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# STUDY OF ARDHANARISHWARA AS A SYMBOL OF GENDER EQUALITY IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD

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*Abstract:* India is amalgamation of different religions, languages, caste, classes, and creed reflecting various communities representing their own belief and perceptions of existence. In Hindu philosophy, we have a history of number of Gods and their relation towards humans and their lives. Ardhanarishwara, the mix of deities of *Shiva* and *Shakti* is the one who comes under this line. Its basic meaning represents the equality between the two entities of human society (male and female). Ardhanarishwara's concept is male half as *Purusha* and female half as *Prakriti*. It implies that both have their defined roles towards the cosmos. Ardhanarishwara is the state of male and female energies, where it depicts how *purusha* and *prakriti* are important and interrelated to each other, how they are dependent on each other, how they are inseparable and how they are incomplete without each other. Moreover, this is the statue of gender equality. In the Hindu iconography women were sacred and being worshipped as *Kali*, *Sati*, *Parvati*, equivalent to male gods. But in the urban world identity of women and existence has totally changed, she has become the victim of male domination and patriarchy in personal and private realms. She just needs to follow the voice of the head of the society (patriarchy) manifested in the head of the house- father, and the head of her marriage –husband and when her kids grow up, she even needs to follow the words of her own children. She is the one who never gets the equality in her whole life and spends her most of life by losing her existence day by day which actually means there is no Ardhanarishwara in the real world.

*Keywords:* -Ardhanarishwara, Gender Equality, Patriarchy, Marginalised, Subordination.

### Introduction: -

This paper attempts to understand the intended study of Ardhanarishwara, its symbolism, and what its relevance to the contemporary world is? Is this

actually present anywhere or with anyone? Indian Philosophy has many stories of gods and goddess, semi-god, demi-god, personal-god, forest-god, air, fire and water gods. They all had their prominent places and beliefs in the *Vedas* and the *Puranas*. It is believed that our universe had been made by the trinity of Brahma (the creator of the world), Vishnu (the administrator of the world), and Mahesh (the destroyer of the evils) collectively managed by cosmos. In the modern era, writers have a keen eye on these mythological topics and they have shown their deep interest in the poetry, stories, folk tales, major and minor characters of Ramayana and Mahabharata and have also chosen the writings of Kabir Das, Tulsi Das and Kali Das. They are not only becoming the modern-lenses to retell the stories on it but they are giving their voices to many sensitive and sensational characters of these epics which have their directly connections with contemporary life. These writers are trying to glorify those females who were actually depicted victim of exploitation. There are number of mythological fiction writers such as Devdutt Pattanaik, Kavita Kane, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Amish Tripathi. They have been using these themes and issues in their writings and have achieved tremendous name and fame. Devdutt Pattanaik Book *Myth = Mithya*, a novel illustrates the story of *Shiva* and Shankar, forms of gods and goddess and the myth about their attributes. The book *Shikhandi: and Other Tales They Don't Tell You* expresses the tales of many characters of Mahabharata and Ramayana. The short stories of it has dealt with the theories of LGBT, feminism and mythology. He has chosen the themes like:

1. How and why Shikhandini became Shikhandi (WTM)?
2. Why Mahadev became a woman to deliver his devotee's child?
3. How and why Vishnu became a woman to enchant gods and demons?
4. How Arjuna become an eunuch?
5. *Shiva* who included the female in his male body (Ardhnariashwara).

In regard to the story of *Shiva*, who included the female in his male body, Devdutt Pattanaik has shown the glimpse of Ardhanarishwara and said, "In Hindu mythology the male form represents mind and female is representation of nature." (Pattanaik, 57) He added by saying that mind is totally dependent on nature because mind only works with the existence of things and to know the existence of anything it, has to see and feel that. So, the nature is not dependent on mind but the mind is the one who needs nature to grow.

According to B.N. Raveesh, in his paper Titled ‘Ardhanarishwara Concept: Brain and Psychiatry’, says, “this unity of two biological opposite sexes the universe complete with their energies.”(Raveesh, 112) He further added that the image of Ardhanarishwara expresses the hermaphrodite in this context and said this is acceptable in the gods and goddess because god can be man or woman or neutral as per their needs but in real world it comes under the queer.

