The Unfolding of Ardhanārīśvara

Philip Lagace

A Dissertation in the Department of Religions and Cultures

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy (Religion)

Concordia University

Montréal, Québec, Canada

March 2025

CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY
SCHOOL OF GRADUATE STUDIES

This is to certify that the thesis prepared

By: Philip Lagace

Entitled: The Unfolding of Ardhanārīśvara

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy (Religion)

complies with the regulations of the University and meets the accepted standards with respect to originality and quality.

Signed by the final examining committee:

_____ Chair
Dr. Marc des Jardins

_____ External Examiner
Dr. Rachel McDermott

_____ Arm's Length Examiner
Dr. Mathieu Boisvert

_____ Examiner
Dr. Hamsa Stainton

_____ Examiner
Dr. Sowparnika Balaswaminathan

_____ Thesis Supervisor
Dr. Leslie Orr

Approved by _____

Dr. Marc des Jardins, Graduate Program Director

5/13/2025
Date of Defence

_____

Dr. Pascale Sicotte, Dean, Faculty of Arts and Science

The Unfolding of Ardhanārīśvara

Philip Lagace, PhD
Concordia University, 2025

Abstract

As a deity divided into male and female halves, Ardhanārīśvara has garnered significant attention. Notable academic works center on its visual depictions, its place within poetry and mythological narratives, as well as its philosophical framings. However, a survey of scholarship indicates interrelated issues involving the omission of content concerning the figure in living contexts. In this connection, on chiefly hypothetical or theoretical grounds, Ardhanārīśvara has been framed as uniquely significant to people whose gender identities and/or sexual orientations exist beyond cisgender and/or heterosexual frameworks; work directly engaging associated populations regarding their relationship to the deity is critically lacking. Moreover, information on the conceptualizations and utilizations of Ardhanārīśvara in and around its places of worship is virtually absent within published literature; when devotional sites are mentioned, they are simply acknowledged and receive no sustained consideration.

To account for these issues, three pertinent contexts were identified for examination within this project: Durgā Pūjā festivals observed in Kolkata (into which Ardhanārīśvara is integrated by transgender activists); affairs of the Kinnar Akhāḍā (a religious order mainly comprised of “third gender” membership that has named Ardhanārīśvara their patron god); and life centering on the Ardhanārīśvara temple of Tiruchengode, Tamil Nadu (alongside associated sites). Each involves Ardhanārīśvara within ground realities and receives a dedicated chapter in this dissertation. However, while the impetus for this project was a desire to address the lacunas and shortcomings noted above, it does more than fill holes and ameliorate deficiencies. In addition to contributing to areas of prior scholarly focus and those of cursory attention, new ground is covered through tracing and analyzing active developments within the ongoing history of Ardhanārīśvara. In doing so, it highlights invocations of both tradition and innovation while showcasing a deity strategically engaged, embraced, and employed as a means of securing primarily worldly ends.

Acknowledgments

Properly thanking everyone who contributed, directly or indirectly, to this project would be a mammoth undertaking necessitating more space than the dissertation itself required. Accordingly, I will keep things brief, though it should be noted that a tremendous amount of gratitude will remain unexpressed.

To begin, I offer my heartfelt thanks to Leslie Orr, my PhD supervisor. She provided the perfect balance of space and guidance to suit my needs. I felt free to work through my own thoughts without constraint, and when I brought her my ideas, I was both listened to with care and challenged in meaningful ways. Her own industriousness was also a strong source of motivation. On several fronts, Dr. Orr has been a true inspiration.

I was also fortunate to have Hamsa Stainton and Sowparnika Balaswaminathan as internal committee members. Their critical engagement, generous insights, and genuine enthusiasm for my research considerably enhanced the final product. Rachel McDermott and Mathieu Boisvert graciously served as my external examiners. It was a privilege to have these scholars, whose work I admire, involved with my dissertation. Their feedback also elevated the project significantly.

I owe much appreciation to the students, teachers, and staff of the Department of Religions and Cultures at Concordia University. I offer special thanks to Marc des Jardins for his encouragement throughout my studies and for stepping in to attend my doctoral defence, as well as to Marcel Parent, who has positively shaped both my professional and personal trajectory. I am also especially grateful to Tina Montandon and Munit Merid, whose kindness and conversations greatly contributed to my positive experience in the program. Thank you also to Thomas Seibel, a current PhD student in the department, whose presence in my life has been profound; he has been an academic peer, a creative collaborator, and even a groomsman.

My colleagues (both past and present) at the Religion Department of Dawson College deserve recognition for their support and companionship: Laurence Nixon, Sonia Zylerberg, Johanne Rabbat, Ivan Freud, Natalie Kepka, Calogero Miceli, Marie-Josée Blanchard, Amanda Rosini, and Laurel Andrew.

From the University of Saskatchewan, I am particularly indebted to Braj Sinha, my MA supervisor, and to George Keyworth, a former professor and member of my MA thesis committee. I would also like to highlight that my time at the U of S was largely characterized by studies and shenanigans alongside fellow graduate student Savhanna Wilson, who remains especially dear to me.

Despite the distance between us, I have also maintained regular contact with Jill Laflamme and Angela Guenther from Saskatoon, for which I am deeply appreciative. Thank you as well to my many other friends in Saskatoon, Winnipeg, and Montréal, especially Shaun de Rooy, whose friendship means the world to me.

I am grateful for the many people I have met in India throughout the course of my research, including the following: Anindya Hajra, Ranjita Sinha (and all the Garima Greh residents), Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, Bhavani Ma, Raju Mohan, Baba Atreya, “Cashew Man,” Adarasupally Nataraju, Rana and Bitu Baishya, Saumya Kanti Biswas (and family), and Jnan Nath Sarma.

My ability to travel to India as frequently as I have is largely thanks to funding opportunities. In this regard, I owe a debt of gratitude to Concordia University, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, and the Shastri Indo-Canadian Institute.

I have been blessed with a wonderful family. My Great Baba and Great Gido, Baba and Gido, and Nana and Papa have all showered me with generosity and unconditional love. Thank you to my mother and father, Larry and Donna Lagace, whose influence is evident in all that I do. My brother, Marc Lagace, pursued his own PhD in the same field while I completed mine. That we took parallel paths should be both hilarious and unsurprising to anyone who knows us. His brilliance inspires me. Thank you also to my sister, Renée White, who always puts my endeavours first in our conversations, despite her own full and exciting life.

I met my beautiful wife, Aurélie Frenette-Araujo, to whom this dissertation is dedicated, when I began my doctoral studies. Her presence in my life ever since has enriched every part of it. She joined me in India twice during the course of my research, patiently supported my long workdays, and her rejuvenating company has made many of my pursuits possible.

Finally, I would like to thank our soon-to-be-born child for creating a sense of urgency that propelled my dissertation to completion.

Dedicated to Aurélie, my better half

Table of Contents

Chapter 6

Red and White Stripes: Ardhanārīśvara in Tiruchengode and Associated Sites

Chapter 7

Conclusions, Contributions, and Future Considerations

Note on Transliteration

I have used diacritics when presenting non-English terms, except for the names of present-day people, cities, towns, and villages. Other than proper nouns, these terms have been italicized. For ease of readership, they have been pluralized according to standard English practice.

List of Images

Chapter 1
Introductions, Orientations, and Overview

Introduction

A honeycreeper from Colombia made headlines in 2023 for its uncommon plumage. One article described its feathering as "bright green on the left half of its body and blue on the right half, split neatly down the middle as though two birds had been glued together."[1] This followed 2019 coverage of a cardinal exhibiting "bright red on its right side and a muted yellowish brown on the left."[2] The feathery stars of these news stories have been classified as bilateral gynandromorphs, organisms split into male and female halves by a midline.[3] Although rare overall, many examples have been identified beyond the avian above, including within crustacean and insect populations (see Figure 1).[4] As evidenced by the numerous scholarly articles and media reports focusing on these anomalies, bilateral gynandromorphs have captured the imaginations of both academic and non-academic circles. Intriguingly, the same can be said for similarly segmented beings of sacred status, including the compelling Ardhanārīśvara.

Ardhanārīśvara is a composite Hindu deity whose name itself reflects a combination of three words as per the Sanskrit grammatical practice *sandhi.*[5] They are: *ardha*, meaning half; *nārī*, meaning woman; and *īśvara*, often rendered as "lord."[6] Ardhanārīśvara is thus translated along the lines of "the lord who is half woman."[7] Accordingly, the figure is visually depicted as divided into male and female halves by a medial axis. The male half is invariably represented by the god Śiva; the female half is identified as Śakti or Devī (i.e., the divine feminine principle) and generally represented by the characteristic features of the goddess Pārvatī (see Figure 2). As suggested, the curious anatomy of Ardhanārīśvara has proven alluring, and the deity has

---

[1] Alexandra Mae Jones, "This bird isn't just half green and blue – it's half female and half male," *CTV News*, https://www.ctvnews.ca/climate-and-environment/article/this-bird-isnt-just-half-green-and-half-blue-its-half-female-and-half-male/ (accessed September 2024).

[2] Sheena Goodyear, "This rare male-female cardinal is 'something pretty special,'" *CBC News*, https://www.cbc.ca/radio/asithappens/as-it-happens-monday-edition-1.5005086/this-rare-male-female-cardinal-is-something-pretty-special-1.5005090 (accessed September 2024).

[3] This description of bilateral gynandromorphs is drawn from the definition provided in Joshua P. Jahner, Lauren K. Lucas, Joseph S. Wilson, and Matthew L. Forister, "Morphological Outcomes of Gynandromorphism in *Lycaeides* Butterflies (Lepidoptera: Lycaenidae)," *Journal of Insect Science* 15, no. 1 (April 2015): 1.

