

## ***Ardhanārishvara*—A Study in Religious Philosophy, Scientific Mysticism and Neuroscience**

AMBAR CHAKRAVARTY

In Hinduism, '*Ardhanārishvara*' or '*Ardhanāri*' is an androgynous deity composed of Shiva and His consort *Shakti* (Pārvati), representing the synthesis of masculine and feminine forces. The term is derived from the union of three words—*Ardha* (half), *Nāri* (female) and *Ishvara* (God or Goddess). The *Ardhanāri* form also illustrates how the female principle of God is inseparable from the male principle of God, Shiva. *Ardhanāri* in iconography is depicted as half-male and half-female, split down the middle. The best sculptural depictions of Shiva as *Ardhanāri* are found in the sensuous Chola dynasty (900-1300AD) bronzes in Southern India and the sculptures of Ellora (near Aurangabad in India) and Elephanta (near Mumbai). The earliest *Ardhanārishvara* images are reported from the early period of the Kushānas (c 35-60 AD). The early Kushāna rulers were, however not Hindus; they were probably Buddhists and Western culture had a great influence on their art works. A sculpture depicting only the head of *Ardhanārishvara* is preserved in the Mathura museum, dating to about 500 AD, probably belonging to the time of the kings of the Gupta dynasty who were Hindus (Kumar 2002).

### Iconography

Barring a few exceptions, the left halves of the *Ardhanāri* sculptures comprise male anatomy and the right halves that of the

female. However, a reverse disposition has also been noted, probably created by the sculptors belonging to the Shakti sect (devotees of *Shakti*). In both sculptures and paintings, the feminine characters are more obvious (more so in the paintings) and I shall make a comment on this later in the article.

The female part, in general, imparts a feeling of elegance and tenderness specially because of the elegantly curved prominent breast. The image may be endowed with two, three, four, six and eight arms. Imagination and depiction of multiple body parts are often essential features in Hindu conception of gods and goddesses and even demons. Durgā in Eastern India is often sculptured with ten hands and Rāvana, the demon King, with as many heads. In *Ardhanāri*, arms more than eight are attributes of Rudra Shiva who has been conceived with as many as thousand arms. The two-armed image of the *Ardhanārishvara* in *lalita* posture is the beautiful one in absolute ease. The female hand carries either a mirror or a *nilotpala*, a blue lotus. The male hand either rests on the bull (often identified with sculptures of Shiva and called Nandi) or is let loose below the thigh. It may also be in *abhaya mudrā*, the gesture of imparting fearlessness or giving blessings. When three-armed, one is generally on the female side and two on the male side. Of the two, one is often in

*abhaya* or *varadā mudrā* and the other one carries a trident (*Trishula*—the divine weapon of Shiva). In four-armed figures, the two male hands are generally the same as above, but the second female hand may carry either a mirror or *nilotpala* or a pot. In the six and eight-armed figures, the extra male hands carry various weapons like a small drum (*Damaru*) and the additional female arms may carry a parrot in addition to mirror, lotus or pot.

Overall the images have three body postures—the *abhanga* (a posture without a curve), the *tribhanga*, (a posture with three body curves) and the *atibhanga*, (a posture with extreme curves). The body curves give elegance to the images and such curves are commonly observed in many ancient Indian art forms and give a feeling of dynamism to the image increasing its aesthetic value. Recent sculptors have at times conceived of this dual image in the sitting posture as well, but this is not common. It is of interest to note that at Elephanta, there exists also a three-faced image (sculpture) of Shiva Maheswara—on the left, his male profile displaying virility and will-power, on the right his female aspect which is gentle, charming and seductive—and in the centre the sublime union of the two aspects is represented by the magnificent head.

### Religious philosophy

The basic concept of combining a male God (*Shiva*) with a female Goddess (*Shakti* or *Pārvati*) speaks of a combination of two opposing forces in one image. This conception of duality of existence suggests '*dvaita*' which contradicts the fundamental concept of God in the Advaitavāda. In the Advaita Shaiva philosophy, God is single who also is the cause of the entire existence and it is by His will and act of Him that the cosmos came into being. However, the Shaivite

hymn found in the *Shiva Purāna*—'*Ekoham babusyām*' (that is, I am One, but wishes to be many)—there echoes the *Rig-Vedic* perception of the single egg splitting into *bhuta* (soul) and *prāna* (life). This apart, most interpretations of the Vedas widely favour the principle of monogenic existence. Besides its emphasis on the unity of the outward duality, the *Rig-Veda* proclaims that the male is only so much male as much he is female and the female is only as much female as much she is male. The maleness and femaleness are attributes contained in one frame. The *Smārta* tradition, which, by and large, follows Advaita philosophy, believes that all forms (male and female) are different forms of the impersonal Absolute or Brahman, who is of neuter gender and can never be defined. Brahman is viewed as without personal attributes (*Nirguna Brahma*) as well as with attributes (*Saguna Brahma*). In Advaita Vedanta, *Ishvara* (generally meaning *Saguna Brahma*) is simply the manifest form of Brahman in the human mind. Thus, according to *Smārta* views, the Divine can be with attributes, and can be viewed as a male god or a female goddess as a devotee wishes.