Amish Tripathi has also written the Book on *Shiva- The Immortals of Meluha*, basically deals with the trilogy of *Shiva* and story revolves around the character of *Shiva*. Chitra Banerjee has given the voices to characters like Draupadi and Sita, the novel *Palace of Illusions* is a beautiful description of Draupadi with a strong and positive outlook into the present world. She has also shown the journey of woman from identity to empowerment, and questions at men’s actions of that time and reactions of contemporary masculine readers. Kavita Kane the prolific writer has given the voice to the minor female characters of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* like Urmila, Uruvi, Menaka, Surpanakha, and Satyawati and has also given voice to the Devdases. Being a re-teller and narrator, she has re-visited the great mythological epics to represent the issues of feminism, prevalent, gender-discrimination and insecurity based on looks and skin colour, honour killing and taboo on sexuality.

Kane herself remarks, “I always believed that mythology can be a huge canvas for contemporary thought. It is not telling us some old tales, as so carelessly assumed, of gods and goddess, but of man his follies and fallacies.”(Kane, 73) Mythology, antique narrations, folk tales are the reflections of historical culture and traditional base of a society including the topic of re-telling. These are very common practices in Indian literature to rewrite the myths in different verses. Starting from writer Raja Rao to the modern day story teller Amish Tripathy, Kavita Kane etc, all are trying to bring the golden age mythologies. They try to spin out the implicit point of view of different characters from the original narrative.

According to Kavita Kane, “If women have not been portrayed in a proper light, it’s because of misogyny and chauvinism which made us all myopic and did not allow us to see these women for their enormous strength and conviction. We need to return him into their original self by using mythology as a tool to show what they originally were.”(Kane, 5) It signifies that retelling is not around the male of the mythologies narrated earlier rather it focuses on the female characters and their point of views towards their surroundings. Efforts have been made by bringing the mythology to the present year and by re-shaping and contemporizing the prewritten classic texts. The retelling not only emphasises on asserting the

identity of woman rather it gives efforts to erase the thin line between mythology and past.

### **Origin, Significance and Symbolism of Ardhanarishwara: -**

Ardhanarishwara which is a blend of three words- Ardha (half), Nari (woman) and Ishwar (God) symbolically indicates towards dichotomous existence- half male and half female. It illustrates the form of dual energies *Shiva* (Purusha) and Shakti (Prakriti) in one frame. Purusha is mind, constructive, and right part of the body whereas Prakriti is nature, heart, generative, left part of the body and Shakti of *Shiva*. Moreover *Shiva* is (Shav) without his (Shakti). They both are concluded in a supreme power. In this aspect, we found the roots of *Shiva* and Shakti in the Philosophy of Samkhya (number) of Kapil Muni, it draws our attention to Purusha and Prakriti.

ChampeyaGaurardhaSharirakayai,  
KarpuraGaurardhaSarirakaya.  
Dhammillakayai Cha Jatadharaya  
Namah*Shiva*ayai Cha Namah*Shiva*aya. (Shiv Stotra,1)

The above lines have been taken by Ardhanari Nateshwara Stotra which has beautifully depicted the union of creator (*Shiva*) and creation (Shakti). It is written in Sanskrit language and as a whole it expresses compassion, union, equality and love through the symbol of the Ardhanarishwara. It gives the sense of the supreme power. The meaning of the lines has started with the “Salutation to *Shiva* and Shakti” and their beauty. It means:

Body of Shakti shines likes a pure gold;  
Body of *Shiva* shines likes a glittering camphor,  
Shakti who has a neat and tidy hairs,  
And *Shiva* who has the knotty locks.

It gives the sensuous feeling of love and tells us that *Shiva* and Shakti are divine and full of eternal energy. In the ancient history, we found the seeds of these images in the Kushan Era first century CE. The roots of *Shiva*, the God, were also found in the Indus Valley Civilization (2500 BC), and he was worshipped as Mahadev Pashupati and even more the Harappan people worshipped the Goddess of Fertility. The concept of Ardhanarishwara got popularity in the Vedas and Puranas and it is mostly found in *Shiva* temples throughout India. History has a best example of (Yama- Yami) which is half a Bull and half a Cow in iconography which mainly inspired the Vedic literature.

Ardhanarishwara symbolizes that *Shiva* (male) and Shakti (female) are inseparable. Blend of opposite sexes make the cosmos and Purusha stands for the masculine, passive mind and the destroyer of the old, on the other

hand Prakriti stands for feminine, active, doer, and creator of the universe. She is considered the earth, mother who gives flower to leaves, blossom the flowers, gives water to sea, and she is mother of all of us. Eventually *Shiva* is (being) and *Shakti* is (becoming). The Indian author Vishnu Prabhakar has also attempted to justify the gender equality in his novel by taking 'Ardhanarishwara' as a title. He directly relates it with burning issues of the society- rape, exploitation of women, caste, class and religious conflicts, marriages and divorces, prostitution, polygamy, female child as burden etc. This is the bitter truth of our society which has started from the patriarchy.