[4] For a discussion of crustacean bilateral gynandromorphs, see Allen W. Olmstead and Gerald A. LeBlanc "The Environmental-Endocrine Basis of Gynandromorphism (Intersex) in a Crustacean," *International Journal of Biological Sciences* 3, no. 2 (December 2006); for a discussion of insect bilateral gynandromorphs, see Jahner, Lucas, Wilson, and Forister, "Morphological Outcomes of Gynandromorphism in *Lycaeides* Butterflies (Lepidoptera: Lycaenidae)."

[5] *Sandhi* is the process by which sounds are fused together at morpheme or word boundaries. See Robert Goldman and Sally J. Sutherland Goldman, *Devavāṇīpraveśikā: An Introduction to The Sanskrit Language* (California: IEAS Publications Program, 2004), 23.

[6] Ellen Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman: Ardhanārīśvara in Indian and Feminist Perspective* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2002), 1.

[7] Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman*, 1.

correspondingly attracted attention; *The Lord Who Is Half Woman*, *Ardhanarishvara the Androgyne*, and *Ardhanārīśvara in Art and Literature*, for example, are books centering on the deity.[8]

Figure 1: A bilateral gynandromorph.[9]

My own interest in Ardhanārīśvara began when browsing through volumes of artwork featuring the Hindu pantheon. Intrigued at first sight by its bifurcated form, I began to familiarize myself with available works on the figure.[10] In doing so, I discovered scholarship on its iconography, its place within poetry and mythological narratives, as well as its relationship to philosophical thought. However, I also noticed the omission of content concerning the deity in living contexts. For one, Ardhanārīśvara was framed as particularly significant to people whose sexual orientations and/or gender identities exist beyond heterosexual and/or cisgender frameworks, yet these assertions were chiefly forwarded on hypothetical or theoretical grounds. At best, the sensibilities of actual people were passingly cited; I could find no substantial work engaging associated populations regarding their relationship to the deity. Second, information on the conceptualizations and utilizations of Ardhanārīśvara at and surrounding its places of worship was virtually absent within academic literature; when dedicated sites of worship are mentioned, they are simply acknowledged and receive no additional consideration.

---

[8] See Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman*; Alka Pande, *Ardhanarishvara the Androgyne: Probing the Gender Within* (New Delhi: Rupa & Co., 2004); and Neeta Yadav, *Ardhanārīśvara in Art and Literature* (New Delhi: D.K. Printworld Ltd., 2001).

[9] This picture is from Richard Pallardy, "How gynandromorphs manage to be half male and half female," *Earth.com*, https://www.earth.com/news/gynandromorphs-half-male-half-female/ (accessed September 2024).

[10] The possessive pronoun used here (its) is intentional, and my decision to opt for gender-neutral language when referencing Ardhanārīśvara will be explained later in this chapter.

To approach these issues, I identified three pertinent contexts to research: Durgā Pūjā festivals observed in Kolkata within the past decade; affairs of the Kinnar Akhāḍā (a religious organization established in 2015); and life in and around the Ardhanārīśvara temple of Tiruchengode, Tamil Nadu (alongside associated localities). Each involves Ardhanārīśvara within ground realities and receives a dedicated chapter in this dissertation. However, while the impetus for this project was a desire to address the lacunas and shortcomings noted in the preceding paragraph, what follows does more than fill holes and ameliorate deficiencies. In addition to contributing to areas of prior scholarly focus and those of cursory attention, I tread new ground in tracing and analyzing active developments within the ongoing history of Ardhanārīśvara. In doing so, I highlight invocations of both tradition and innovation while showcasing a deity strategically engaged, embraced, and employed as means to primarily worldly ends.

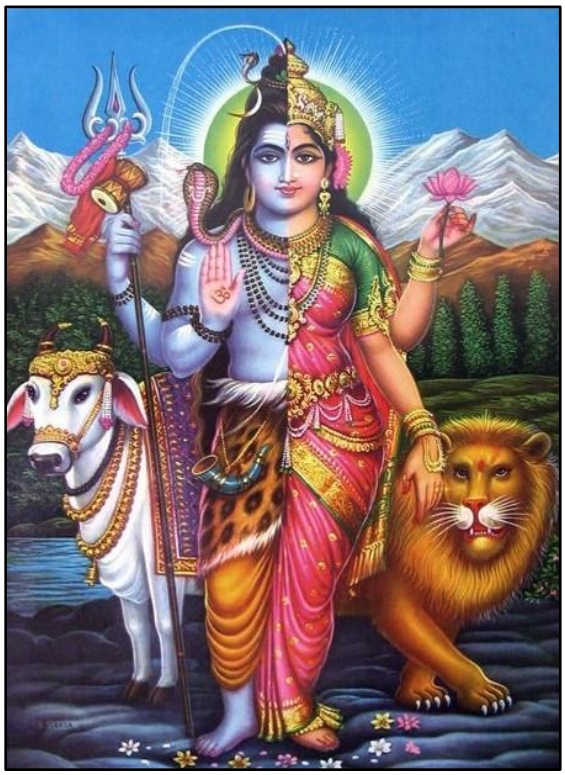

Figure 2: Ardhanārīśvara.[11]

Preliminary Clarifications

"Research is a relationship," Sartre perceptively observed.[12] Similarly, Srinivas notes that fieldwork encounters shape the pliant "ethnographic subjectivity" of researchers and thus their

[11] This image was scanned from my personal collection. From here on, unless otherwise indicated, the images provided are my own.

[12] I initially saw this pointed out by Srinivas; see Tulasi Srinivas, *The Cow in the Elevator: An Anthropology of Wonder* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2018), 21.

academic output.[13] These ideas ring true for the project at hand; the information and insights presented herein have been generated through interaction with interviewees and interlocuters, the observation of others, and engagement with the works of manifold writers (before, during, and after ethnographic fieldwork). However, while I recognize that abundant influences doubtlessly informed its production, this is not, as it were, a coauthored piece of scholarship, and some caveats ought to be offered accordingly.

Ardhanārīśvara is the crux of this project, but people are intimately involved. A great deal of my work, for example, engages populations, both directly and indirectly, whose experiences as nonmale and nonelite are of interest. Given the sensitivity surrounding these facets of positionality, I feel that it is particularly important to touch on the (in)ability for researchers to access and relay the lived realities of others. Sharf recognizes that "experience" is linked to "the subjective, the personal, [and] the private."[14] The relativity of each vantage, together with the unspeakable fullness of experience, renders perfect conveyance impossible; Sharf goes so far as to state that "all attempts to signify 'inner experience' are destined to remain 'well-meaning squirms that get us nowhere.'"[15] Moreover, articulations of experience are delivered through conditioned modes of expression and received via (differing) conditioned modes of apprehension; thus, to relay any encountered articulation is to partake in modifications like those yielded by transmission chaining.[16] In fact, Clifford suggests an ethnography – which he says "translates experience into text" – is "inescapably allegorical" given the additional meanings and frames of reference inevitably introduced by its writer that point beyond the content being engaged.[17]

Impacted by notions of unavoidable subjective colourings and "a view that all we can ever write about with authority and accuracy is ourselves," ethnographic writing has trended towards increased reflexivity.[18] Yet complications arise here, too. Shore, for example, cautions against assuming great reflexive capacity exists within researchers, recognizes the trickiness of discerning how (and to what extent) oneself should be located within a text, and identifies the

---

[13] Srinivas, *The Cow in the Elevator*, 23. Note that the "ethnographic subjectivity" discussed by Srinivas appears somewhat informed by the work of Chawla; see Devika Chawla, "Subjectivity and the 'Native' Ethnographer: Researcher Eligibility in an Ethnographic Study of Urban Indian Women in Hindu Arranged Marriages," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 5, no. 4 (December 2006).

[14] Robert Sharf, "Experience," in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies,* ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 94.

[15] Sharf, "Experience," 114.

[16] In the game of "telephone," for example, information is passed sequentially between people and (oftentimes) the information is modified by participants; in social psychology, passing information in this sequential fashion is known as a transmission chain.

[17] The first quote is from James Clifford, "On Ethnographic Allegory," in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, eds. James Clifford and George E. Marcus (Berkley: University of California Press, 1986), 115; the second quote is from page 99.

[18] The quote is from Cris Shore, "Fictions of Fieldwork: Depicting the 'Self' in Ethnographic Writing (Italy)," in *Being There: Fieldwork in Anthropology*, ed. C.W. Watson (London: Pluto Press, 1999), 29; on 28, Shore states that "an element of reflexivity has become *de rigeuer* in most ethnographic writing."

pitfalls of self-curation; with respect to the latter, he highlights cases in which "the 'reflexivity' trope actually conceals more than it reveals about the author[s]" for presenting "contrived, edited, or 'authored' version[s] of [themselves]."[19] Nonetheless, reflexivity is deemed beneficial for insightfully indicating that researchers are active players in "'the field' . . . from which, and onto which, [they] try to impose some kind of conceptual order."[20] In line with the foregoing, I underscore that the sentiments expressed by – and (the frequently sensitive) issues pertaining to – others as presented in this work have been digested, shaped, and delivered through the filters of my faculties and aims. To render this apparent within the ensuing pages, I strive to reflect upon and acknowledge the influences that have informed my perspectives, delineate my thought processes, and disclose my rationales for including the observations and impressions presented. At the time same time, I recognize that there are matters, both overt and subtextual, fated to escape my awareness. In sum, despite the relational nature of research, I urge that all descriptions and inferences made within this project be evaluated predominantly at the level of my authorship.