Apart from Brahman, from whom the cosmos or universe originated, the other two great godheads in Hinduism are Vishnu and Shiva. With a broad philosophical view, all three can be assumed to be the same or different forms of the same force. However, opinions may vary on this points depending upon conception of the believer.

In Vaishnavism and Shaivism, which are exclusive monotheistic denominations of Hinduism, Vishnu or Shiva is personified as male although the fact is that God transcends gender and gender is simply conceived by the embodied human beings for the purpose of worship. For example,

Shaivites and Vaishnavites worship God in non-anthropometric images, the '*linga*' and '*śbālagrām*' respectively. Furthermore, the principle that God's true nature is sexless is emphasized in the *Vishnu Sahasranāma*, a prayer that contains one thousand names of Vishnu. The names focus not on His sex or anthropometric form but highlight His inherent nature—that He is all-pervasive and the destroyer of sin. To a common man Vishnu as well as Shiva have human features. But scholars clearly state that Vishnu (or Shiva) pervades everything and is not anthropometric. He has no particular shape or form. He can manifest in any form and is the centre of all forces. He is the inducting spirit in all beings and the whole cosmos constitutes His body. Both Vishnu and Shiva nevertheless have been traditionally referred to by grammatical gender. On the other hand, while God is conceived as a male, His power is often viewed in the female form of *Shakti*. However, God and His power are indivisible, unitary and the same. The analogy is that fire represents God and the actual heat is the *Shakti*.

In *Ardhanāri*, Lord Shiva assumed a form and split into two halves of male and female—the union of substance and energy—the Being and His force (*Shakti*) (see *Notes* for other views).

At this stage it is important to comment on the concept of *Shakti* in Hinduism. *Shakti* is also known as Pārvati, Umā, Durgā and Kālī and generally considered the female consort of Shiva. Devotees of *Shakti* are known as Shāktas. The great scholar N. N. Bhattacharyya, in his *History of Shākta Religion*, explains the basic concept of *Shakti*. He writes: '... (they) who worship the supreme Deity as exclusively a female principle... conceive their Great Goddess as the personification of primordial energy and the source of all divine and cosmic evolution. She is identified with the

Supreme Being, conceived as the source and the spring as well as the controller of all the forces and potentialities of Nature. Nowhere in the religious history of the world do we come across such a completely female-oriented system.' Here we see a conflict. While the devotees of Shiva (Shaivites) believe that *Shakti* is a part of Shiva, the Shāktas would look at the relation the other way round. This would lead to a different interpretation of the *Ardhanārishvara*. In one concept it is basically a Shiva deity with one part of it depicted as *Shakti*; on the other, it is basically a female Goddess (*Shakti*) one part of which is male. The Shaivite scholars argue that the feminine manifestation is only the vehicle through which the masculine Unmanifested Parashiva is ultimately reached. Here, the Divine Mother (*Shakti*) becomes something of a mediator, who bestows *advaitic moksha* (eternal freedom or peace) on those who worship Her. Thus, these Shaivite views often tend to show that Shaktism is effectively a subdenomination of Shaivism, arguing that Devi (*Shakti*) is worshipped to attain union with Shiva, who in Shaktism is the impersonal unmanifested Absolute. This is what is depicted in the *Ardhanārishvara*.

Some people, however, consider Shiva as equal and inseparable aspect of Devi (*Shakti*). Thus one can never be sure which concept really led to the creation (or whether there was really any concept to start with the sculpturing) of the *Ardhanārishvara*. (see *Notes* for some unorthodox concepts). Ultimately of course the conclusion reached is that *Shakti* and Shiva (*Shaktimān*—the masculine) are one and the same. Each and every god in Hinduism has its partner or consort (here *Shakti*) and without this *Shakti* (consort) he is sometimes viewed as being without essential power. It is a common practice to worship

not just one personality but to combine it with its consort at the time of worship. Traditionally, for example, Krishna is often worshipped along with his consort, Rādhā. Krishna is a form of Vishnu. He is worshipped as 'bhagavān' who is male and who shows great veneration to his Radhā (the female), who is worshipped as supreme. The union of Radhā and Krishna may symbolize the union of *Shakti* with the *Shaktimān*. In Vaishnavism Krishna is believed to be the source of all manifestations of God. *Radhā*, His divine consort, is the original source of *Shakti* as feminine manifestation of divine force of energy.

