transcending sectarian boundaries.

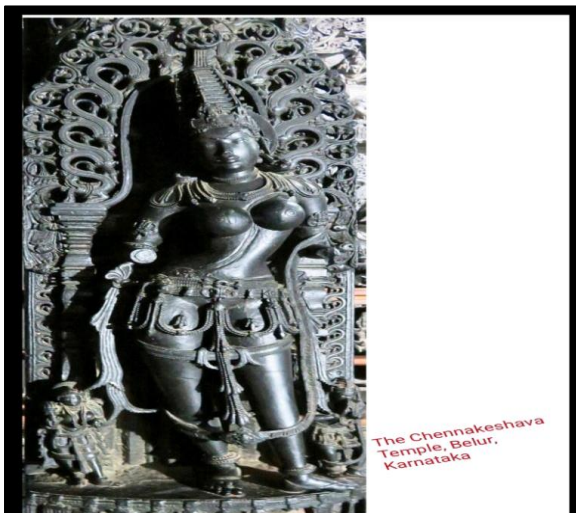
In sum, the episode illustrates the overarching influence of Śāktism, not as a rival to Vaiṣṇavism but as its enabling substratum, reaffirming the non-dual logic where power (śakti) and agent (śaktimān) are inseparable.

## 3. Śakti’s Supremacy and the Limits of Male Agency: Indra and Brahma-hatya

**Indra**, when defeated by Vṛtra went to **Dadhici**, a seer, and asked him to help in the destruction of **Vṛtra**. Dadhici after a long consideration left his body by Yogagni so that the weapon may be made of his bones to kill Vṛtra. Indra, having done so, ultimately killed his enemy and regained his kingdom. But as Dadhici was killed, the **Brahma-Hatya** came to Indra which he could not absolve on his own, setting the stage for the later involvement of Mahākālī. **The episode of Indra seeking purification from the sin of Brahma-hatya through Mahākālī** illustrates the centrality of Śakti as the ultimate cosmic agent. **Even Indra, the king of gods, is powerless without her grace, demonstrating that masculine heroism alone cannot accomplish cosmic or moral rectification.** The narrative emphasizes the autonomy and supremacy of the Goddess: Indra must traverse multiple levels of divine mediation—consulting Gautama, Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva—before he can even approach her loka, highlighting that Śakti’s realm operates according to principles beyond the authority of conventional male deities. The episode also underscores the necessity of discipline, devotion, and surrender (tapas, stuti) to access her, reinforcing the idea that Śakti is both transcendent and immanent, accessible only through alignment with her power.

From a philosophical perspective, this episode **parallels the Ardhanārīśvara paradigm**: just as Śiva cannot act without Śakti, **Indra’s effectiveness is contingent upon the Goddess**. She embodies consciousness in action, the dynamic principle that actualizes cosmic functions. The multiplicity of Brahmāṇḍas and deities encountered by Indra can be read symbolically, representing the manifold manifestations of Śakti’s power and the limits of male-centric hierarchical cosmologies. In this sense, **the story decolonizes interpretations of power by demonstrating that traditional Western readings of Hindu tradition—often framed as patriarchal heroism—miss the ontological truth that all divine potency is ultimately grounded in Śakti**. The narrative thus functions as a textual case study in which the Goddess, like Ardhanārīśvara, is both inseparable from the masculine principle and yet ontologically prior in agency, challenging conventional dualistic or gendered frameworks of power and emphasizing a non-dual metaphysics of consciousness and energy.

#### 4. **Visnu’s Feminine Form: Mohini**





Several Purāṇic narratives describe Viṣṇu's assumption of the feminine form Mohinī, the divine enchantress, a transformation undertaken both to aid the cosmic order and to instruct errant beings. In the episode of **Samudra Manthana**, Viṣṇu becomes Mohinī to deceive the Asuras and restore the stolen amṛta to the Devas, thereby reaffirming divine balance. In the Dāruvana episode, however, Mohinī's appearance serves a pedagogical function: she entices the ascetic ṛṣis, exposing their hypocrisy and assisting Śiva in redefining the true nature of devotion beyond mere external austerity. The Mohinī narrative reaches its metaphysical culmination in encounters between Śiva and Viṣṇu, where divine gender fluidity becomes theologically significant. In one account, Śiva, overwhelmed by Mohinī's form, emits his seed, which is preserved by the sages and eventually gives rise to Hanumān through Añjanī. In another tradition, informed by Nārada of Viṣṇu's transformative power, Śiva requests Viṣṇu to reveal his Mohinī form. Upon beholding her, Śiva is once again captivated, leading to the scattering of his seed, from which Mahābala is born. Other regional traditions associate this union with the births of Skanda and Ayyappan, indicating a rich plurality of theological interpretations. These narratives do not function as literal mythic episodes alone but articulate a philosophical assertion: **divine consciousness is not bound by fixed gender categories. Viṣṇu's transformation into Mohinī and Śiva's response destabilize rigid masculine-feminine binaries, reinforcing the non-dual Śiva-Śakti framework visualized in Ardhanārīśvara.** The Mohinī myth thus complements Ardhanārīśvara iconography by demonstrating that gender fluidity is intrinsic to divinity, not a deviation from it.