Ardhanarishwara had also the glimpse in the western Philosophy too.: - "So, the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man." (Walter, 2) These lines are the part of *The Book of Genesis*, which highlights the story of how Eve has been created by the Adam's Ribs. It implies that in the Bible, after creation of the hell and heaven, god (Yahweh) wanted to create humans, so first he created the Adam and with the ribs of Adam, created the Eve. This story gives the best example of Ardhanarishwara that this is an umbrella concept which has its roots not only in the Hindu philosophy but it is present in many others too.

Chinese Philosophy Ying/ Yang is also being famous day by day, that also depicts how the polar forces of white and black are actually interdependent on each other, and how they are complementary to each other. They are much like *Shiva* and *Shakti* positive forces because tarot readers use this card in the prediction of client's marriages and in the love life of their readers for positive outcomes in their problems

In the English framework the word S(he) also draws the attention to the word 'he' which comes under the She, and here are some examples which shows that women are the one who take things forward with the theory of being (stative) and becoming (possibilities to change) like: *Shiva-Shivani*, *Sushil-Shushila*, *Parva-Parvati* and *Vishnu-Vaishnavi*. So, this embodiment of Ardhanarishwara has explained that purusha and prakriti are not in the binary opposition but they are actually complementary to each other and both are inseparable because they are divine power.

### **Ardhanarishwara as a symbol of Gender Equality**

Our universe has been blessed with the plants, birds, animals, other living things and non living things but humans are considered the supreme creation of nature and man is considered superior to woman. Generally, man and woman are the forms of two divine energies to complete each other. They have some biological differences, man is considered strong

while woman is meek and mild. With this perceptual notion, both have taken their defined roles to play in the society as social human beings representing their sexual orientations. In the ancient religious literature women has a role of 'Shakti' to generate the universe and history has many witnesses that Shakti saved many gods by killing the demons like Mahishasur and Chand-Munda in the form of goddess Durga. The form of Goddess Vaishnavi has killed the Tantrik, Bhairavnath to save the devotees. But now the time has totally changed for woman, the so-called Shakti goddess has become an object of harassment, inequality and domination of male. Religious thoughts make women goddess but unfortunately patriarchy fails to recognize her as a human beings. The female Goddess are worshiped in many forms but are indulged in exploitation of women as daughters, wives and mothers in our day to day life. Gender equality is a phenomenon in order to expresses the equality between the male and female. It is a term which throws light on equality and opposes stereotypes related to the subjugation and discrimination towards woman. It is true that women were praised and were sacred in our religion even in the *Vedas* and *Puranas*. In the modern era, gender inequalities and discrimination are present which starts even before the birth of the child. The discrimination is related to their sexes: pink colour related to a girl and blue colour related to a boy, male should behave like masculine and female should behave like feminine, if they could not behave like expected social norms then queer is obvious. Gender inequality opposite to gender equality is a broad term which has its roots in many dimensions- it deals with patriarchy, gender discrimination, self and other, subjugation of women, status of women as a secondary, double-marginalised and most important is (LGBT). Indian feminist writers like Amrita Pritam, Mahashweta Devi, Anita Desai, Sudha Murthy, and Kamala Das have highlighted the female issues and their world in their writings. Western feminist writers like Virginia Woolf, Toni Morrison and Kate Millet use feminist term to fight against the patriarchy and their thoughts are so radical and not easy to be digest for men, Dramatist like Mahesh Dattani, Vijay Tendulkar and Badal Sircar also have chosen to write about the voiceless female characters and these writers actually give an attempt for the equality between both the sexes against the stereotypes. They said that in the earliest time women were not allowed to perform their roles in the theatres also, men played their roles. This was the real picture of women subjugation because she cannot even perform that role in which she had born.

In the medieval history, one of the world's greatest poet Kabir Das has openly criticised women in his poetry and their traditional views towards women was that women had eight negative attributes: foolhardiness, waywardness, lustfulness, cowardice, suspicion, cruelty, falsehood, and

lack of discrimination. These words have expressed that women have no mind and they cannot significantly contribute to the society.

Gurinder Kaur Singh opines that Kabir's thoughts on women are derogatory. Women historian of religion Kairne Schomer has got conclusion with Kabir's poetry that he is biased, she has given many examples of it. For Kabir, woman is Kali Nagin (black cobra) who destroys the mind of man with her venom, she is Kunda Narak Ka (the pit of hell) means she is nothing more than hell and on the other hand Ardhanarishwara symbolises women as Prakriti (the mother and generator) Devi, they are the heart and Shakti of Men.