In addition to concerns regarding the (in)ability to speak (i.e., write) for and/or about fieldwork subjects, are issues surrounding the fundamental status of the speaker and the thing(s) spoken of. Beatty writes that "the ethnographer . . . is not a finished product any more than what [they purport] to represent. [Within] participant observation . . . the two terms are in unstable and everchanging relation."[21] This ephemerality suggests that there is nothing essentially bounded to be captured in writing and no ultimately stable writer to do so. Yet, deceivingly, "text embalms the event," in the words of Clifford, and the written word can easily be regarded as singularly authoritative, if not framed as otherwise, by virtue of being published.[22] Thus, he warns that written accounts "are clearly [not] *the* story, but a story among other stories."[23] Indeed, the dissertation presented here is a gathering of my own swirling, impressed-upon thoughts on the research undertaken and could have easily taken on another form, even by my own hand. Moreover, it is official (in that it is formally submitted as a doctoral degree requirement) but nonetheless provisional; it is not a work of "mastery and closure," nor did it aspire to be.[24] After all, "[a]ny story has a propensity to generate another story in the mind of its reader (or hearer), to repeat and displace some prior story."[25] The present work is thus offered as a transient layer within the ever-becoming palimpsest of scholarship and a springboard for thought to come.

---

[19] Shore, "Fictions of Fieldwork," 30.

[20] Shore, "Fictions of Fieldwork," 45.

[21] Andrew Beatty, "On Ethnographic Experience: Formative and Informative (Nias, Indonesia)," in *Being There: Fieldwork in Anthropology*, ed. C.W. Watson (London: Pluto Press, 1999), 78.

[22] Clifford, "On Ethnographic Allegory," 116.

[23] Clifford, "On Ethnographic Allegory," 109.

[24] For a discussion on the provisional nature of published works, see Beatty, "On Ethnographic Experience," 77. The quotation is drawn from Srinivas, *The Cow in the Elevator*, 31; here, she differentiates her own work from "a conventional textual treatise displaying mastery and closure."

[25] Clifford, "On Ethnographic Allegory," 100.

The Relational World and Its Rewards

Heraclitus, a pre-Socratic philosopher, axiomatized the fluctuating nature of life in saying that no one steps in the same river twice.[26] Consonantly, I conceive observable phenomena as inherently dynamic and situated within a seamless existence; all demarcations amount to fundamentally arbitrary boundaries whose contents ongoingly modify – while undergoing modification by – everything else in a relational and fluid state of affairs.[27] This view is akin to the understanding of relatedness forwarded by Govindrajan in *Animal Intimacies*. In this multispecies ethnography, she describes her sites of research as "terrains of relatedness" for the interacting beings, both human and nonhuman, that inhabit them.[28] Importantly, these inhabitants are never islands unto themselves; Govindrajan uses the concept of relatedness to "capture the myriad ways in which the potential and outcome of a life always and already unfolds in relation to that of another."[29] One may extend this insight to human relatedness involving presences beyond the nonhuman animals she highlights in her work; indeed, other scholars focus on relationality regarding people and different "other-than-human" parties, including environmental and supramundane ones.[30] Given these "terrains of relatedness," each apparently individuated being could be more accurately described as a hub of processes. For her part, Alaimo opts for "trans-corporeal subject," which she describes as "generated through and entangled with biological, technological, economic, social, political and other systems, processes and events, at vastly different scales."[31] Through the insightful perspectives of Govindrajan and Alaimo, ultimate distinctions between figure and ground dissolve.[32] Of course, the experienced reality of distinctiveness, including of personhood, also exists, and the project at hand, far from aiming to discredit aligned sensibilities, considers them meaningful and impactful within the mutable world it recognizes. In fact, as a matter of convention and in service of readability, this dissertation makes use of language that may, on the surface, appear

---

[26] Ava Chitwood, *Death by Philosophy: The Biographical Tradition in the Life and Death of the Archaic Philosophers Empedocles, Heraclitus, and Democritus* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2004), 66.

[27] My use of the word "within" is not to suggest some kind of separability as though phenomena could also be without; all phenomena, in my view, is constituted by the field I describe it as situated within (as are the faculties at play in demarcation).

[28] Radhika Govindrajan, *Animal Intimacies: Interspecies Relatedness in India's Central Himalayas* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 4.

[29] Govindrajan, *Animal Intimacies*, 3.

[30] For an ethnography that pays mind to environmental relationality, see, for example, Ernestine McHugh, *Love and Honour in the Himalayas: Coming to Know Another Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001). For an example of an ethnography that considers relationality with supramundane parties, see Isabella Nabokov, *Religion Against the Self: An Ethnography of Tamil Rituals* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). The "other-than-human" phrasing comes from Dennis Gaffin, *Running with the Fairies: Towards a Transpersonal Anthropology of Religion* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), 7; here, Gaffin attributes the coining of "other-than-human" to Alfred Irving Hallowell.

[31] Stacy Alaimo, "Trans-corporeality," in *Posthuman Glossary*, eds. Rossi Braidotti and Maria Hlavajova (London and New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018), 436.

[32] Alaimo, "Trans-corporeality," 435.

to imply the delimitation of the items it discusses. Yet it takes nothing for fixed and, by extension, situates the "other-than-human" Ardhanārīśvara within dynamism.

As noted by Lutgendorf, "[t]he academic study of South Asian religious traditions [is now] characterized by a willingness to look beyond the ancient authoritative texts and elite practices privileged by earlier Orientalists."[33] Instead, he describes "scholarship of the postcolonial era" as utilizing phenomenological and ethnographic approaches; favouring interdisciplinary methods that combine firsthand observations with available textual, iconographic, and historical materials; and recognizing alternative sources of information and overlooked voices, including those of disenfranchised populations, as legitimate.[34] While his own far-reaching study of the simian deity Hanumān concordantly aligns with these trends, Ardhanārīśvara has, until now, received no such treatment; on the whole, available scholarship – even when offering novel perspectives – considers the figure in terms of its place within iconographic and textual domains. To do so while virtually ignoring its place in the lives of people is to take the Sun for its photosphere and neglect the reach of its heat and light; much of great bearing goes unrecognized.[35] In view of this, I avoid relegating Ardhanārīśvara to a vacuum and instead take for granted that the deity is part and parcel of a reverberating field of relations. Thus, I consider various dimensions (e.g., artistic, historical, political, and religious) of the figure and arrive at my findings through variegated means, including remote and in-person interviews, participant observation, and close readings of varied sources. Just as the titular deities of *Hanuman's Tale* and *Encountering Kālī* emerge from these wide-ranging works as layered, lively, and multivocal, Ardhanārīśvara accordingly appears complex, active, and often ambiguous across the pages that follow.[36] The reader will find Ardhanārīśvara raised in political protests staged by transgender activists, worshipped by heterosexual men and women aiming to secure spouses, and adopted by a controversial religious order accused of inciting communalism. The populations and issues indicated here are undoubtedly diverse, and one might reasonably assume that Ardhanārīśvara similarly features disparately across them. Yet although differences abound, unifying themes are also discernible. In investigating Ardhanārīśvara in relation to others, I encountered similarities in how Ardhanārīśvara was

---

[33] Philip Lutgendorf, *Hanuman's Tale: The Messages of a Divine Monkey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 11.

[34] Lutgendorf, *Hanuman's Tale*, 11-12.

[35] This metaphor was inspired by an Alan Watts recoding in which he says: "Let's ask: how big is the Sun? Are we going to define the Sun as limited by the extent of its fire? That's one possible definition. But we could equally well define . . . the Sun by the extent of its heat. We could also define the . . . Sun by the extent of its light." For the recording and its transcription, see Alan Watts, "The Essential Lectures of Alan Watts – Time," lecture recorded 1972, *The Library of Consciousness*, https://www.organism.earth/library/document/essential-lectures-6 (accessed December 2024).

[36] See Lutgendorf, *Hanuman's Tale* and Rachel Fell McDermott and Jeffery J. Kripal, eds., *Encountering Kālī: In the margins, at the Center, in the West* (Berkley and Los Angeles: University of Berkley Press, 2003). The latter book – an edited collection of works from numerous authors – focuses on the Hindu goddess Kālī and highlights the diverse ways she is framed and the myriad contexts in which she features.

related to; in each context analyzed in this work, the deity is tactically engaged so as to acquire preferred social conditions.

Navigating the twists, turns, highs, lows, calms, and tumults of life can be unpredictable, challenging, and all-encompassing. Therefore, mitigating uncertainty and ensuring desired outcomes is at the front of many minds. In this connection, Reader and Tanabe note an inclination towards attaining "this-worldly benefits" in Japanese religiosity that is relevant to the present discussion.[37] With respect to "this-worldly benefits," the authors provide a range of examples, including economic and material gains, good health, unhindered advancement in pursuits, general contentment, and, quite comprehensively, freedom from problems.[38] While seemingly exhaustive, "this-worldly benefits" are those pragmatically pursued to alleviate difficulties and improve conditions in this lifetime, contrasting with loftier concerns focused on afterlife matters.[39] Similarly, while Ardhanārīśvara is, for instance, linked to philosophic nondualism and yogic practices aiming to realize undifferentiated consciousness, my research showcases a deity predominantly embraced in the hopes of aiding more grounded matters. For example, Ardhanārīśvara is petitioned to guarantee pregnancies and marital bliss and publicly forwarded as a divine legitimizer of gender and sexual variance within initiatives meant to countervail ostracization. Thus, within the realm of terrestrial dynamics, people are no doubt concerned with who Ardhanārīśvara *is* (e.g., a deity associated with the majority religion of India) but appear to jointly (if not primarily) regard the figure in terms of what it may *do* for their lives.