##### 5. **The Kāmārūpa Penance of Śiva**

The episode of Śiva's penance at Kāmārūpa following the death of Sati underscores the inseparability and primacy of Śakti in the cosmic and personal realms. **Śiva**, despite his supreme consciousness, **experiences pangs of separation and is incapable of restoring balance or harmony without the return of his Shakti.** The gods, including Brahmā and Viṣṇu, act merely as advisors, highlighting that **even male divinities cannot independently effectuate the cosmic order or the reunion of Śiva with Prakṛti.** Through disciplined penance, Śiva succeeds in reuniting with the goddess, who incarnates as Durga and Ganga, symbolizing that the active, creative, and salvific aspect of the universe—Śakti—is essential for all action, even for the highest consciousness. The site of Kāmārūpa, with its yoni symbol and presence of the ten Mahāvidyās, becomes both a spatial and symbolic representation of the metaphysical principle that the union of Śiva and Śakti enables creation, sustenance, and liberation. From the perspective of Ardhanārīśvara, this narrative reinforces the philosophical assertion that consciousness (Śiva) and its dynamic power (Śakti) are mutually dependent and ultimately non-dual, while simultaneously showing that access to Śakti's grace is mediated through devotion, discipline, and recognition of her sovereignty. This also supports a decolonizing reading, challenging patriarchal or male-centric interpretations of divine authority by foregrounding the goddess as the agent through whom cosmic and moral order is restored.

##### 6. **Prathama Charitra of Durga Saptashati (Story of Madhu-Kaitabha and Yoga Nidra)**

At the beginning of creation, the universe existed in a state of cosmic ocean (Kshira Sagara), and Vishnu was resting in yogic sleep on the serpent Shesha. From Vishnu's navel, Brahma had emerged and was preparing to create the universe. However, Vishnu was under the influence of Yoga Nidra, the divine power of the Goddess that induces deep cosmic sleep. During this time, two demons, Madhu and Kaitabha, were born from Vishnu's earwax. Extremely powerful, they attempted to kill Brahma and disrupt the process of creation. Recognizing that Vishnu could only act if awakened, Brahma prayed to the Supreme Goddess (Devi) — the force behind Yoga Nidra — requesting her to withdraw her influence. The Goddess then emerged from Vishnu's eyes, ears, and body, freeing him from cosmic sleep. Once awakened, Vishnu engaged Madhu and Kaitabha in battle for five thousand years. The demons, arrogant and convinced of their invincibility, were deluded by the Goddess's Maya. Lifting them onto his thighs due to the world being filled with water, Vishnu beheaded them using his Sudarshan Chakra. In the Madhu-Kaitabha story, even Vishnu cannot act until the Goddess withdraws Yoga Nidra. The Goddess is not subordinate to male gods. She is the cosmic energy that enables them to act.

#### 7. Madhyama Charitra (Story of Mahishasura and the Birth of Durga)



The most famous story of Durga, this narrative begins with the demon Mahishasura, who performed severe penance to please Brahma. Pleased, Brahma granted him a boon that no man or god could kill him. Confident that women were weak, Mahishasura neglected to seek protection from women. With his boon, Mahishasura grew extremely powerful. He defeated the gods, captured Indra's heaven, and drove the deities away from their kingdom. The defeated gods approached Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva for help. In response, divine energies (Tejas) emerged from their anger and combined to form Goddess Durga. Each god contributed weapons:

- Shiva → Trident
- Vishnu → Sudarshan Chakra
- Indra → Thunderbolt

- Varuna → Conch
- Agni → Spear
- Vayu → Bow & arrows

Durga rode a lion, symbolizing courage. During the battle, Mahishasura sent generals — Chikshura, Chamara, Udagra, and Asiloma — all of whom were destroyed by the Goddess. She also created many divine powers (Matrikas) to fight the demon army. The battle lasted nine days. Mahishasura continually changed forms — buffalo, lion, elephant, and human warrior — but ultimately returned to his buffalo form. Durga pressed him down with her foot, struck him with her trident, and beheaded him. This victory is celebrated during Durga Ashtami and Navami.

### 8. Agyātavās Episode Of Mahabharat

During their Agyātavās (incognito exile) in the Mahābhārata, the Pandavas exemplified the subtle interplay of power and consciousness. Arjuna, disguised as Brihannala, and Yudhishtira, as Kanka, concealed their true identities while remaining fully capable of action, strategy, and guidance. Their hidden strength mirrors the non-dual principle of Śiva and Śakti, where Śiva represents consciousness and Śakti the dynamic power that manifests action. Just as Ardhanārīśvara embodies the inseparability of male and female principles, the Pandavas' external concealment did not diminish their inherent potency; their wisdom, courage, and skill were always active, though veiled. This episode illustrates that essence and appearance, potential and action, remain inseparable, echoing the metaphysical truth that energy and consciousness co-exist in perfect unity, and that divine power can operate subtly, beyond obvious forms.