It means that women are truly not acceptable by Kabir in any way, she has always and openly been criticised by him in his poetry and in his daily dialects. We should also understand the gender inequalities that are actually present in the form of women subjugation, levels of women subjugation and construction of women subjugation in the society which is actually extremely far from the Ardhanarishwara concept. Kabir Das was not only the one who dislikes women but Tulsi Das was also one of them from the feminist perspective:

“Dhol Ganwar Shudra Pashu Nari, Sakal Tadan ke Adhikari.” (Tulsi, Doha 58, Chaupai 3, Sundarkant.

The above line is a Doha of *Ramcharitramanas*' Sundarkand that implies that women can be compared to illiterate, animals, drums or dalits who are meant to be scolded and beaten mercilessly. On the other hand Vedas and Puranas attempt to place women at higher level which emphasized on the understanding of women for peaceful life. Some said that Dalits had the capabilities to understand the basic works of day to day to life. On the behalf of women feminist writers who actually belong to social and radical feminism, they have taken this Doha as a teaching of sexism. Dr.Parul Tyagi in her paper “Asserting Self: Kamala and Sarita in Vijaya Tendulkar's Kamalahad” also raised and asked many questions on this Doha and said why are these words has used by our greatest poets. This is actual image of our ancient Indian history on these sensitive issues, women were not praised by our greatest poets even they criticised them like a hell. In the analysis of this Doha from the feminist point of view in the depth, then could understand the level of humiliation. Women were marginalised they were treated like 'other' not in the centre and here example of black Dalit woman enlightens the understanding the level of double-discrimination. She is criticised because she belongs to Dalit community and her black colour.

Women are considered as the second creature always to be empowered by men. All these Dohas neither represent anywhere that women are the better

half of man nor they had given the motherly figure to women. These writings have left us with the painful questions for all: Why do we have such a long painful history of subjugation of women by men? Throughout the whole history women have been treated as their properties by their father, husband, brother and harem owner. Why have been they cursed with the secondary position in the society? Why are they inferior to men?

The equality is a tool for everyone that gives the inner peace to individuals but inequality, discrimination and subordination directly deals with the Patriarchy. In the modern time women are achieving their targets by their hard works and determination, patriarchy brings up hurdles for them because patriarchy institutions and societal pressure makes them inferior or give them the feeling of secondary status to women. Patriarchal society gives the top most priority to the men and limits the rights and life of women with their orthodox thoughts. Patriarchy explains the male power, domination over women both in public and private realms. Feminists use this word (patriarchy) to describe the power relationship between the men and the women and they found the roots of inequalities in the women subordination.

It implies that women's subordination gives the feeling of inferiority to them, and makes them full of indecision and they are treated as subjects in the society by male. So, it has direct meaning that subjugation of women give birth to inferior position of women to men. In this regard, women feel powerlessness, lack of confidence, low self-esteem thus they became the central figure of domination. A contemporary feminist theorist, Simon de Beauvoir, of *Second Sex* fame has voiced this and has propagated that men have a perception that women has fundamentally reduced status in the society (Beauvoir, 1974). Kate Millet's theory of subordination illustrates the argument that women are a dependent sex under the patriarchal domination (Millet, 1977). This is actually not the Ardhanarishwara concept because in our history there are certain examples which throw light on denigrations of women, which is still present.

- 1) Why is women's chastity more important to men? The Goddess Sita had to undergo Agni Pariksha but God Ram's chastity was not questioned at all in the history by any writer or poet?
- 2) Why do always women's virginity questionable by men even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?
- 3) Why was Devdasi concept present in the name of marriages with gods and forced to live the life of celibacy later on converted to the Rajadasi eventually this becomes prostitution nothing more than that?
- 4) Why do people mostly prefer new born male child over female, if both sexes are equal?



- 5) Why do women always need to look beautiful, polite and should surrender completely to her husband?
- 6) Why should women be submissive, docile and fulfill every aspects of unhappy marriage?
- 7) Why is prostitution still available in the form of direct and indirect mode, if sex is the part of the marriages?
- 8) Why does Sexual harassment of girls at schools and workplaces, is another unanswerable feature
- 9) Why low wages to women in comparison to men in practice?
- 10) Why are Family planning decisions mostly taken by men and not women and why does she only need to behave like a reproductive machine?
- 11) Why is family reputation or parent's respect only the duty of women?
- 12) Why are white women more beautiful than black? Why is color another obstacle for her identity and equality?
- 13) Why are women considered as a Maya?
- 14) Why are these abusive words like kulta, charitraheen, besharam and nari narak ka dwar used only for women? Why does everyone target women only, if she is the earth, motherly figure and equal to men?
- 15) Love marriages are still a taboo in our society, and honor killings takes place on this but in the religious philosophy of gods and goddess, love was eternal. The *Shiva* and Sati, and *Shiva* and *Shakti* are a best example of love marriages, Radha and Krishna compassionate love was beyond the limits and still their names come together to worship them.