Tradition, Innovation, and Mobilization

Themes of tradition, innovation, and their interplay are present within efforts to mobilize Ardhanārīśvara in service of securing desirable outcomes; towards these ends, Ardhanārīśvara can, in the same breath, be heralded as an established figure within Hindu history and framed in unprecedented ways. The coaction of tradition and innovation, recurrently present throughout this project, merits prefatory discussion. Below, I will provide one, beginning with a brief foray into *śāstrik-laukik* dynamics which will then be placed into conversation with the particulars of my research.

Parry notes that "a sharp distinction . . . between the *shastrik* (or scriptural) and the *laukik* (or popular)" is widely internalized amongst his Benares-based informants, "whether priests, ascetics, or ordinary householders."[40] While viewed as together informing belief and practice, the two categories are often framed as somewhat antipodal; the *śāstrik* is associated with Sanskrit texts (and the injunctions therein) viewed as eternally authoritative (e.g., the

[37] The term "this-worldly benefits" is found on Ian Reader and George Tanabe Jr., *Practically Religious: Worldly Benefits and the Common Religion of Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1998), 2.

[38] Reader and Tanabe, *Practically Religious*, 2.

[39] Reader and Tanabe, *Practically Religious*, 2.

[40] Jonathon Parry, "The Brahmanical tradition and the technology of the intellect," in *Reason and Morality*, ed. Joanna Overing (London: Tavistock Publications Ltd., 1985), 202.

dharmaśāstras) while the *laukik* is associated with "[ephemerality], a mere matter of local usage to be discarded if it offends against contemporary canons of good sense."[41] Insightfully, however, Parry suggests there is no consensus as to what belongs to each category and, in fact, identifies inconsistencies in attribution; he notes that "some practices which . . . have no backing at all in the ancient texts . . . are almost universally believed to be scriptural and are rated as *shastrik*, while others . . . which do indeed have a respectable textual pedigree are generally regarded as merely *laukik*."[42] Evidently, people claim as *śāstrik* those sensibilities and directives they wish to present as established, credible, respected, and authoritative, although, as Parry and Prasad independently observe, the actual contents of texts are seldom cited or scrutinized.[43] Yet that which folks *believe* and *assert* to be *śāstrik* has bearing. In this connection, Fuller suggests a tendency for "higher-status groups" to invoke the putatively scriptural in order to "[frame] their beliefs and practices as superior to those assumed to belong to lower-status groups."[44] However, while such invocations may be used to reinforce social hierarchies, my research indicates that similar ones are made to incite shifts in stratification.

Much of this dissertation examines initiatives focused on improving the lives of peoples marginalized on account of their gender identity and/or sexual orientation. Within these initiatives, Ardhanārīśvara is publicly presented as reflecting and validating those unaligned with heterosexual and cisgender frameworks. Positioning Ardhanārīśvara this way is calculated; the deity is thought to be capable of appealing (at least) to the Hindu majority of India for itself being associated with Hindu religiosity (e.g., narratives involving Ardhanārīśvara are found within the Sanskrit Purāṇic corpus).[45] Pointing to Ardhanārīśvara is quite like pointing to something considered *śāstrik* in that the deity is also viewed as an established, unquestionably valid part of tradition. In identifying themselves and their agendas with Ardhanārīśvara, the marginalized people in question – in addition to emboldening themselves – utilize the deity in attempts to sway public opinion towards recognizing their legitimacy. Ideally, Ardhanārīśvara is to function as a vehicle or bridge by which the downtrodden and their manners of living can shift into improved status; there is a desire to move away from "continual critical evaluation"

---

[41] Parry, "The Brahmanical tradition and the technology of the intellect," 202. The *dharmaśāstras* example taken from C.J. Fuller, *The Camphor Flame: Popular Hinduism and Society in India* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992), 27.

[42] Parry, "The Brahmanical tradition and the technology of the intellect," 202. Importantly, given "[this] lack of any general consensus about their constituent elements," Fuller problematizes the notion that "the scriptural and popular are two more or less stable and separate religious strata." See Fuller, *The Camphor Flame*, 27.

[43] See Parry, "The Brahmanical tradition and the technology of the intellect," 202-203, and see Leela Prasad, *Poetics of Conduct: Oral Narrative and Moral Being in a South Indian Town* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 145-146.

[44] Fuller, *The Camphor Flame*, 27.

[45] The Purāṇas constitute a body of texts that, among other things, contain narratives involving Hindu deities. For an introductory overview of the Purāṇas, see Gavin Flood, *An introduction to Hinduism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 109-113.

(similarly afforded the *laukik*) to "ideological immunity to sceptical scrutiny" (likewise granted the *śāstrik*).[46]

Intriguingly, some of the very people who cite Ardhanārīśvara as established within tradition thrust the deity into new frontiers and the acquisition of novel associations. For example, an installation of Ardhanārīśvara was constructed to celebrate the 2018 Indian Supreme Court decision to decriminalize consensual homosexual activity, and the figure has been increasingly linked with the "transgender" category burgeoning within India. Such examples dovetail well with the insights of Srinivas. In her work engaging religious innovation, she describes the "iterative, strategic, and creative improvisations" at play within an "experimental Hinduism" (i.e., the adaptation of Hindu practices in the face of a changing world).[47] Importantly, she frames related innovations as being guided by a "creative ethics" that can "[inspire] people to confront what it means to be Hindu, Indian, moral, and modern as categories of being that are permeable and negotiable."[48] The (re)purposing of Ardhanārīśvara examined within this project regularly reflects a similar "ethos and ethics of religious experimentation;" the Hindu-affiliated figure is no doubt transforming in the face of a changing world, and its exposure to innovation increasingly occurs alongside aims of transforming attitudes towards gender and sexual variance within Indian society (and beyond).[49]

The coactivation of tradition and innovation present within the mobilizations of Ardhanārīśvara indicated above may be likened to the work of Pennington and Allocco. In the introduction to their edited volume on ritual innovation, they point to the "malleability of ritual and the role it often plays as an agent in engineering social change or allowing those engaged in ritual activity to come to terms with changes they may be facing."[50] In this connection, they describe a type of "ritual instrumentality" in which "ritual serves as a means to an end [in achieving] a desired outcome on the basis of an intervention by a collective or individual actor in the shape of the ritual itself."[51] They connect such instrumentalization to "the strategic exploitation of the social capital of the ritual" (whose legitimation comes from connection to tradition) and assert its various possible outcomes, including: a change in the status of the actor(s), altered social relations, the wresting of power, the assertion of hierarchy, and/or the enfranchisement of a marginalized group.[52] I argue that the conceptualizations and applications

---

[46] Parry, "The Brahmanical tradition and the technology of the intellect," 203. Here, Parry explicitly links the quoted phrases with the italicized terms I placed in brackets).

[47] Srinivas, *The Cow in The Elevator,* 15.

[48] The large quote is from Srinivas, *The Cow in The Elevator*, 16; her discussion in this introductory chapter culminates in a discussion of "creative ethics" which she details on pages 30-31.

[49] The phrase "ethos and ethics of religious experimentation" is from Srinivas, *The Cow in The Elevator*, 30.

[50] Brian K. Pennington and Amy L. Allocco, Introduction to *Ritual Innovation: Strategic Interventions in South Asian Religion*, eds. Brian K. Pennington and Amy L. Allocco (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2018), 1.

[51] Pennington and Allocco, Introduction to *Ritual Innovation*, 8.

[52] The point concerning legitimation deriving from tradition is from Pennington and Allocco, Introduction to *Ritual Innovation*, 4; the remaining points in this sentence are drawn from page 8.

of Ardhanārīśvara introduced in this work often occur in analogous fashion; the figure, framed as having vindicating ties to tradition, has been innovatively and strategically embraced and advanced in the pursuit of upward social mobility by those aiming to rectify their own wrongful marginalization.

It is important to underscore, however, that not all benefits sought through Ardhanārīśvara relate to improving the lives of populations disenfranchised for their gender and/or sexual variance. As indicated earlier, the figure is also, for example, called upon by heterosexual individuals to grant marriages and pregnancies in the face of pressures to wed and bear children. Yet the reader will find that creative augmentations play off established thought in such instances, too. In these cases, Ardhanārīśvara is conceived of as reflecting the spousal and parental statuses of Śiva and Pārvatī – widely recognized connotations of the pair – and inventively connected to the human sphere through being deemed capable of intervening within related concerns regarding marital relationships and family life.

An overarching consideration I have with respect to each case analyzed in this dissertation concerns how Ardhanārīśvara features in both "textual 'great' traditions and lived 'little' ones."[53] Thus, what Narayanan calls the "diglossia" of Hinduism is in play.[54] Such consideration allowed Prasad to discern how lived notions of *śāstra* deviate from those found in prescriptive texts within Sringeri, Karnataka.[55] Similarly, I juxtapose how Ardhanārīśvara is found in living contexts with the deity as present in the written traditions of revered texts and scholarly literature. The result is a treatment of the figure that acknowledges previously unrecognized elements of ritual, custom, and practice.

Multimodality and Neutrality

All activity (e.g., ritual undertakings, spoken discourse, etc.) and relatively fixed writings addressing Ardhanārīśvara acknowledge its salient bifurcation in some way. Assuredly, all perceptions of the deity are informed largely (if not principally) by its form. Thus, the following will take imagery for a starting place as I work towards presenting some additional thoughts on how Ardhanārīśvara is conceptualized herein.