### 9. Ganesha's Feminine form-Vinayaki,



It is also known as Ganeshani, Vighneshwari, Gajanani, or Ganeshwari, is considered the Shakti, or feminine energy, of Lord Ganesha. In Shakta and Tantric traditions, every deity is believed to have a corresponding female power, or Shakti; for example, Shiva has Shakti/Parvati, Vishnu has Lakshmi, and Brahma has Saraswati. Similarly, Ganesha's feminine counterpart is Vinayaki, who represents wisdom, removal of obstacles, and divine feminine power. According to the Matsya Purana, the demon Andhaka had a boon from Shiva such that every drop of his blood touching the ground created another Andhaka. When Andhaka

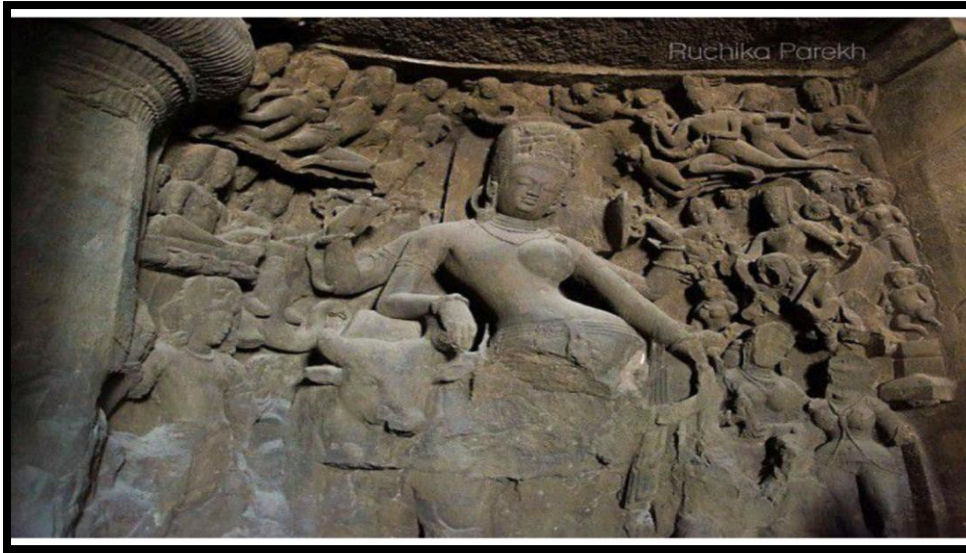


attempted to abduct Parvati, the gods released their Shaktis, the female energies, which drank the demon's blood before it touched the ground. During this event, the feminine power of **Ganesha manifested as Vinayaki**, establishing her as one of the Shakti manifestations assisting the gods. In Tantric traditions, Vinayaki is also mentioned among the 64 Yoginis, a group of powerful tantric goddesses worshipped in medieval India. Important Yogini temples include the Hirapur Yogini Temple and the Bhedaghat Chausath Yogini Temple, where Vinayaki appears as an elephant-headed goddess. Her **iconography** typically depicts her with an **elephant head, a female body, and four arms holding symbols such as a lotus, modaka (sweet), an axe, and a noose**; some forms also show **tiger feet**, especially in South Indian temple traditions. Though her worship is rare compared to Ganesha, Vinayaki is honored in a few temples, including the **Meenakshi Amman Temple** (as Vyaghrapada Ganeshani), **Suchindram Thanumalayan Temple**, **Cheriyana Balasubramanya Swamy Temple**, and in the **Rairh region of Rajasthan**. Another sculpture is found in **Buleshwar temple, Pune in Maharashtra**. The **Linga Purana** describes her as a "demoness," but this term does not imply evil; rather, it refers to fierce tantric goddesses who help defeat demons. Therefore, **Vinayaki is not a demon but a fierce protective Shakti, embodying the divine feminine power of Ganesha**.

## ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

The metaphysical unity of Śiva and Śakti, articulated in Purāṇic, Tantric, and philosophical texts, finds concrete and enduring expression in Indian art and archaeology through the icon of Ardhanārīśvara. Archaeological remains across the subcontinent demonstrate that this concept was not merely speculative but was ritually, socially, and visually institutionalized.

**1.** The earliest known representations of Ardhanārīśvara date back to the **Kushan** and early Gupta periods (2nd–4th century CE). **Sculptures from Mathura and Ahicchatra** show a vertically divided figure, with the right half male (Śiva) and the left half female (Pārvatī). These early forms already display iconographic precision: the male side bears matted hair, a trident, and ascetic austerity, while the female side is adorned with ornaments, a rounded breast, and graceful posture. This archaeological continuity suggests that the Ardhanārīśvara concept had become a standardized theological and artistic idiom by the Gupta age. Ardhanārīśvara representation found on **coins** issued by King Vijayamanikya of Tripura (16th century). Lahiri identified the unusual pairing of four-armed Śiva (caturbhuja) with ten-armed Durgā (daśabhuja) as a **numismatic manifestation of Ardhanārīśvara**, underscoring the adaptability of the form beyond sculptural media.