These are the certain small and big questions which still do not have their answers in any book, and they don't express the ever widening gap between the male and female. "Why" becomes the significant challenge in the life of woman because whenever she looks for the new opportunities in her life whether they are related to her personal or private spheres. She stops and to avoid interrogation and interruptions from so called superior male there is continuous effort to escape the so called "Why". Why can't I do this? Why can't I go there? Why can't I see dreams? Why can't I fulfill them? Though the concept of Ardhanarishwara actually gives the sense of female equality with the male, moreover it explains that *Shakti* is that energy which holds *Shiva* and *Shiva* is *Shav* without *Shakti*, *Shiva* is the one who is totally dependent on *Shakti* (the female energy) but no one has accepted the women as a human being then how they can accept her as Ardhanarishwara. She has only become the puppet of male dominated

society. The word equality is only meant for the men and not for the women because they only deal with inequalities from her birth to death.

### **Conclusion:**

In the conclusion, the exploration of this study of Ardhanarishwara as a symbol of gender equality in the contemporary world uncovers the many bitter truths of the Indian Society. It is transparent figure for us to know that women are the sufferer of exploitation and subordination (under male domination, dichotomy of pay and low wages in jobs), oppression (forms of violence). There are many unsolved societal issues present in our society for women which are son preference over girl, burden of household work, negative portrayal of women in the media, social customs for only women, quest for her identity and identity crisis.

Women have been assured by creating many laws of gender equality in the constitution but patriarchy has its own laws and rules, which are followed in rural and urban places in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is said that women are strong on the legal papers, they have their own rights and legal systems to achieve their dreams with equality, legally women are not discriminated anywhere but whenever any woman wants to use their rights then considered the bad woman. She is called by the names of selfish and even disowned by her own blood relations. A society can never learn the ideology of equality then how they consider the women better half of a man. The roots of patriarchy are interlinked with the forces of religion, orthodox customs, mobility which is mainly set for the women only because they all have bounded their identities and roles. Here have some gender related inequality which still prevails in the society at many places:

1. Women have the lower status in the social hierarchy.
2. Pathetic perception of women is that they were equated with sin.
3. Boundaries were set for women within which they have to perform.
4. They were identified by their body parts, and treated as an object of lust.
5. If she has liberal mind, then she is believed to be available for anything.
6. Concept of Pativrata, Dharma and Sati is only followed by women.
7. Child marriage and Polygamy is still permitted.
8. Widow re-marriage consider her as a lustful lady.
9. The burden of all ills and sins referred to women.
10. A patriarchal social frame has been developed to analyses her, and with the notion of this they to start dominating her.
11. Oppression of women is seen as natural.

This is the vast and harsh image of women in Indian society and no conclusion has come out in the contemporary Indian society. The fact is that we are celebrating Mother's Day, Women's Day and Daughter's day to make them realize their existence but on the other hand they are being controlled by the rigid customs laid down by the male hegemonic system. In rural places villagers use the quote like "Beti and Roti chupa k Rakhi jaati hai", this conventional thought gives us the sense that woman is a part of jewellery that need to be hidden in their houses, then how they can come forward in real life to achieve their targets and identity. The real truth about females is to full fill the multiple roles defined by the males. She has to live her life for others in the names of social cultural norms. By doing this man has forgotten her existence as female is the half part of a male. If Shakti has generated the universe, then woman is the one who blessed with a right to become the mother on this earth and has that power which is forwarded from generation to generation. Men are dependent on women to become a father and they cannot feel the pleasure of parenthood alone, but still women. There are many writers, authors and Bollywood Directors who used these issues in their scripts to reach out the equality between both the sexes like *Chak De India*, *Queen*, *Neerja*, *Dangal*, *Pink* and *Lipstick under my Burkha* which mainly gives the sense of equality of woman. Everyone is fighting with these norms of society which actually is shattering the identities of woman in the names of racism, discrimination and secondary status in society. Ardhanarishwara actually symbolizes the concept of equality in the religion, religious books, Vedas and Puranas but in the real world there is no equality between the male and the female. Male (patriarchy) first should understand female as a human being then, should understand their dreams, thoughts and mind which works, give them peace of solace and then should bless them with equal strata in the society, then maybe they would understand that woman is nothing less but only the better half of a men, which actually stands for Ardhanarishwara.

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