Iconography may be rendered "image-writing" for combining the Greek *eikon* (image) and *graphein* (writing) and therefore suggests the ability for a visual to encode and relay information.[56] In this connection, Goldberg asserts that depictions of Ardhanārīśvara codify sentiments present in prescriptions regarding its image construction and, therefore, androcentric values (in having, for example, the female half positioned on what she contends is

---

[53] Srinivas, *The Cow in The Elevator,* 31.

[54] Vasudha Narayanan, "Diglossic Hinduism: Liberation and Lentils," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 68, no. 4 (December 2000): 762.

[55] See Leela Prasad, "Text, Tradition, and Imagination: Evoking the Normative in Everyday Hindu Life," *Numen* 53, no. 1 (September 2006).

[56] Roelof van Straten, *An Introduction to Iconography*, trans. Patricia de Man (New York, Taylor & Francis, 1994), 3.

the subordinate left side of the figure).[57] However, while iconographic codifications have certainly steered understandings along the way, specific readings of the deity have not been ensured. Insightfully, Pinney states that images can serve as "an integral element of history in the making" (i.e., players within history themselves).[58] He suggests images are not representations that merely serve as a screen onto which meaning is projected; the experienced effects of an image constitute its meaning and power.[59] At several turns, my findings appear aligned with his insights; there are examples within this project indicating understandings of Ardhanārīśvara alternative and quite contrary to those supposedly codified in its form, ones inspired by its appearance all the same and reflecting the experiences, sensibilities, positionalities, and agendas of those engaging the figure.

Prasad, who also considers both prescription and practice, places "'shastric texts' . . . in the world of material and oral [traditions] animated by human agency."[60] In doing so, she illuminates how notions of the *śāstrik* contribute to "essentially an *imagined text*" underscoring ethical practices. Importantly, this "text" is a fluid one and framed as dynamically constituted through drawing upon and weaving together varied sources (e.g., a sacred book, an exemplar, a tradition, etc.). Conceptions of Ardhanārīśvara, too, may mingle together variegated wellsprings of inspiration in their crystallization; an individual, for example, may incorporate knowledge of its place within lore, familiarity with its imagery, and memories about its sites of worship. Aware of the many spheres in which Ardhanārīśvara factors, the diverse instrumentalizations of the deity that exist, and the complex forces at play in the formation of personal interpretation and meaning, I submit that the deity is best thought of as a multimodal nexus; Ardhanārīśvara contains multitudes, for the figure lies at the heart of varied activity.

In studies centering on Ardhanārīśvara, the deity is described as an androgyne or (less frequently) a hermaphrodite given the presence of male and female halves in its form.[61] One can see why; "androgyne" is "a word that literally unites the Greek [words] for male and female," and "hermaphrodite" derives from Hermaphroditus, the two-sexed child of Hermes and Aphrodite, and has been used to categorize organisms "that [produce] functional male gametes *and* female gametes (sex cells) during [their] lifetime."[62] Yet I question, in some

---

[57] For information on the codification of prescriptions, see Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman*, 18-20 and 25. On page 24, Ardhanārīśvara is described as encoding male primacy.

[58] Christopher Pinney, *'Photos of the Gods:' The Printed Image and Political Struggle in India* (London: Reaktion Books, 2004), 8.

[59] Pinney, *'Photos of the Gods*,*'* 8.

[60] Prasad, *Poetics of Conduct*, 118.

[61] For Ardhanārīśvara described as an androgyne, see, for example, Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman*, 2; Prem Saran, *Yoga, Bhoga, and Ardhanariswara*: *Individuality, Wellbeing and Gender in Tantra* (London: Routledge, 2008), 194; and Yadav, *Ardhanārīśvara in Art and Literature*, 186. For Ardhanārīśvara described as a hermaphrodite, see page 11 of the latter text.

[62] This definition of androgyne is taken from Catherine R. Stimpson and Gilbert Herdt, Introduction to *Critical Terms for the Study of Gender*, eds. Catherine R. Stimpson and Gilbert Herdt (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 6. Information on Hermaphroditus taken from John C. Avise, *Hermaphroditism: A Primer on the*

senses, the appropriateness of applying these descriptors to Ardhanārīśvara. It suffices to say that "hermaphrodite," the lesser-used term for the deity, has, since being integrated into the English language, primarily served to taxonomize biological organisms – not divine beings – and been contested, in part, for carrying aberrational connotations.[63] "Androgynous" describes Ardhanārīśvara with relative suitability for signalling the joint presence of even abstract masculine and feminine characteristics, but the word has implications of "gender-blending" in popular parlance that do not necessarily befit the deity.[64] This "gender-blending" is such that androgyny would be grey if the masculine were black and the feminine were white. Contrastingly, the Ardhanārīśvara form has male and female features that remain perceptibly partitioned. Accordingly, while I include terms such as "androgynous" when quoting and engaging the work of others, I personally tend towards using adjectives like "composite" when suggesting that both Śiva and Śakti comprise Ardhanārīśvara.

The presence of male and female halves does not preclude thoughts of their inequivalence. Doniger, for example, states that Ardhanārīśvara should only be viewed as a form of the otherwise male Śiva and, in fact, subcategorizes the deity as a "male androgyne" while noting that "Ardhanārīśvara" operates as a masculine noun in Sanskrit.[65] Despite this grammatical insight, and although identification of Ardhanārīśvara as Śiva rather than as the Goddess (or both equally) does occur widely, I have chosen to use gender-neutral pronouns in referring to the deity. Though reluctant to frame Ardhanārīśvara as androgynous, I nevertheless acknowledge the presence of male and female features within its form as important. Without a doubt, the rich and varied readings of the deity discussed in this dissertation owe to the explicit and discernible presence of both masculine and feminine characteristics. My use of gender-neutral language for Ardhanārīśvara is to recognize this fact and to acknowledge the validity of views that deviate from those in the vein of Doniger; there are some people, for example, who find no issue with regarding Ardhanārīśvara primarily (or equally) as Devī.

The Unfolding of Ardhanārīśvara

Before concluding the chapter with an overall outline of this dissertation, I will take an opportunity to discuss its title. In the process of titling this work, I took inspiration from two books, including *The Ubiquitous Śiva* by John Nemec; the adjective he included in this title

---

Biology, Ecology, and Evolution of Dual Sexuality (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), xii; the definition of hermaphrodite taken from page 1.

[63] For a thorough history of the term and its applications, see Alice Domurat Dreger, *Hermaphrodites and the Medical Invention of Sex* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1996). For mention of "hermaphrodite" carrying negative social connotations, see Eric Vilain, John C. Achermann, Erica A. Eugster, Vincent R. Harley, Yves Morel, Jean D. Wilson, and Olaf Hiort, "We used to call them hermaphrodites," *Genetics in Medicine* 9, no. 2 (February 2007): 66.

[64] Such a link between androgyny and "gender-blending" is made on Sonia J. Ellis, "Gender," in *Intersectionality, Sexuality, and Psychological Therapies: Working with Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Diversity*, eds. Roshan das Nair and Catherine Butler (Oxford: BPS Blackwell, 2012), 49.

[65] Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 317.

spurred me to contemplate which word(s) I might link with Ardhanārīśvara to suitably encapsulate the present project.[66] I deemed "unfolding" particularly apt. I also recalled *After God* by Mark C. Taylor, a title readily suggesting multiple meanings; it can, for example, be read as implying the pursuit of God and/or suggesting a time following God.[67] With the aim of ensuring such polysemy, I opted to also introduce a preposition, and *The Unfolding of Ardhanārīśvara* was decided upon.

I intend for this title to relay differing and distinct connotations. First, "unfolding" can indicate something being revealed or made known; for example, unfolding scenes of the countryside may occur and be apprehended as obfuscating fog dissipates. Thanks to the aforementioned preposition, this revelatory unfolding can be taken as possessed by, owing to, and/or characterizing Ardhanārīśvara. Such understandings of the title are fitting, given that this dissertation does not view Ardhanārīśvara simply as an invention and repository of unidirectional human projections. Instead, the Ardhanārīśvara form is also viewed as evoking and inspiriting its own inventive framings and applications; its latent creative potential becomes realized via those engaging the figure.

Second, "unfolding" can be read as affecting the titular Ardhanārīśvara much like "the unfolding of a map" can indicate actions upon an item. This sense of the title is appropriate and significant for signalling the influence of other actors. Indeed, my research largely spotlights people who have broadened the ambit of Ardhanārīśvara through their innovative understandings and operationalizations of the deity. Of course, through documenting and analyzing these developments (and other unaccounted-for phenomena relating to the figure), I also expand the place of Ardhanārīśvara, for example, within the realm of scholarship. Yet my dissertation title relates to processes at play within the production and presentation of this project in other important ways.

The Unfolding of Ardhanārīśvara can suggest an elucidation of the deity through the progressive disclosure of information just as the unfolding plot of a novel becomes known to readers through details gradually provided by its author. This take on the title is also suitable, for I do illuminate Ardhanārīśvara by such means through the course of this project. However, some caveats should be offered in this connection. As mentioned earlier, I differentiate my work from those aspiring for mastery and closure and echo Srinivas in doing so. Interestingly, in *The Cow in the Elevator,* she expands on this notion, stating: "rather than presuming endings and completeness, this text invites the unfurling of wonder and creativity, an opening of its joints."[68] In addition to eschewing the conclusiveness of her scholarship, Srinivas describes entertaining and pushing the cusps of her own discovery; "I write what I know, while also, more importantly, I attempt to *write into* what I do not know yet," she avows. These two quotes of

[66] See John Nemec, *The Ubiquitous Śiva: Somānanda's Śivadṛṣṭi and His Tantric Interlocutors* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

[67] See Mark C. Taylor, *After God* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2007).