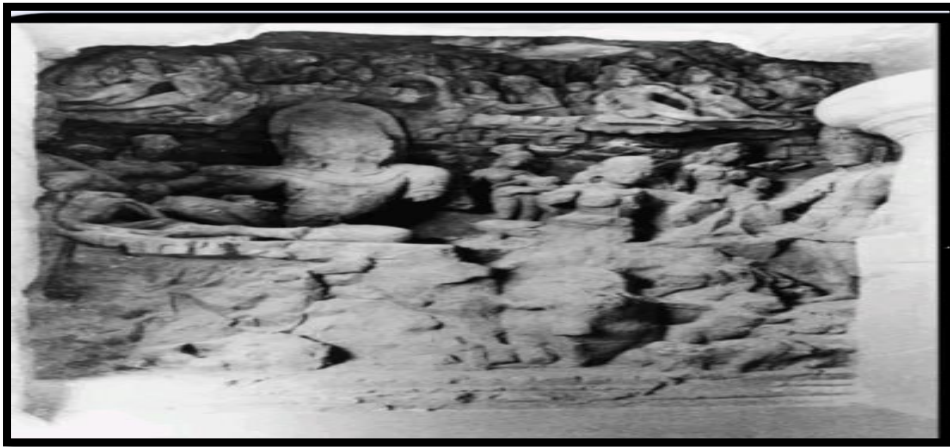
**Ardhanārīśvara relief in Cave 1 of the Elephanta Caves**, measuring approximately five metres in height, represents one of the most monumental visual articulations of Śiva–Śakti unity in early medieval Indian art. Positioned to the east of the central Sadāśiva (Trimūrti) icon on the rear wall of the cave, the relief occupies a carefully chosen spatial location within the larger iconographic programme of the cave. The deity is surrounded by subsidiary divine figures and vāhanas, most notably Nandi, Śiva’s bull mount. The Ardhanārīśvara is shown leaning against Nandi in the tribhaṅga posture, characterized by three gentle bends at the hip, torso, and neck. The exaggerated curvature of the hip and the presence of a single prominent left breast function as legible markers of femininity.

The deity possesses four arms, each contributing to the symbolic economy of the relief. The upper left hand holds a darpaṇa (mirror), an attribute frequently associated with **the female half** in iconographic canons. The lower left hand holds the remnant of a lotus, now partially destroyed, possibly once positioned in *kātyavalambita mudrā*, suggesting grace and repose. **On the male side**, the upper right hand grasps a serpent, while the lower right hand rests upon Nandi’s back. The **headdress** further differentiates the two halves: the left side displays pleated coiffure elements associated with femininity, while the right side bears the crescent moon. **The lower portion of the sculpture** has suffered severe damage—likely during the Portuguese occupation of the site in the sixteenth century.

The subsidiary figures are organized into three hierarchical tiers.

- The lowest tier includes standing figures closely associated with Śiva and Parvatī: Kartikeya appears on the male side, while Parvatī’s attendants, Jaya and Vijaya, occupy the female side.
- The second tier depicts major Vedic and Purāṇic gods—Indra, Viṣṇu, and Brahmā—flying toward Ardhanārīśvara on their respective vāhanas (Airāvata, Garuḍa, and Haṃsa).
- The uppermost tier consists of apsarās and devāṅganās borne on clouds, suggesting celestial participation in and recognition of Ardhanārīśvara’s supreme status. Together, these tiers frame Ardhanārīśvara as a focal point of cosmic convergence.

The placement of the Ardhanārīśvara relief opposite the Gangādhara panel and flanking the central Sadāśiva icon appears to be conceptually deliberate. Gangādhara represents the descent of the river Gaṅgā through Śiva's matted locks, symbolizing a form of fertility and creative power that remains external to the god and must be controlled through ascetic restraint. Ardhanārīśvara, by contrast, embodies an internalized fertility in which the creative principle of the goddess is fully assimilated within Śiva's own being. Together, these two reliefs articulate complementary modes of Śiva's interaction with Śakti: one in which creative energy is mediated and regulated from outside, and another in which it is ontologically integrated.



**3.Uma-Mahesvara-Murti:** In this panel Shiva and Sakti are emanations of the undivided absolute. Shiva here symbolizes the passive male principle, while Uma or Parvati represents the active female principle. Unfortunately this panel is in bad condition. Uma and Mahesha are seated in Kailash. Shiva's countenance is defaced. He sits in the ardha-paryankasana (half-seated posture), reclined to the left. The figure of Uma too is damaged. Below Uma, Nandi and a winged dwarf are seen, while above them are flying figures and male and female attendants on either side.



4. **Ravanapahadi cave** is one of the oldest rock-cut cave temples in Aihole, Karnataka. Inside it, an image of Ardhanarishvara portraying the equivalence and essential interdependence of the masculine left Shiva and feminine right Parvati.



5. **Vashishteswara temple** at Karanthi in Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu depicts Ardhanārīśva sculpture.



