

Attaining Selfhood in the Retelling of Ardhanarishvara: A Comparative Study with Present Times

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Abstract

Ardhanarishvara is a challenging concept with startling divulgence. The proposed paper is an attempt to uncover the trajectory related to it via philosophically, socially and culturally where inequalities are responsible for the discriminations and exploitations of the people. The study will interpret the Ardhanarishvara concept with the essence of its existence in present times but simultaneously maintains its sacrosanctity.

Moreover, it explores the untold mysteries about human existence in cosmic reality. Ardhanarishvara is the embodiment of love, harmony, integrity and peace between two opposite and complementary parts of the very essence of human life. Mythologically, it stands for the reproductive energy of human civilization. It is the amalgamation of two continuum persona viz, sky and earth, fire and water.

In relevance to recent times, the study tries to unravel the creation of binaries that emerge due to this division of human attributes and its aftermaths in society. As a result, society is divided into gender stereotypical roles which leads to gender and identity politics.

Keywords: Discrimination, cosmic, reproductive, binaries, identity politics.

Ardhanarishvara being a unique study in the classical trajectory of divine knowledge has an everlasting influence on the lives of people. It revolves around the sacrosanct sentiments of gender roles. It reveals such surprising mysteries which somewhere hit the present day gender inequalities prevailing in the society. Thus, the paper is an attempt to explore the glorious past philosophically, socially and physiologically.

Ardhanarishvara is one of the most important concepts in Indian mythology. The word ardhanarishvara comprises ardha, nari, ishwara means half male\ female god that represents the

religious sentiments of great Hindu mythology. Accordingly, both the male and female are the two sides of a cosmic individuality which emphasis on gender equality in contrast to gender politics of present day society.

There are many mythical stories related to its unique significance as mentioned in the Puranas such as in *Shiva Purana* which remarkably explained about the creation of the world. The story begins when Brahma has created Parjapati, a male but ultimately failed in the process of creation. That's why on the request of Brahma, Lord Shiva created Ardhanarishvara form, to make Brahma to understand the importance of feminine role in the creative process. It symbolizes masculinity and feminine energies or powers in the form of Shiva and Parvati which are inseparable identities and contributes to the progression of life. No doubt, the two separate individualities get united and simultaneously reveal the whole crux of human life. That is to say, the balance in the life can be maintained only if both the powers work together in life. Hence, these energies can be "feminine" or "masculine" which act as two different identities that incorporate humans to lead a life of fulfilment and gratification. In the canon of creation in different cultures, the process revolves around the myth of Adam and Eve, Ying-Yang, Purusha-Prakriti; basically the Ardhanarishvara is the reflection of union of the two opposite forces that are responsible for regulating the smooth rhythm of life. It inspires us to lead a harmonious life by maintaining a balance. It has been observed by Alka Pande in her book, *Ardhanarishvara the Androgyne, Probing the Gender Violence*:

Ardhanarishvara can therefore be understood as representing this very harmony, resolution and balance of the universe, in union. One may interpret this as Siva having projected Sakti, or Sakti having projected Siva. Applying this to present- day tensions of existence faced by men and women alike, it is feasible to understand where one gets off being the other and needs to merge the two to beget a wholesome fusion- an ultimate union.(Pande 29)

The pivotal point of studies lies in the different dimensions of identity in the contemporary society. A critic observes in his writings as, "Historically, theorists seeking to draw a distinction between sex and gender have claimed that sex is a wholly natural or biological

category, independent of the cultural construction of gender. On this basis they have claimed that our gender is in no way fixed or determined by the nature of our sex” (Webster 2). The basis of the study is to focus on narrative texts and performative practices of the society which appears in the writings of Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble*:

If gender is the cultural meanings that the sexed body assumes, then a gender cannot be said to follow from a sex in any way . . . the sex/ gender distinction suggests a radical discontinuity between sexed bodies and culturally constructed genders. Assuming for the moment the stability of binary sex, it does not follow that the construction of “men” will accrue exclusively to the bodies of males or that “women” will interpret only female bodies. (Butler 9)

Similarly, in the expression of *Ardhanarishvara* which embodies the spirit of blissful stage in the union of Shiva-Shakti that has no differences on the name of gender and goes beyond the distinction of gender. This persona is magnificently observed by author in writings as:

The androgyne reflects a synthesis of what is objectively known (identified as the masculine) and the unknown Other (identified as feminine) who will make that knowledge complete. In the third millennium, women seem to be invading the male domain and men seem more and more resigned to take on traditionally female roles . . . Thrown into this cauldron of role perpetuation is the mess of reasoning that delineates and dictates femininity and masculinity as role allocations to the two . . . manifesting in a wide range of emotive, physically palpable entities that make up present day definitions of cross- dressing, gender- bending and transgendering. (Pande 29)

Now, the researcher deeply interrogates the constructed process of gender and introspect the law of construction regarding gender which determined the existing roles and forced an individual to behave under cultural compulsion. There are many instances and myths in the recorded annals of Indian culture that elaborately explained about Shiva and Shakti or masculine and feminine powers. Thus, the concept of fusion of both the energies into one which does not confine to realm of religion but expanded beyond to other forms of art such as, music, dance and painting which nurture these energies for attaining ultimate supreme state of bliss, perfection and

happiness. In the realm of dance especially classical dance such as Kathakali where male dancers enact female roles thus, it seems to free flow of energies from male to female and the writer observes, “a celebration of the duality of the self. There is a growing acknowledgement of the presence of the polarities within the individual and that of the continuum of the male and female manifestation of physiological, psychological and philosophical constructs and their inter-relatedness”(Pande 35). Hence, the process makes one to liberate from the chains of constructed gender and confined boundaries and leads to new developments of individual personality. Identity is dynamic in nature because it has attributes which are biological and constructed. For instance, a person who was given the name "female" at birth but later on is inclined towards the other gender which creates a sense of confusion and chaos in the life of an individual. Hence, the instance is not fully revealed by the biological characteristics, such as genitalia, chromosomes, and hormones. It's possible that a person's gendered characteristics—including psychological, behavioural, and social traits—have nothing to do with their biological characteristics. The person born with female genitalia and assigned to the female sex may have a strong, unwavering belief that they are male (referred to as their "gender identity"), may act in ways that are stereotypically male (referred to as their "gender expression"), and may even have a deep-seated desire to be a man. (Weiss 27)

The conservative mindset of the society which is confined to gendered bodies is responsible for ruining the lives of innocent people for instance, transgendered/ *hijra* community. The word *hijra* means, a person who is a wanderer lives the life of nomad and neither comes in the rubric of a man nor woman. It has been remarkably mentioned in the writings, “Derrida deploys the term logocentrism to describe the western pattern by which meaning is produced through a binary of presence and absence” (Nayak and Kheily 466). As a result they have to face humiliation in life. The present paper also explores the lives of those innocent people who became victim due to their bodies. Such as, in the autobiography, *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* by A. Revathi who was born with male identity and named Doraisamy. She experienced violence in her family for her feminine ways, “what I was going through? I bundled my feelings and confusions into tight roll, laid it aside, and, in spite of all the teasing and bullying, went about doing what I was asked to do” (Revathi 11). Thus she felt herself trapped

in the male body. She was quite comfortable while playing with girls and often dressed up as a girl. The dilemma of her identity had affected her personal, social and academic performance. Everyone made fun of her and refused to accept her existence as a female. So, she decided to leave her home and joined *hijra* community. It was really a great irony that the innocent person sometimes forced to take such deadly decision in life. Many sarcastic remarks and derogatory words compelled her to undergo *nirvaanam* or sex change operation and named Revathi from Doraisamy. It is matter of concern that just to come up with the expectations of the society Revathi underwent such a painful procedure. Hence, she acts as a mouthpiece for all those millions of transgender people who have to face social exclusion, sexual harassment, violence and exploitation due to their gender identity. She observes, “It seems like there is nothing for us *hijras* to do but sex work. We lack the education to do much else, and there’s no one to offer us work. Sex work brings with it all kinds of problems- we suffer at the hands of both the police and rowdies. We are not accepted by our families” (Revathi 240). This is not the story of just one Revathi but all those trans women who are struggling hard in this cruel world. Thus, the story of Revathi has projected the rigid and confined approach of modern societies which have been divided in two folds, hence individual is forced to select between ‘two polarities of the gender spectrum’ (Pande 65) and any change or aberration is considered as abnormal. Judith Butler argues in *Gender Trouble*, “Gender is not a noun, but neither is it a set of free- floating attributes . . . the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence” (34).

Conclusion:

Ironically, in the present times majority of the people have forgotten about the glorious past when every individual had a place in Indian culture without any sort of discrimination. Thus, the true essence of Ardhanarishvara or “the god who is half woman” (Pande 15) lies in harmony in various dimensions of gender roles by attaining complete state of bliss by merging margins to centre.

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