In recent times, it is often said that 'behind every successful man, there is always a woman'. That is, the woman is conceived as the driving force, the inspiration. This idea is quite close to the Hindu concept of calling a wife—*Ardhāngini* (the half of the body, or better still the 'better half'). This concept primarily highlights the fact that woman is an equal part of man and vice versa. The Sanskrit marriage vow—'Let my soul be thine and thy soul mine'—clearly hints at the unification of two souls. It is this concept in the eye of a modern man that is depicted in the deity of *Ardhanārishvara*.

Before leaving this section let me clarify one concept. I have earlier commented rather loosely on unification of two forces in the deity *Ardhanārishvara*. Force, however, should not be equated with energy. Energies cannot be combined. Several scientists starting with Einstein had attempted it theoretically, but they failed. What the deity really represents in physical scientific term is the unification of energy (*Shakti*) with its originator (Shiva) or the other way. Matter and energy are interconvertible as shown by Einstein ( $\text{Energy}=\text{mass} \times \text{velocity}^2$ ). In physical scientific term (also in a philosophical sense),

God is a vast source of energy wherefrom matter (Universe and Life for example) originates and where matter (life) ends. That is the fundamental concept of Hindu philosophy.

#### The concept of *Ardhanārishvara* in scientific mysticism

Mysticism can be equated with religious philosophy as discussed in the preceding section. The basic concept expressed in the deity *Ardhanāri* is the unification of two opposites—the male Shiva and female *Shakti*. One of the fundamental principles of modern physics is that opposites unite at higher dimensions. As we talk about God as a vast conglomeration of energy, we refer to a multidimensional concept of a much higher order than what is now conceivable in science (the four dimensions of Einstein's relativity).

The Austrian-born American atomic physicist, Fritjof Capra, had written extensively on the parallels between modern physics and eastern mysticism, specially in his best-selling book *The Tao of Physics* (Capra 1982). Capra made a trip to Elephanta and marvelled at the 'Shiva *Ardhanāri*', the stunning unification of male and female forms in the rhythmic, swaying movement of the deity's androgynous body. He referred this in his book, *Uncommon Wisdom* (Capra 1989). He made brief note of *Ardhanāri* in *The Tao of Physics* as well and a photograph of the Elephanta deity is included in the book. Capra writes, 'The most important characteristic of the Eastern World view—one could almost say the essence of it—is the awareness of the unity and mutual interrelation of all things and events, the experience of all phenomenon in the world as manifestations of a basic oneness' (Capra 1982). All things are seen as interdependent and inseparable parts of this cosmic

whole; as different manifestations of the same ultimate Reality. The Eastern traditions constantly refer to this ultimate, indivisible Reality which manifests Itself in all things, and of which all things are parts. As discussed earlier, *Shakti* is a part of Shiva and Shiva Itself a part of *Shakti*. This oneness or unifying concept is what the Hindus refer to as Brahman, Buddhists refer to as *Dharmakāya* and the Chinese as *Tao*. Fundamentally, in these concepts (or one concept) all differences and contrasts are relative within an all-embracing unity.

Capra brings in the conceptualizing 'beyond the world of opposites' (Capra 1982) to find the parallels between the Eastern religious concept (mysticism) and modern physical concepts. Opposites are abstract concepts belonging to the realm of thought and as such they are relative. By the very act of focusing our attention on any one concept we create its opposite. Good and bad, pleasure and pain, light and dark, life and death are not absolute experiences belonging to different categories, but are two sides of the same reality—two poles which are set in a dynamic balance. Capra brings in the concept of 'Yin' and 'Yang' to explain the two poles beyond which lies the oneness—that is *Tao* (Capra 1982).

One of the principal polarities in life is the one between the male and female sides of human nature—and we usually bring one or the other side into prominence irrespective of the anatomical differences that exist between the two forces. Capra felt that a unity between these two aspects of human nature is sought in Eastern mysticism. In support he cites the example of the *Ardhanāri* and the three-faced sculpture of Shiva Maheswara, both seen at the Elephanta cave. He writes, '...such a union of one's male and female modes can only be experienced on a higher plane of consciousness where the realm of thought and

language is transcended and all opposites appear as a dynamic unity' (Capra 1982), just like as what had been said earlier relating to modern physics—opposites unite at higher dimensions.