6. **Kerala Mural Tradition** was created by the author under the guidance of eminent Kerala Mural Artist, Sri Sasi Edavarad, founder of Chitrasopanam Art Foundation, Bengaluru, India. The following verse conveys essential features such as colour, key attributes, and divine identity:

*“Neelapravalaruchiram vilastrinetram  
Pasharunotpalakapalakashulahastam  
Arthambige shamanisham pravibhakta bhusham,  
Balendu bandah makutam, pranamami roopam.”  
(Nampoothirippad, 2013).*

*Transl. – Half blue, half coral-hued, radiant, three-eyed, Holding the noose, lotus, skull-bowl and trident in hand, Whose one half is Goddess Ambika (Parvati) for all eternity, Crowned with a crescent moon, to this form I bow.*

The use of natural pigments and the stylization makes this image distinctively Kerala Mural: the elongated fish-like eyes, the bold black outlines, the fine detailing with delicate

black lines, and the intricate rendering of ornaments, garments, and the background motifs that follow conventions prescribed in the *Silparatna*. The technique of painting is layered. Shades of yellow are applied first, followed by red, blue, and green, each built up gradually until the desired saturation is achieved. Shiva's side is rendered in a yellow or saffron hue, symbolizing asceticism and transcendence. Parvati's side is depicted in blue, signifying fertility, beauty, and worldly power. The final outline is drawn in black. Shading is accomplished through stippling.

## 7. Mohini( Archaeological evidence & iconography):



A notable example of such iconography is found at the **Thiruvallam Parasurama Temple in Kerala**, where two sculptures of Mohini are carved on temple pillars. One image appears on the pillar of the west gopura, while the other is located on a pillar near the northern entrance. In **the first image** (figure 6), Mohini is represented as a young woman with full breasts and a comparatively slender waist, standing almost nude except for a cloth wrapped around her knees, the edge of which she holds in her hand. Her thick hair is tied to one side, and she wears ornaments such as a necklace, earrings, and a waistband. In one panel, a yogi is depicted attempting to hold her hand, symbolising temptation and illustrating how even ascetics can be captivated by beauty and divine illusion. This imagery visually expresses the mythological theme that Mohini's charm and enchanting presence possess the power to distract and influence even those devoted to spiritual discipline.

**The second image** of Mohinī, which is carved on the pillar of the main entrance hall (Figure 7), is slightly different from the earlier one. Mohinī appears here without the Rsi here unlike the earlier one. She is also represented as nude, having only a strip of cloth loosely going around her thighs. The young woman is shown with a rounded waist and pointed breasts. Differently from the earlier image, the depiction of her **Yoni** is evidently prominent here. Her left hand is resting on the thigh and the right hand touching her own face. Unlike in the earlier image, her legs are shown crossed here. She is wearing a **necklace, kataka, kundala** and **anklets**. Her hair is not knotted but left free. Both the images illustrated above are shown looking at sides and a belt



around her pelvic area is also visible in both the images. These kinds of depictions are clearly to demonstrate the female body, and the presence of belly bands in the image may have to seek the attention of people towards her sensuous body.

## ICONOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS OF ARDHANĀRĪŚVARA

This section presents an overview of the iconography of Ardhanārīśvara, drawing upon both visual and textual traditions. It examines the formulaic prescriptions found in the canons of Indian art and architecture, particularly the śilpaśāstras, which provide normative guidelines for the representation of the deity. A key textual source for Ardhanārīśvara iconography is the Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa (c. 8th century CE), which, in addition to outlining principles of pratimālakṣaṇa (image-making), also addresses subjects such as dharma, dance, astrology, astronomy, temple architecture, and the ritual efficacy of mantra. Like many śāstric texts, the Viṣṇudharmottara is structured as a dialogue, in this case between King Vajra and the sage Mārkaṇḍeya. The third khaṇḍa (chapter fifty-five) provides a concise yet significant description of Ardhanārīśvara under the heading Mahādeva (Goldberg 2002: 16). Despite its brevity, the Viṣṇudharmottara explicitly emphasizes that the composite form of Ardhanārīśvara symbolizes the fundamental non-duality (abheda-bhinna) of prakṛti and puruṣa, thereby grounding iconographic form in metaphysical doctrine.

### 1. Body bifurcation and attributes:

The most fundamental principle governing the image is the vertical division of a single body into two gendered halves. This division runs invisibly along a central vertical axis from the crown of the head to the feet, separating the right half as male and the left half as female, yet allows the deity to appear simultaneously unified and dual. The right male half, identified as Śiva, is distinguished through attributes traditionally associated with asceticism, virility, and transcendence. This side typically bears the rosary (akṣamālā), trident (triśūla), A shared halo (prabhāmandala), serpentine ornaments (nāgas), the third eye or tilaka, jatāmukuta or uṣṇīṣa, the crown of matted hair emblematic of Śiva as Yogīśvara. The hair may be ornamented with serpents, the crescent moon, flowing Gaṅgā, or jewels—though such features appear more fully in later images rather than the earliest Kuṣāṇa-period sculptures. The male half is rendered with a broader shoulder, muscular chest, wider waist, and more robust thigh, emphasizing strength and generative power. Male earrings, ascetic garments such as the dhotī or tiger-skin loincloth, skull or rudrākṣa garlands, and, particularly in North Indian images, the ardhordhvareta (half-ithyphallic form) further affirm Śiva's identity as both ascetic and cosmic generator.

