



# ORIGIN OF THE CONCEPT OF ARDHĀNARĪŚVARA AND COMPARISON WITH GREEK MYTHOLOGY

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## **Abstract**

A form where the same body is shared by Śiva and Pārvati each of whom represent one half of the complete image. Therefore, whenever Śiva is shown, in the field of plastic art or described in the literary works, benedictory verses, prayers and stotras with the above details he is identified as Ardhanārīśvara. There are various stories in the puranas concerning Śiva's assumption of this peculiar form. In Tamil literature also Manikkavasagar, Sundarar, etc., mentioned this form in their songs.

**Key words:** Siva, Nari, Parvathi, Puranas, etc.,

## **Meaning of Ardhanārīśvara**

The name Ardha-nāri-śvara is a compound of three words, Ardha, Nāri and Isvara, meaning Īśvara (i.e. Śiva) with the Nari (i.e, Parvāti) as his ardha (i.e, half). A form where the same body is shared by Śiva and Pārvati each of whom represent one half of the complete image. Therefore, whenever Śiva is shown, in the field of plastic art or described in the literary works, benedictory verses, prayers and stotras with the above details he is identified as Ardhanārīśvara

## **Origin of the form of Ardhanārīśvara**

There are various stories in the puranas concerning Śiva's assumption of this peculiar form. These stories are runs as follows:

## Myth of Ardhanārīśvara

In Śiva-Purāṇa, there is an interesting story about the composite form of Śiva or Ardhanārīśvara, i.e, half-male and half-female. It says that the creator Brahmā first begot a number of male beings, the Prajapatis, and commanded them to create various other beings. They were found later to be unfit for the task for which they were intended and Brahmā, feeling uneasy at the slow progress of creation, contemplated on Mahesvara. The latter appeared before him in a composite form of male-female and asked him to cease feeling distressed. Hitherto, it had not occurred to Brahmā to create a female also and at the sight of the composite form of Mahesvara he realised his error. Thereupon, he prayed to the female half of Mahesvara to give him a female to proceed with the act of creation. Brahmā's request was complied with and the creation went on afterwards very well. This story accounts for the Ardhanārīśvara form of Śiva. The *Linga Purāna* also mentions this form of Śiva.

There is another myth relating to the form of Ardhanārīśvara. On certain occasion when Śiva was seated with his consort Pārvati on the top of the Kailasa mountain, the devas and *rishis* went there to pay their homage to him. All of them except the *rishi* Bhringi, went round both Śiva and Pārvati in their circumambulations and also bowed to both. This *rishi* had a vow of worshiping only one Being, that is Śiva, and in conformity with his vow, he neglected to go round or bow down to Pārvati. Pārvati growing angry with Bhringi, desired in her mind that all his flesh and blood should disappear from his body and instantly he was reduced to a skeleton covered with only the skin. In this state he was unable to support himself in an erect position, seeing his pitiable plight Śiva gave him a third leg so as to enable him to attain equilibrium; Bhringi became pleased with his lord and out of joy danced vigorously with his three legs and praised Śiva for his grace. The design of Pārvati to humble Bhringi thus failed and the failure caused great annoyance to Pārvati, who returned to do penance for obtaining a boon from Śiva. At the end of the penance, Śiva, pleased with his consort Pārvati, granted her wish of being united with his own body.

Thus, the Ardhanārīśvara form was assumed by Śiva, for offering difficulty to the *rishi* Bhringi in circumambulating, or bowing to Śiva alone. But undaunted by him impeded Bhringi assumed the form of a beetle pierced a hole through the composite body of Śiva and circumambulated Śiva alone to the great wonder and admiration of even

Pārvati, who become reconciled to his vow and bestowed her grace upon the pious *rishi* for his steadfastness to his vow.

The *Matsya Purāna* gives a detailed description of such an image. The *Purānas*, however, invented many interesting episodes in connecting with the emergence of this androgynous form of Śiva. In the *Skanda Purāna* it is stated that, “When Brahmā asked Rudra to divide himself, the latter divided himself into the male and the female forms.”<sup>1</sup> In another place of the same *Purāna* it is stated that on one occasion Pārvati said, “Let me reside with you all the while embracing you limb by limb”<sup>2</sup>. Thus, the form of Śiva became androgynous.

Yet another interesting episode regarding the amalgamation of Śiva and Gauri into one body is found in the *Kālikā Purāna*. It is stated that, “One day, Gauri’s form was reflected on the crystal like breast of Śiva. The jealous wife mistook the reflection to be another and a more favoured woman and a conjugal conflict occurred. When amiable relations were restored, the goddess expressed a desire to be so united with her lord as to leave no possibility of the recurrence of a feeling of separation. They accordingly, allowed their bodies to be half-fused into each other and thus was created the united Ardhanārīśvara.

According to another version regarding the creation of half-man, half-woman form of Śiva, Śiva Ardhanārīśvara was created as Pārvati was jealous of Lakshmi because her husband Vishnu, always carried the mark Shrivasta, the symbol of Lakshmi, on his chest. Pārvati one day complained about this to Śiva and said that he neglected her. To appease Pārvati, Śiva gave half of his body to her and thus became Ardhanārīśvara.