Examples of the unification of opposite concepts in modern physics can be found at the subatomic level, where particles are both destructible and indestructible; where matter is both continuous and discontinuous and force and matter are but different aspects of the same phenomenon.

Space and time are two concepts which seemed entirely different but have been unified in relativistic physics. This fundamental unity is the basis of the unification of the opposite concepts. This unification, however, is only possible at a 'higher plane' which is of higher dimensions.

It had taken physicists a long time to conceive the fact that matter manifests itself in ways which seem to be mutually exclusive and hence opposites. The prevailing concept, however, is that particles are waves and waves are also particles. Light, for example, is emitted and absorbed in the form of 'quanta' or photons (particles) but when these particles of light travel through space they appear as vibrating electric and magnetic fields which show all the characteristic behaviour of waves. Likewise, electrons are normally considered to be particles and yet when a beam of these particles is sent through a small slit, it is refracted just like a beam of light—particles behaving like a wave. Force and matter, particles and waves, matter and the rest—these are some of the opposites of contradictory concepts which are transcended in modern physics.

These various pairs of opposites can be conceptualized in the notion of complementarity. Capra considered the particle picture and the wave picture as two complementary descriptions of the same reality. Bohr realized that the concept of

complementarity can be a useful concept even outside the domain of physics and was impressed by the complementary concept in ancient China with the 'Yin' and 'Yang' lying at two opposite poles and complementary to each other in Taoism. Similarly, *Shakti* and Shiva are complementary to each other in the deity *Ardhanārishvara*.

#### ***Ardhanārishvara* in the light of neuroscience**

Having been trained as a clinical neurologist from an early age (and a thinking neurologist as trained by my mentors), I have developed a 'bad' way of looking at most things from a neurological or neuroscientific perspective. As I often gazed at the small bronze replica of the Chola *Ardhanāri* in my collection, I often wonder about the neuroscientific principle encoded in the sculpture. One day, rather suddenly, I had a vision which I would like to explain in this section. I shall explain my concept from the neurocognitive perspective first and then from the perspective of visual science (which of course is a sub-discipline of cognitive neuroscience).

I likened the two halves of the deity to the two halves of our brain—the left brain and the right brain. The left brain subserves language function, motor control of skilled movements, categorical processing and arithmetic calculations. The right brain, on the other hand, facilitates function of spatial cognition, spatial imagery, face and object recognition, coordinative coding and emotional communication. Looking differently, the left brain seems to have male characteristics (outspokenness, activity, rational thinking, competition, aggressiveness and so on) whereas the right brain seems to harbour female characteristics like artistic talent, literary talent, religiousness and love for the occult. Interestingly, the left half of

*Ardhanāri* is male form and the right half depicts a female form—and they are united in the sculpture. This is exactly what is there in the human brain. The right brain and the left brain do not function independently but function as a whole in a most harmonious manner. This is because the two halves are united together by a thick bundle of white fibres called the 'corpus callosum'. Every brain area of the left side are connected to corresponding area of the right and vice versa, although the areas might be responsible for different functions. Sectioning the 'corpus callosum' (as may be needed for control of intractable epileptic seizures) lowers a person's creativity or novel ideation which is very closely dependent upon connectivity of brain circuits. Creative people always need the harmonious functioning of both halves of the brain in unison. Works of scientific or artistic creativity often require that one uses the skill and knowledge mediated by both halves of the brain. For example, the novelist who is writing about an emotional response of a character must use knowledge of facial emotional expression stored in the right brain together with the verbal lexicon stored in the left brain. The sculptor must imagine the rotation of spatial image mediated by the right brain while he uses the motor skill mediated by the left brain. The space physicist must combine the spatial computations mediated by the right brain with arithmetic skills mediated by the left brain.

We can thus appreciate how in neuroscience there is unity of two opposites—the right (female) brain and left brain (male). This is exactly what has been transpired in theories of modern physics—opposites unite at higher dimensions and brain's computing and thinking power is indeed multidimensional and beyond the range of any mathematical formulation. And, inter-

estingly, this is what is depicted in the *Ardhanārishvara* sculpture—the fusion of the opposites—Shiva and *Shakti* or simply a male and a female form.

My thought process in visual science in relation to *Ardhanāri* is likely to raise controversy and criticism. While I do not wish to hurt the religious sentiment of anyone, I need to give vent to my scientific reasoning. I am a devout Hindu who often worships images, but still I cannot rise above the feeling of the scientist within.