In contrast, the left female half, identified as consort (vāma-ardha-dayitā-tanuh) and variously named Pārvatī, Umā, Gaurī, is marked by visual cues of fertility, grace, and embodied creativity. This side typically holds a lotus (nīlotpala), necklace (hāras), wrist ornaments (kaṅkana), waistbands (mekhalā) and a mirror (darpaṇa). The hair is styled in a dhamillā braid and adorned with ornaments, while garments fall gracefully to the ankles. Female earrings on the left side are one of the most reliable indicators of gender differentiation,



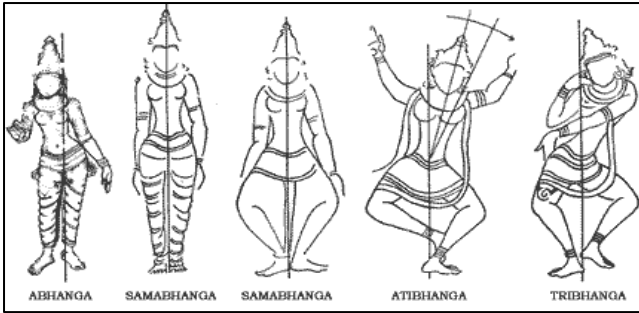
so much so that even fragmentary busts of Ardhanārīśvara can be identified through this feature alone. Additional feminine markers include nose ornaments, bindus, henna-stained hands or feet, and a narrower waist with fuller hips and thighs, particularly evident in painted and mural traditions. However, the most definitive female identifier across all standing and seated images is the single, well-developed breast on the left side, which visually asserts femininity, nourishment, and generative capacity. Ardhanārīśvara images also reveal a clear bodily evolution, particularly in the number of arms depicted. Early representations, especially from the Kuṣāṇa period, predominantly portray the deity with two arms, suggesting an early canonical simplicity. Multi-armed forms—three, four, or in rare cases six or more arms—appear in later periods and regional contexts, notably in eastern India.

## 2. The Mirror (Darpana)

Given the centrality of the mirror in both iconographic convention of Ardhanārīśvara, it is necessary to probe this symbol deeply in relation to living Indian religious and yogic traditions. Understood through this Yogic lens, the mirror likewise has two faces. One face turns outward toward the world of form, objects, and multiplicity—what Yoga philosophy terms viveka-khyāti, discriminative insight into phenomenal reality. The other face turns inward toward puruṣa (Śiva), enabling yogic perception (viveka-khyāti yogi-pratyakṣa) that culminates in self-realization. Pārvatī's posture—sometimes facing Śiva, sometimes aligned toward the manifest world—visually encodes this oscillation between outward engagement and inward absorption. The mirror thus becomes a powerful symbol of the two-sided nature of divine reality. The yogic practitioner does not perceive divinity directly through puruṣa alone; rather, divinity is apprehended through the body-mind complex—prakṛti operating as buddhi. Classical yoga texts, particularly the Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali, repeatedly emphasize the mirror-like clarity of buddhi when purified through disciplined practice. When the fluctuations of the mind (citta-vṛtti) are stilled, buddhi reflects puruṣa without distortion. In this sense, the mirror held by Pārvatī can be understood as an anticipatory iconographic expression of Yogic psychology, visually encoding processes that occur in the higher stages of sādhana.

The mirror also carries important implications for gender symbolism. Liz Wilson argues that the feminine has historically been associated with reflection as a mode of self-reflexivity, proposing that women “utilize the entire objective world as a mirror for self-evaluation.” This association emerges not merely from aesthetic convention, but from deeply embedded cultural constructions of femininity as relational, reflective, and self-aware.

## 3. Postures



As per Matsya purana & Shiva Purana, Archaeological images of Ardhanārīśvara broadly exhibit three postural types—**abhanga** (without curvature), **tribhanga** (with three gentle curves through a pronounced hip), and **atibhanga** (with pronounced curvature). These postures are not merely aesthetic choices but symbolic articulations of cosmic balance. While the tribhanga and atibhanga subtly emphasize Śakti's dynamic and creative spanda, the structural symmetry of the figure preserves the ontological unity of the deity. The **katyāvalambita posture**, where the arm rests upon the waist, introduces a relaxed composure suggestive of sovereign balance rather than dominance. **Samapāda** or sthānamudrā presents a balanced and symmetrical stance that minimizes bodily differentiation. **Seated representations**, though less frequent, suggest contemplative and integrative aspects of the deity. Together, these iconographic features reveal a dynamic interplay between unity and differentiation, allowing Ardhanārīśvara to embody cosmic balance rather than biological dualism.

#### 4. **Mudrās**



Equally significant are the recurring hand gestures (mudrās) associated with Ardhanārīśvara images. In **abhaya mudrā**, The right hand is raised to shoulder height, with the palm is facing outward and the fingers pointing upwards, signifying fearlessness and protection, while the **varada mudrā** is performed with the left hand facing downward, palm outward, and fingers extended, represents grace and boons. The **vyākhyāna mudrā**, formed by the joining of fingers in a circular gesture, conveys teaching and metaphysical exposition, reinforcing the deity's role as both guru and ground of reality. . Together, these gestures articulate authority without aggression, and power without hierarchy.



## BIOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF ARDHANĀRĪŚVARA: AN INTERDISCIPLINARY READING

The iconography of Ardhanārīśvara has traditionally been interpreted within metaphysical and theological frameworks; however, modern biological insights into human sexual differentiation provide an illuminating interdisciplinary parallel. Contemporary biology establishes that a human being is not a purely unisexual organism but carries within itself the potentiality of both masculine and feminine traits. Sexual differentiation is determined not by absolute exclusivity but by the predominance of one set of characteristics over the other. This biological understanding resonates strongly with the Ardhanārīśvara doctrine, which presents Śiva and Śakti as inseparable, coexistent principles within a single unified form. The **Vedas** have perceived this biological unity in several dually existing things- *Agni and Soma*, *Stri and Punam*, *Kumara and Kumari*, *Pita and Mata*, *Linga and Yoni*, *Mahagna and Mahagni*, *Prana and Aprana*, *Nara and Nari*, *Heaven and Earth* and so on. The Rigvedic perception of '*Prana*' and '*Bhuta*'- the life and the matter, which the Rigveda calls Hiranyagarbha, is, however, more explicit and better defined.

From a genetic perspective, every human ovum carries an X chromosome, while the sperm may carry either an X or a Y chromosome. The resulting chromosomal configuration influences sexual development, yet this process itself reveals that masculinity and femininity are not mutually exclusive categories. Further, embryological development demonstrates that the primitive gonad is inherently bisexual, consisting of two distinct components: the inner medulla, capable of developing into testes, and the outer cortex, capable of developing into ovaries. Differentiation occurs only at a later stage, where the dominance of one pathway leads to the regression of the other. This biological sequence underscores a fundamental principle: unity precedes division.

Hormonal processes further complicate rigid gender binaries. Both sexes secrete androgens and estrogens, differing only in proportion rather than kind. Testes produce small amounts of estrogen, just as ovaries secrete limited quantities of androgen. Such overlap reinforces the understanding that no individual embodies a biologically “pure” masculinity or femininity. Instead, human sexuality exists along a continuum shaped by balance and interaction. Just as biology reveals sexual identity to be relational and composite, Ardhanārīśvara affirms that creation itself arises from the harmonious integration of complementary forces. The form thus challenges hierarchical gender constructs by asserting ontological equality between masculine and feminine principles.

## REASSESSING THE CRITICISMS RELATED TO ARDHANĀRĪŚVARA

The concept and iconography of Ardhanārīśvara have not been free from criticism, particularly in modern scholarly discourse. One of the most prominent critiques arises from feminist and sociological perspectives, which argue that the Ardhanārīśvara image, despite its apparent androgyny, does not necessarily convey



gender equality. Scholars such as **Kalidos** and **Ellen Goldberg** contend that the consistent placement of the female half on the left side symbolically reflects subordination, weakness, or inferiority, given the traditional Indian association of the left with lesser value. From this perspective, the image is viewed as reinforcing patriarchal hierarchies rather than challenging them.

Another major criticism concerns the asymmetry in iconographic attributes. Goldberg's analysis of the mirror symbol grounded in Sāmkhya and Yoga philosophy interpret the female half primarily as subordinated matter. However, these criticisms often arise from a selective reading of iconography divorced from its philosophical and cosmological context. When viewed through the lens of Śaiva non-dualism, the left-right distinction in Ardhanārīśvara does not signify hierarchy but functional polarity. This is evident in comparable syncretic forms such as *Hari-Hara*, where Viṣṇu—an unquestionably male deity—is assigned the left position. Such examples complicate the claim that left placement necessarily implies feminine inferiority. Textual traditions repeatedly emphasize that creation, movement, and manifestation arise only through Śakti. Thus, the asymmetry in form should be understood as symbolic differentiation within unity rather than dominance over difference. In classical Sāmkhya, *prakṛti* is not passive or inferior; rather, it is the active, dynamic, and manifesting principle through which *puruṣa* becomes perceptible to itself. In Sāmkhya-Yoga thought, *puruṣa* is the seer (*drastā*) but cannot apprehend itself without mediation. *Prakṛti*, as the seen (*drśya*), provides that mediation. Within the iconography of Ardhanārīśvara, this *mediation* is visually encoded through the mirror held by Pārvatī. Thus, self-recognition—both divine and cosmic—becomes possible only through the feminine principle. This interpretation unsettles the assumption that symbolic power resides exclusively with the male half. Although Śiva occupies the ritually privileged right-hand side, it is Pārvatī who controls the medium of darśana, the act of seeing and revealing. Importantly, in Ardhanārīśvara the two halves do not face one another; they stand side by side, sharing a single body. The mirror therefore becomes the sole mechanism through which mutual recognition occurs. In this sense, the feminine is not merely reflected but reflective, enabling consciousness itself to emerge.

Apart from these, one more criticism is made that the goddess sometimes emerges only when male gods cannot defeat evil. For instance, In Devi Mahatmya, Durga is created from the combined energies of male gods. However, this interpretation can be challenged within the broader theological framework of Śākta-Tantra.

The form of Durga can be understood as the visible expression and manifestation of the feminine energy that already exists within the male deities in a dormant state. This feminine principle represents their true dynamic power. The ability of the gods to act and ultimately defeat Mahishasura becomes possible only through the activation of this feminine energy, which manifests externally in the form of Durga. Therefore, it is indeed true that the goddess sometimes emerges when the male gods are unable to defeat evil, because without Śakti, the dynamic power of the universe, the male principle alone cannot perform effective action.