[68] Srinivas, *The Cow in the Elevator*, 31.

hers go hand in hand. After all, there can be no finality and something always discoverable in an ever-changing world, points relevant to some final thoughts on my title.

"Unfolding" can also suggest something developing or evolving. To wit, news stations reporting on unfolding events detail actively transpiring (i.e., changing) circumstances. This dissertation is very much concerned with transforming understandings, utilizations, and depictions of Ardhanārīśvara. To be sure, such transformations have taken place in both the distant past and contemporarily; some developments I even encountered directly during fieldwork, while others I was made aware of afterwards. Accordingly, rather than framed as ultimately conclusive, the contents of this work are presented with the realistic expectation that the story of Ardhanārīśvara will continue to shift and surprise. Thus, *The Unfolding of Ardhanārīśvara* suggests that the history of Ardhanārīśvara is an ongoing one.

Dissertation Outline

In addition to this introductory chapter and a conclusion, this dissertation contains five main chapters. Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 set up those that follow, which are each dedicated to Ardhanārīśvara as found within distinct contexts (and titled after unique notions of colour found therein). Below, I will summarize the contents of all five principal chapters and delineate the logic behind their organization. As indicated, I demonstrate across them that tradition and invention interplay and interweave as Ardhanārīśvara is mobilized in service of securing varying worldly ends.

Chapter 2 offers an extensive exposition of Ardhanārīśvara as found in present scholarship. The primary purposes are threefold. First, the information provided adequately acquaints the reader with the figure on whom this project centers. Second, this survey of scholarship serves to substantiate my claims of gaps and shortcomings within these works. Lastly, it enables sound juxtaposition between my research findings and existent scholarly accounts of Ardhanārīśvara; this allows me to determine which scholarly conceptualizations of Ardhanārīśvara are present and/or absent within my field encounters in order to make claims about unrecognized and/or unreported framings of the figure.

Much of this dissertation examines Ardhanārīśvara in relation to those marginalized for their gender identity and/or sexual orientation. Associated peoples are varied and multifaceted, situated within an intricate web of designations, and tied to sensitive issues and complex challenges that have local and global dimensions. Chapter 3 introduces these populations and, in Foucauldian fashion, addresses sociopolitical and legal developments in their history so as to shed light on present-day predicaments. This permits the navigation of nuanced nomenclature and contextualizes the issues Ardhanārīśvara is positioned to confront within the Durgā Pūjā and Kinnar Akhāḍā affairs addressed in the chapters that follow.

Ardhanārīśvara has been integrated into the annual Durgā Pūjā festivals of Kolkata for roughly the past decade by gender and sexuality rights activists. Chapter 4 primarily examines related phenomena occurring over eight years (from 2015-2022 inclusively). In this connection,

I conducted interviews with individuals principally responsible for incorporating Ardhanārīśvara and observed the festivities in 2022 alongside a transgender community that centered the deity within their own celebrations for, in part, its recognizably established place within Hindu religiosity. In addition to interviews and fieldwork, I draw upon media coverage and relevant scholarship in showing that Ardhanārīśvara has operated inventively within the contexts in question: as a marker calling for (and celebrating) the inclusion of those marginalized for their sexual orientation and/or gender identity; as an activistic emblem counteracting regimes deemed oppressive to these demographics; as a parental figure for related peoples whose families have abandoned them; and as a rallying point for the reconsideration of gender norms, roles, and identities. Importantly, in this chapter and the next, through engaging ground realities and interacting with actual voices, my research moves away from those theoretical, hypothetical, and passing mentions of Ardhanārīśvara as relevant to peoples unaligned with heterosexual and/or cisgender categories.

In Chapter 5, I examine Ardhanārīśvara as tutelary deity of the Kinnar Akhāḍā, a religious order whose membership primarily consists of individuals with gender identities that do not fit neatly into static male-female frameworks. In examining the place of Ardhanārīśvara within this order, I conducted interviews with its founder (and head), visited a Delhi-based Ardhanārīśvara temple established by another high-ranking member, and again assessed relevant media reports and academic works. Accordingly, I determine that Ardhanārīśvara is thought to mirror and validate gender and/or sexual variance while reflecting the Kinnar Akhāḍā aim of combatting patriarchy. In this chapter, I also contemplate Ardhanārīśvara as emblematic of ascetic and erotic elements present in the Kinnar Akhāḍā and situate the deity within communal tensions associated with the order. Although my findings indicate that the Kinnar Akhāḍā orients itself by principles differing from those at play within the agendas investigated in the previous chapter, I ascertain that Ardhanārīśvara is nevertheless similarly forwarded as a recognizable (and respectable) Hindu deity and employed in the pursuit of upward social mobility by those attempting to redress their marginalization.

Tiruchengode, Tamil Nadu, is home to the largest temple complex in India housing Ardhanārīśvara as its presiding deity. Chapter 6 primarily focuses on this site and its surrounding environment, though it significantly considers Ardhanārīśvara within linked localities (predominantly Tiruvannamalai) as well. Although also drawing upon 2014 and 2018 visits to Tamil Nadu, findings from my 2022 fieldwork are at the fore of this chapter; pertinent popular and scholarly sources are again utilized, too. With respect to Tiruchengode, I analyze local conceptions and uses of Ardhanārīśvara in relation to sacred narratives, iconographic expressions, and rituality. As a result, I discern that Ardhanārīśvara is popularly understood as an image of husband and wife and/or mother and father in perfection; notably, the deity is correspondingly engaged pragmatically by devotees who believe Ardhanārīśvara is efficacious in aiding human concerns regarding heterosexual marriages and concomitant family life. In contrast to the contexts examined in the two preceding chapters, associations between Ardhanārīśvara and those whose gender identities oppose fixed binaries are not predominant

in Tiruchengode; the prevailing view is that Ardhanārīśvara relates to male-female couples and associated familial domains. Yet here, too, I find Ardhanārīśvara considered capable of facilitating better social conditions through, for example, securing marriages and children for individuals who innovatively petition the composite figure.

Chapter 2
Examining Ardhanārīśvara in Scholarship

Introduction

The Hindu traditions are replete with composite deities. In his book dedicated to these forms, Bhattacharyya identifies a host of examples, including Harihara (a fusion of the gods Śiva and Viṣṇu), Vāsudevakamalajā (an amalgam of Viṣṇu and the goddess Lakṣmī), and Dattātreya (whose iconography reflects the treble Trimūrti comprised of Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva).[1] Yet of all the composite figures, Ardhanārīśvara is perhaps most renowned; representations of the deity feature widely in varied contexts across South Asia, and the figure has garnered arguably greater academic attention than its counterparts.[2] This chapter will delineate and examine how Ardhanārīśvara has been presented in the scholarship indicated. Accordingly, the reader will become familiar with the titular deity of this dissertation and acquainted with what I regard as deficiencies in the scholarly treatment of Ardhanārīśvara.

While my evaluations are peppered throughout, the following discussion will progress through themes identified by scholars with respect to Ardhanārīśvara – from its relationship to conceptual antecedents to its purported connections with human gender and sexual variance – towards a more pointed analysis regarding the place of the figure in published works. As a result, my claim in the preceding chapter that there are issues involving the omission of content concerning Ardhanārīśvara in living contexts will be elaborated and substantiated. Thus, much of the groundwork allowing for meaningful engagement with my primary research contexts (i.e., Kolkata Durgā Pūjā festivals, Kinnar Akhāḍā affairs, and the Ardhanārīśvara temple of Tiruchengode) will also be in place.

Conceptual Antecedents

Analyses of Ardhanārīśvara often include situating the figure against conceptual antecedents; it is argued that the bifurcated/bipolar (i.e., sexed and/or gendered) symbolism of Ardhanārīśvara finds its basis in earlier thought. For example, Yadav explains that the Vedic god Rudra is etymologically associated with *rodasī,* a concept indicating Heaven and Earth in union.[3] In the *Ṛg Veda*, Dyauṣ (Heaven/Sky) and Pṛthivī (Earth) are presented as being male and female, respectively.[4] Their pairing as Dyāvā-Pṛthivī is recognized by Doniger, Pande, and Goldberg as

---

[1] For mention of these (and other deities), see Dipak Chandra Bhattacharyya, *Iconology of Composite Images* (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1980). Trimūrti refers to Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva configured as a triad in which each is associated with a cosmic principle (creation, preservation, and destruction, respectively). See Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger, *Everyday Hinduism* (United Kingdom: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), 20.

[2] To get a sense of the pervasiveness of Ardhanārīśvara imagery within India, see Neeta Yadav, *Ardhanārīśvara in Art and Literature* (New Delhi: D.K. Printworld Ltd., 2001), 191-195; here she provided an inventory of examples within a section called "Find Spots of Ardhanārīśvara in India."

[3] Yadav, *Ardhanārīśvara in Art and Literature*, 148. The Vedas contain the oldest stratums of Hindu Sanskrit scriptures.