The two universal parents, the Father and the Mother, Heaven and Earth, are symbolised in the half-male and half-female aspect of Śiva. The male half is Agni and the female half is Soma. Heaven is father and earth is mother, Dyava-Prithivi. Heaven symbolises the immortal world of the Devatas and the earth, the mortal world of matter. There are the two eternal symbols of life and matter; the dualing of life and death, without either of which creation cannot go on.

## Comparison of the form of Ardhanārīśvara with Greek mythology

One of the prominent myths of the world, which have a similar concept of Ardhanārīśvara myth, is the well-known Greek myth of the Hermaphrodite. The iconographic motif of Ardhanārīśvara, however, was evolved long before the explanatory myths of the *Purānas* came to be fabricated. In India the conception of composite figure of male and female seems to be found in the *yama-yāmi* episode of the vedic literature. It is interesting to note that such an idea of man and woman finds place in the mythology and sculpture of the Greeks also.

A brief story of the Greek myth is as follows :

Among Aphrodite's children there was Harmonia, who was born of Ares, and a son Hermaphroditus or Eros, born of Hermes. Aphrodite wanted to conceal the birth of this son and immediately after his birth gave him in safe keeping to the nymphs of mount Ida, who brought him up in the forest. The youth Eros, nurtured in the lap of beauty, was exceedingly charming. He was wild, strong, handsome and he spent most of his time hunting and enhancing the forests with breath-taking charm. Once, he got a chance to reach the limpid lake in the Caria-forests. The transparent waters invited him to bath. The nymph Salamakis was thrilled by his extreme beauty and lithe figure. She desired him and entreated him to make love and accept her.

Eros repulsed her tactlessly and incurred her extreme displeasure. In her desperation and rage she begged the gods that 'nothing may ever separate me from him or he from me'. Instantly, Salamakis and Hermaphrodites were united into one body. In their double form they were neither man or woman like Ardhanārīśvara. They had no sex and were condemned to remain as unseparated twins. The myths explicit Greek personality is undeniable. Thus, the son of Hermes and Aphrodite became androgynous form.

A Phrygian counterpart of this story may be mentioned in this connection. The goddess is known as Agdistis whose origin may be recounted as follows: Once Zeus fell asleep on the Agdos rock, near Pessinous, which had assumed the form of the Great Mother. As he slept or strove with the Goddess his semen fell and after a lapse of ten months, the Agdos rock burst, bringing forth a hideous being of two-fold sex and two-fold lust. These episodes perhaps belonged to the early Hellenistic period and became a

favourite theme in later Greek art. Thus the conception of the composite figure of both India and Greece belongs to hoary antiquity.

From the philosophical point of view it may be said that the Indian Ardhanārīśvara is surely the symbol of the union of *Purusa* and *Prakṛti*. The active and passive forces. Thus, V.S.Agrawala observes, “On the philosophic side it represented the two fundamentally opposed cosmic forces, viz., *Prakṛti* and *Purusa*, which are constantly drawn together to embrace and fuse with each other but are separated by intervening axis.”<sup>3</sup>

This dual conception of the universe, *Purusa* and *Prakṛti*, maintained a strong hold on the religion of the Hindus since early times. Another conception, though rather primitive, also played a part in the rise of the icons. It is an admitted fact, however, that this dual conception or the hermaphrodite figure was conceived basically as a symbol of fertility and luxuriant growth.

“The earth after bearing each successive harvest becomes exhausted, and that if she is to continue to discharge her functions, she must be periodically refreshed and roused to new activity”, and further that “the fertility of the soil was supposed to depend upon the periodical marriage of mother earth with her male consort.” Here, “Śiva is the impersonation of the eternal reproductive power of Nature, perpetually reintegrating after disintegration”. It is a “duality in unity”, the underlying principle being “a sexual dualism”.

It may be noted in the connection that the Ardhanārīśvara form is the composite aspect of *Linga* and *Yoni*. Pārvati represents the *Yoni* and Śiva the *Linga* and the union of the two creates the world. The goddess is the supreme power of the transcendent creator. Thus according to V.S.Agarwala, “the Purāna writers dilate on the Ardhanārīśvara Śiva comprised of the half-male and half-female aspects going to it a metaphysical exposition as well as an iconographic formulation.”<sup>4</sup>

## Conclusion

This is a new concept which formed during Kushans period. In order to show the equality between male and female community. This could be introduced in India. There are many references in the literatures also. In Tamil literature also Manikkavasagar, Sundarar, etc., mentioned this form in their songs. It is an attempt to bring light this idea through this paper.

## END NOTES :

<sup>1</sup> Pranabananda Jash, **History of Saivism**, Roy and Chaudhury, Calcutta, 1974, p.161.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> V.S.Agrawala, A Catalogue of Brahminical Images in Mathura Art, U.P.Historical Society, Lucknow, 1957, p.28.

<sup>4</sup> Pranabananda Jash, op.cit., p.160.

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