I have a faint hesitation in accepting the fact, that the first artisan who sculptured *Ardhanārishvara*, did so in the spirit of creating a Hindu deity. We assume that the earliest sculpture dates to the early time of the Kushāna dynasty which reigned over northern and central India. Now, the early Kushānas were not Hindus; they were, as stated earlier, Buddhists with some western influence, as revealed by their dresses and art forms. It is unlikely therefore that they would have patronized a Hindu deity. Secondly, looking, at least at the Elephanta sculpture (and Elephanta was probably not within the Kushana empire as the historical maps suggest) and the Chola bronzes, it is apparent that the sculpture is essentially feminine. In fact, the female gender is inscribed in the very name—*Ardhanāri*—a half female form. So my hypothesis is that originally the sculpture was crafted to depict just a beautiful sensuous female form. So what went wrong that the left half looks much like a male—the conspicuous thing being that the beautifully curved breast on the right chest is missing in the left? I tend to explain this by the phenomenon of *hemineglect* in the artisan who first crafted the original sculpture.

*Hemineglect* is a curious phenomenon in neuroscience where due to a lesion in one half of the brain (usually the right) caused commonly by a stroke, a person de-

velops a ‘neglect’ or unawareness in the opposite (that is the left) half of the field of vision. This is commonly tested by asking such a person to draw a clock face. A subject with a left *hemineglect* would miss out the numbers on the left half of the clock face and would tend to put all or most of the numbers (from 1 to 12) on the right side of the clock face. If such a subject happens to be an artist, this would be evident in the left half of his art work which would be asymmetrical compared to the right or some features may be missing. Such phenomena had been recorded in a number of celebrated European artists including the famous German painter Lovis Cornith, following right brain stroke (Bazner and Hennerici 2007). The art works referred to here include both painting and sculpture. The extent of the disability and hence the degree of distortion in the art work depends on the degree of recovery of function after a brain injury (that is a stroke). I hypothesize that the original artisan who sculptured the *Ardhanāri* suffered from left visual *hemineglect* due, most probably, from a right brain stroke. This explains the missing breast on the left half of the sculpture giving it a male form. And since it was a right brain injury, it did not affect his sculpturing skill (which rests in the left brain) and the right half had been crafted so beautifully. I have a strong suspicion that the religious implications of the sculpture were conceptualized by later observers who were aware of the Hindu philosophical principles which were written in the Vedas much before the Kushāna period.

The final question is: how does one feel when he or she stands in front of the Elephanta sculpture or the Chola bronze? Does one think of religious philosophy or scientific mysticism or hard principles of neuroscience? One’s vision and thoughts

get flooded by the sheer beauty of the swaying androgynous sculpture. And beauty is the very essence of a creative art as Hagman pointed out (Hagman 2009). Beauty elevates

human subjectivity and human values to a transcendent level. A good piece of art, visual or otherwise, is a symbol of beauty and lies in the eyes of the beholder. ■

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

Notes: Unorthodox concepts in *Ardhanārishvara*.

In the *Shiva Purāna*, *Ardhanārishvara* is considered essentially a male God, namely Shiva. He is a complete form—a single unity. It was by Brahmā's command (ie Brahmā's desire to create beings capable of sexual procreation) that Shiva divided to become God and Goddess. Shiva divided Himself and let His *Shakti* (power) be apprehended separately by both Himself and *Brahmā*. Thus came the essential idea of woman, sex and sensuality, and duality came into the world (Kalkinath). In the *Kurma Purāna*, the great God Maheshwara (Shiva) never delights with a wife distinct from His own self—the joy within Him is called the Goddess (Kramrisch 1981).

In India, the Tantric community is known to worship *Shakti* (Goddess Kālī), through a special type of yogic ritual called *sādhana*. The dissolution of categories through *sādhana* is a central and enduring theme in Tantric magic. The aim is to appreciate the union of the two poles of Tantric philosophy, renunciation and erotic bliss. This is what is translated into the union of Shiva and *Shakti* as represented in the deity *Ardhanārishvara*.

Danielou expressed a very unorthodox view. He notes that homosexuals, hermaphrodites and transvestites can be considered sacred beings—'images' of *Ardhanārishvara*.

In India, the Hijra culture is in vogue and represents a sect who are essentially hermaphrodites—males who either do not have male sex organs from birth or what is more common through castration at an early age. They usually

live in separate communities, dress as women and visit wedding ceremonies and families where a child has been born recently and on the pretext of blessing ask for money. If not paid they utter fearful curses. As such, they are looked down upon socially and with fear and awe. Many Hijras believe that they represent the *Ardhanārishvara* in modern times as they dress like women while retaining their male psyche.

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\* Dr Ambar Chakravarty is an eminent neurologist associated with the Department of Neurology, Vivekananda Institute of Medical Science, Calcutta.