[4] Yadav, *Ardhanārīśvara in Art and Literature*, 113.

the "earliest of all Indian androgynes."[5] The Dyāvā-Pṛthivī unit operates as progenitor to creation; this "sky-earth deity . . . generates the universe through an act of splitting into two distinct halves."[6] The Vedas present such male-female pairings as emblematic of other (perhaps all) paired opposites.[7] Likewise, Ardhanārīśvara is considered a symbol of proliferation (i.e., the deity, too, undergoes procreative fission in certain narratives) and as representative of paired opposites.[8] Yadav also highlights the Rudra-*rodasī* connection in another important respect; she points out that "[t]he name Śiva is not found in the Vedas. The Śaivas, however, maintain that in Vedic times he was known as Rudra and thus manage to obtain the sanction of the Vedas for the worship of Śiva."[9] Thus, she argues that "[the] conception of Vedic Rodasi becomes Ardhanārīśvara in Purāṇic formulation."[10] Kramrisch, who links Rudra and the Vedic god Agni, connects Ardhanārīśvara with the latter, too; just as Ardhanārīśvara is "the Lord whose half is woman," the antecedent Agni "had for his highest symbol 'the bull who is also a cow.'"[11]

The Vedas also posit male and female principles as initially united within the Hiraṇyagarbha, the "golden womb/egg/germ."[12] The *Ṛg Veda* describes this golden womb as the primordial scene; it is a singular principle preceding the presence of duality. The Hiraṇyagarbha eventually splits into Heaven and Earth, male and female.[13] Ardhanārīśvara is also understood to represent the simultaneous and paradoxical encompassment of all opposites and, accordingly, the unknowable, undifferentiated chaos that precedes creation. As such, Ardhanārīśvara has been linked to the Vedic Hiraṇyagarbha. Kramrisch asserts that Hiraṇyagarbha is an epithet of Prajāpati (a multiform of Brahmā).[14] This is relevant given that "Prajāpati functions like Dyāvā-Prthivī, as both mother and father" and "desires to create

---

[5] See Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 310; Alka Pande, *Ardhanarishvara the Androgyne: Probing the Gender Within* (New Delhi: Rupa & Co., 2004), 27; and Ellen Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman: Ardhanārīśvara in Indian and Feminist Perspective* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2002), 135.

[6] Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman*, 52.

[7] See Yadav, *Ardhanārīśvara in Art and Literature*, 114. Yadav includes, for example, Prayati-Svadha (energy-matter), Katamardha-Viśvardha (unknown half-world half), and Parārdha-Avarārdha (upper half-lower half), as she demonstrates the "many other pairs of the male and the female which go together in the scheme of cosmogonic procreation."

[8] For example, Flood suggests the Ardhanārīśvara form is indicative of the notion that Śiva "contains all opposites within him." See Gavin Flood, *An introduction to Hinduism* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 151.

[9] Yadav, *Ardhanārīśvara in Art and Literature*, 6. A Śaiva is one who holds Śiva as the supreme deity.

[10] Yadav, *Ardhanārīśvara in Art and Literature*, 113-114. The Purāṇaic texts emerge much later than the Vedic corpus.

[11] See Stella Kramrisch, *The Presence of Śiva* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1981), 200-201.

[12] Kramrisch refers to the *hiraṇyagarbha* both as "golden germ" and "golden egg." For instance, see Kramrisch, *The Presence of Śiva*, 231. Alternatively, it is referred to as "golden womb." See Doniger O'Flaherty, *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts*, 371.

[13] Mircea Eliade, *The Two and the One* (London: Harvill Press, 1965), 115.

[14] Kramrisch, *The Presence of Śiva*, 473.

through a primordial dismemberment or splitting."[15] Goldberg suggests that "[the] myth of the androgynous Śiva (i.e., Ardhanārīśvara) is a variant of this cycle."[16]

The primordial wholeness associated with the Hiraṇyagarbha is similarly attributed to the cosmic person, Puruṣa, whose dismemberment yields the universe as per the "Puruṣasūkta hymn" of the *Ṛg Veda*.[17] Prior to its fission, Puruṣa is understood as pregnant with the potential of all manifestation(s) (including males and females) and therefore "gestures to an androgynous principle."[18] With respect to the conceptual antecedents outlined in this section, Goldberg determines that "the seeds of Śiva's androgynous motif are strategically placed throughout the Vedic literature," preparing, in the words of Srinivasan (which Goldberg quotes), "an overall understanding of the advent of the *śaiva* Ardhanārīśvara concept and form."[19]

Ardhanārīśvara Iconography

A considerable amount of academic literature catalogues the iconography of Ardhanārīśvara. For example, Ellen Goldberg dedicates a chapter of her book, *The Lord Who is Half Woman*, to the diagnostic features of Ardhanārīśvara, including an examination of 17 specific images in order to demonstrate "the various ways . . . Ardhanārīśvara has been portrayed in Indian art over the centuries."[20] These range from the earliest images ascribed to the Kuṣāṇa period (c. 30-375 CE) to an example of contemporary poster art. Neeta Yadav, in *Ardhanārīśvara in Art and Literature*, also examines the iconography of Ardhanārīśvara and includes 70 different, predominantly sculptural, images of Ardhanārīśvara located across India.[21] In *Ardhanarishvara the Androgyne*, Alka Pande, too, provides a chapter detailing various representations of Ardhanārīśvara across time and space in South Asia.[22] Some scholars are narrower in their regional and/or historical scope. For instance, Adiceam catalogues 32 unique images of Ardhanārīśvara from South India in "Les images de Śiva dans l'Inde du Sud, VI. Ardhanārīśvara."[23] Additionally, in her article, "The Ardhanārīśvaramūrti in Early Medieval Indian Temple Art," Neha Singh describes a few iconographic instances of Ardhanārīśvara, namely from the Bṛhadīśvara temple of Thanjavur, the Ravulpadi Cave of Aihole, and the Badami and Elephanta Caves.[24] Furthermore, in "Ardhanārīśvara: Samples of Cōḻa

---

[15] Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman*, 118.
[16] Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman*, 118.
[17] Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman*, 52.
[18] Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman*, 52.
[19] Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman*, 52. Doris Meth Srinivasan is a German Indologist.
[20] Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman*, 26.
[21] See Yadav, *Ardhanārīśvara in Art and* Literature; these images may be found in the "Ardhanārīśvara in Art" chapter as well as the appendix.
[22] See Pande, *Ardhanarishvara the Androgyne,* 97-119.
[23] See Marguerite, E. Adiceam, "Les images de Śiva dans l'Inde du Sud, VI. Ardhanārīśvara," *Arts Asiatique* 17 (1968).
[24] Neha Singh, "The Ardhanārīśvaramūrti in Early Medieval Indian Temple Art," *Proceedings from the Indian History of Congress* 75, Platinum Jubilee (2014).

Masterpieces," Kandasamy examines images found in the Cōḻa temples at Karanthai, Thiruvaiyaru, Thiruvedhikudi, and Kandiyur.[25] Finally, Kramrisch, in *The Presence of Śiva*, offers an appendix on the Elephanta Cave temple of Śiva and provides an analysis of the giant Ardhanārīśvara image found therein.[26]

Most examples provided in these works are of a normative Ardhanārīśvara variety; the right half is male and represented by the god Śiva, and the left half is female, identified as Śakti or Devī (i.e., the divine feminine principle), and represented by the characteristic features of the goddess Pārvatī, popular consort of Śiva. Among such cases, the authors highlight differences in medium, style, and emblematic features. In addition to examining material instances of Ardhanārīśvara images, a number of these scholars have acknowledged the "formulaic descriptions of Ardhanārīśvara found in Indian iconographical works" when discussing its iconographic characteristics.[27] Goldberg, for example, examines formulae for Ardhanārīśvara image construction written within the *śilpaśāstras*, Purāṇas, and Āgamas.[28] Drawing primarily from Goldberg and Yadav (who each thoroughly detail Ardhanārīśvara imagery), I will present an overview of normative Ardhanārīśvara iconography in what follows.

As may be expected, the male half of Ardhanārīśvara is described as including features in line with general Śiva iconography. As such, the male half of the head is often adorned with a *jaṭāmakuṭa*, a pile of matted hair associated with asceticism, and may be ornamented with *nāgas* (snakes), a crescent moon, jewels, and/or the goddess Gaṅgā (often streaming outwards in riverine form).[29] Disparate earring styles are often one of the most readily identifiable markers of male and female presences, particularly on Ardhanārīśvara busts.[30] In this connection, Goldberg identifies three earring styles worn by the male half: the *nakra-kuṇḍala* (*makara*-shaped earring), *sarpa-kuṇḍala* (serpent-shaped earring), or an ordinary *kuṇḍala*.[31] The male half of the face may include a smaller eye than its female counterpart, half a moustache, as well as half a *trinetra* (third eye) and/or Śaiva *tilaka* on the forehead.[32] The male

[25] P. Kandasamy, "Ardhanārīśvara: Samples of Cōḻa Masterpieces," *East and West* 44, no. 2/4 (December 1994): 491.

[26] Kramrisch, *The Presence of Śiva*, 448-453.

[27] Quote from Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half* Woman, 20. It is worth noting that scholars assert that Ardhanārīśvara images predate its formulaic descriptions in text. For example, see Geoff Ashton, "Divine Androgyny and the Play of Self-Recognition: Revisiting Some Issues in Gender Theory through an Unorthodox Interpretation of Ardhanārīśvara," in *The Bloomsbury Research Handbook of Indian Philosophy and Gender*, ed. Veena R. Howard (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 191.

[28] See Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman*, 20-22.

[29] Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman*, 12.

[30] Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman*, 12. Other forms of Śiva, such as Naṭarāja (Śiva as cosmic dancer), may incorporate Ardhanārīśvara through inclusion of disparate earring styles.

[31] Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman*, 12. Goldberg simply refers to *nakra-kuṇḍala* as a "common" type, but I understand it to be another name for *makara-kuṇḍala*, named so for its resemblance to the mythical, crocodile-like *makara*. Goldberg does not further specify *sarpa-kuṇḍala*, but I understand *sarpa* to suggest a snake-like appearance.