Further it can be challenged by referring to the **Mahabhagavata Purana**, which presents a much broader theological vision of the goddess as the ultimate and independent cosmic power. According to this Purana, **Śakti first manifests as Sati**, the daughter of Daksha and the wife of Shiva. When Daksha insulted Shiva during the sacrificial ritual, she assumed the **fierce form of Kali** and eventually immolated herself in the sacrificial fire. In her next birth she appeared as Parvati, also known as **Uma** or **Girija**, the daughter of Himavan and Menaka, and became the eternal consort of Shiva, symbolically united with him in the form of Ardhanarishvara. The Purana further explains that during the process of creation she manifests as Prakṛti, the primordial creative principle, while during cosmic dissolution (pralaya) she is identified with Brahman, the ultimate controller of the universe. In the Dvapara Yuga, the goddess is said to have incarnated as Krishna in order to assist the Pandavas and restore cosmic order. **The Purana therefore identifies these various manifestations—Sati, Parvati, and Krishna—as expressions of the same supreme reality, Para-Śakti or Para-Brahman.**

Apart from Durga, **several fierce forms** of the goddess are described in religious literature, including **Kali, Chamunda, Bhadrakali**, and **Chandi**. These manifestations appear independently to destroy powerful demons and restore cosmic order, emphasizing the dynamic and sovereign nature of Śakti.

In sum, while critiques of Ardhanārīśvara highlight important concerns regarding representation and power, they remain incomplete unless situated within the broader Śaiva, Vedic, Sāṃkhya-Yoga thought and syncretic traditions that frame Ardhanārīśvara as a profound expression of non-duality rather than a reflection of social hierarchy.

## CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE: CHALLENGING WESTERN BINARIES AND PARADOX

Contemporary feminist discourse in India has largely been shaped by the selective adoption of Western feminist theories rooted in liberal, post-Enlightenment, and individualistic epistemologies. While these frameworks have been effective in addressing gender inequality, their universalizing tendencies often overlook the cultural, philosophical, and historical specificities of Indian society. As a result, gender is frequently conceptualized through rigid binaries and oppositional models that do not fully align with indigenous understandings of identity, embodiment, and power. In this context, Ardhanārīśvara offers a critical decolonial alternative for rethinking gender relations. Rather than framing masculinity and femininity as opposing or hierarchical categories, the Ardhanārīśvara form presents gender as ontological and relational, grounded in the inseparable unity of Śiva and Śakti. Power is not located in one gender over another but emerges through interdependence and co-presence. This challenges both patriarchal interpretations of tradition and binary feminist models that reproduce the logic of opposition. At the same time, the symbolic exaltation of the feminine in the Ardhanārīśvara image **exposes a persistent paradox**: despite metaphysical non-duality, real women continue to face domestic violence for many reasons in her own family, sexual Harrassment and



structural marginalization. This tension highlights the gap between philosophical ideals and social practice, inviting a critical re-engagement with indigenous symbols rather than their dismissal. Ardhanārīśvara thus functions as an internal critique of tradition while offering conceptual resources for gender justice rooted in our cultural continuity years ago.

## CONCLUSION

The figure of Ardhanārīśvara represents one of the most profound articulations of non-dual ontology within Indian philosophical and religious traditions. Far from being a merely aesthetic or symbolic amalgamation of male and female forms, Ardhanārīśvara encodes a complex metaphysical vision in which Śiva and Śakti are co-originating, interdependent, and inseparable principles of reality. As this study has demonstrated, the image emerges from a long intellectual genealogy that can be traced from Vedic dual deities and Sāṃkhya metaphysics to Purāṇic theology, Śaiva-Śākta non-dualism, and tantric understandings of consciousness and power. Archaeological and iconographic evidence, particularly from sites such as Elephanta, further reveals how this metaphysical insight was visually negotiated, localized, and sometimes reinterpreted beyond prescriptive śilpa norms. The contemporary tendency to rely uncritically on Western feminist paradigms—many of which are grounded in Enlightenment dualism, biological essentialism, and rigid gender binaries—appears epistemically inadequate for the Indian civilizational experience. Long before modern gender theory emerged in the West, Indian philosophical traditions articulated models of gender that were fluid, relational, and ontological rather than purely biological or social. The Ardhanārīśvara paradigm demonstrates that equality in the Indian tradition is not premised on sameness or opposition, but on mutual co-presence and interdependence within a single metaphysical reality. Thus, rather than seeking external theoretical validation, a return to indigenous intellectual frameworks offers a more coherent and culturally rooted approach to addressing gender inequality in contemporary India. Ardhanārīśvara provides not only a critique of modern binary thinking, but also a constructive philosophical alternative—one that affirms balance over hierarchy, unity over division, and complementarity over conflict. Ardhanārīśvara thus functions as an internal critique of tradition while offering conceptual resources for gender justice rooted in our cultural continuity years ago.

*शिवः शक्त्या युक्तो यदि भवति शक्तः प्रभवितुं*

*न चेदेवं देवो न खलु कुशलः स्पन्दितुमपि।*



Trans. : **When Siva is enjoined with Sakti, he is empowered to create. If the lord is not thus, he is indeed unable to even move.**

- Soundarya Lahari 1.1

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