[32] Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman*, 12-13. *Tilaka* refers to a bodily marking (though usually referencing one on the forehead) that signals sectarian affiliation.

portion regularly features a flatter chest, broader right shoulder, a wider waist, larger thigh, and may be clothed with traditional male garments, such as the *dhoti*, and/or a tiger skin worn from the waist to the knees.[33] Some texts suggest that the right half be coloured differently than the left (e.g., in either red, gold, or coral) or covered with ashes.[34] There are also North Indian images that depict the male side as *ūrdhvareta* (ithyphallic).[35] Ardhanārīśvara figures most commonly bear two, three, or four arms. The limbs are allocated to the male and female halves equally in cases of two and four arms; when there are three arms, the extra arm generally goes to the male half.[36] Often the foregrounded hand is held in a *mudrā* (a gesture or pose that may involve the whole body but generally incorporating only the hands and fingers).[37] According to Goldberg, *mudrās* are indicative of the state of consciousness, character, or emotion of a deity.[38] As such, the anterior male hand of Ardhanārīśvara primarily takes either the *abhaya mudrā* (gesture of reassurance or fearlessness), *varada mudrā* (gesturing the offering of boons), or *cinmudrā* (gesture of teaching).[39] A backgrounded arm usually holds (or is described as holding) a weapon or object associated with Śiva, including the *triśūla* (trident), *paraśu* (axe), *khaḍga* (sword), *pāśa* (a noose or lasso), *vajra* (thunderbolt), *kapāla* (skull), *aṅkuśa* (an elephant goad, sometimes in the form of a snake), or *ṭaṅka* (stonemason chisel).[40] Finally, the male half of Ardhanārīśvara may be shown accompanied by attendant devotees and/or with the bull *vāhana* (vehicle mount) of Śiva.[41]

Again, the manifestation of Śakti/Devī generally taken to represent the female portion of Ardhanārīśvara is Pārvatī.[42] On this half, the hair is often worn in a *karaṇḍa makuṭa* (beehive-styled crest) and adorned with jewels and other ornamentation.[43] A key (and sometimes only) female marker is the presence of one of several female *kuṇḍala* (earring) styles.[44] The other most common feature, particularly in sculptural instances, is a full and rounded breast. The forehead may have half a *tilaka* or *bindu* (dot) and the female eye may be larger and outlined

---

[33] Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman*, 12-13.

[34] Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman*, 13.

[35] Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman*, 13.

[36] Yadav, *Ardhanārīśvara in Art and Literature*, 20. There are variations containing far more arms. Pande, for example, cites an instance of 20 arms. In cases where arms outnumber four and they total to an odd number, an additional arm will generally be found on the male half. For example, Pande describes a nine-armed form with five on the male side and 4 on the female half. See Pande, *Ardhanarishvara the Androgyne*, 98-99.

[37] Fredrick Bunce, *A Dictionary of Buddhist and Hindu Iconography: Objectives, Devices, Concepts, Rites, and Related Items* (New Delhi: D.K. Printworld, 1997), 190.

[38] Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman*, 15.

[39] Yadav, *Ardhanārīśvara in Art and Literature*, 21.

[40] Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman*, 14.

[41] For example, see Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman*, 36-37.

[42] Goldberg writes that in some textual sources, such as *Viṣṇudharmottara* (an encyclopedic text sometimes considered an appendix to the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*), Pārvatī may be referenced by epithets, such as Umā, Sivā, or Gaurī. See Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman*, 14.

[43] Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman*, 14.

[44] See Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman*, 14. The styles listed are: *vāḷīka, patra-kuṇḍala,* and *śankha patra kuṇḍala*.

with collyrium.[45] The hip is more prominent, waist smaller, and the ornamentation is regularly more extravagant; often there are bracelets, armbands, and necklaces of intricate design.[46] In printed and painted representations, it is common to find the female half draped in garments, with *mehndi* designs colouring the hand and/or foot.[47] Some texts suggest that the female half should be coloured either saffron or parrot-green.[48] As stated, in the majority of three-armed Ardhanārīśvara depictions, one is present on the female side; in cases of four, there will be two. A foregrounded hand is usually held in a *mudrā*, either the *kaṭaka mudrā* (suggesting openness or receptivity), *kaṭisamsthita mudrā* (hand held by side of body and resting on leg or thigh), or the *kaṭyavalambita* (gesture of ease).[49] The backgrounded arm may hold an object associated with Pārvatī, such as a *nīlotpala* (flower), *vīṇā* (stringed instrument), *ghantā* (bell), *kamaṇḍalu* (water pot), or *darpaṇa* (mirror).[50] Finally, a lion or tiger *vāhana* may be present on the female side.[51]

Some of the iconographic features are shared by both halves of Ardhanārīśvara, lending a sense of continuity or unity to the figure. These may include a centered navel, ornaments across the chest, *hāra* (necklace), a shared *prabhāmaṇḍala* (halo), *mekhula* (belt), and/or *yajñopavīta* (sacred thread worn by the "twice-born").[52] The *trinetra*, *bindu*, and/or *tilaka* may also be presented in full across the forehead.[53] The figure itself usually takes one of three postures. Often Ardhanārīśvara will be depicted in *tribhaṅga* pose (curved in three places), bent at the head, waist, and knee.[54] Ardhanārīśvara is otherwise commonly found in the *sthānamudrā* posture. In such cases, the figure stands straight, and both sides of the body appear weighted proportionately equal.[55] There are instances, albeit fewer than the aforementioned, where Ardhanārīśvara is found seated in *padmāsana* (lotus position).[56]

---

[45] Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman*, 14.

[46] Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman*, 14.

[47] Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman*, 14. Here Goldberg describes henna as colouring the foot and/or hand of the female half. In this case, henna refers to the reddish henna dye made from leaves of the henna bush; *mehndi* refers to the temporary skin decorations created with this henna dye.

[48] Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman*, 14.

[49] For mention of *kaṭaka mudrā*, see Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman*, 14; *kaṭisamsthita mudrā* is noted on page 15.

[50] Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman*, 14.

[51] For example, see Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman*, 50.

[52] Sometimes the sacred thread (*yajñopavīta*) of the *dvijāti* (twice-born) may be in the form of a serpent (*nāga yajñopavīta*). However, this sacred threat is not always uniform across the halves of Ardhanārīśvara; there are images whereon the *yajñopavīta* is in *nāga* form on the Śiva side but changes at the central axis into the regular thread and remains as such on the Pārvatī half. *Dvijāti* refers to those who have undergone a rite of passage, initiating a "second birth;" traditionally, this possibility has been reserved for male members of Brahmin, Kṣatriyaḥ, and Vaiśya social classes. For more details, see Hillary Rodrigues, *Introducing Hinduism* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 78-80.

[53] The shared features in this section are taken from Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman*, 13.

[54] Yadav, *Ardhanārīśvara in Art and Literature*, 22.

[55] Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman*, 13.

[56] Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman*, 13.

Atypical Ardhanārī(śvara) Forms

Atypical Ardhanārīśvara forms are also noted. For example, Rao documents a three-headed and eight-armed Ardhanārīśvara while Pande and Sivaramamurti highlight instances where Ardhanārīśvara and Naṭarāja (Śiva as cosmic dancer) iconographies are blended.[57] In the latter cases, the figure remains bifurcated with male and female halves, but the matted locks of the male side appear as though waving due to the vigorous *tāṇḍava nāṭya* and/or there is a foot raised in dance.[58] Pande also recognizes a form that engrafts terrifying imagery onto the Ardhanārīśvara form; half a garland of skulls adorns the female half while half a garland of severed heads ornaments the male side, reminiscent of Kālī and Bhairava (terrifying forms of Śakti and Śiva, respectively).[59] However, of all exceptional varieties, those transposing the normative bifurcation of Ardhanārīśvara have garnered unique interest.

In fact, each of the scholars mentioned in the preceding section, save for Kramrisch and Sivaramamurti, identify sculptural instances in which the typical male and female positioning is reversed. A numismatic example is also noted by Lahiri in "Iconography of Ardhanārīśvara on a Tripurā Coin."[60] Importantly, scholarship unanimously considers the right half of Ardhanārīśvara to signify superiority and the left half to indicate inferiority. As a result, the (re)positioning of the male and female halves has received significant attention. For example, this inverted variety is the focus of R.K.K. Rajarajan in "Dance of Ardhanārī as Pattinī-Kaṉṉaki" and of Raju Kalidos in his "Ardhanari in Early South Indian Cult and Art" and "The Twain-Face of Ardhanārī" articles.[61] Pande suggests that perhaps "sectarian predilection has been the motivating force in the determination of the left-right reversal in the male-female features;" she surmises that sects emphasizing the Goddess may have allocated the right side to Devī but concedes this is uncertain.[62] Other scholars, namely Kalidos and Kandasamy (whose article Kalidos helped revise), argue that these inverted forms indicate that "a folk Goddess turned into a manifestation of Śiva."[63] Specifically, they assert that right-female, left-male

---

[57] See Gopinatha Rao, *Elements of Hindu Iconography Vol. 2, Part 1* (Madras: Law Printing House, 1916), 331; Pande, *Ardhanarishvara the Androgyne*, 101; C. Sivaramamurti, *Nataraja in Art, Thought, and Literature* (Delhi: National Museum, 1974), 294.

[58] *Tāṇḍava nāṭya* refers to the comic dance of Śiva by which the cyclicality of existence is perpetuated.

[59] Pande, *Ardhanarishvara the Androgyne*, 110-111.

[60] A.N. Lahiri, "Iconography of Ardhanārīśvara on a Tripurā Coin," in *The Śakti Cult and Tārā*, ed., D.C. Sircar (Calcultta: Calcutta University, 1960), 101-103. However, it must be said that the description Lahiri provides of the figure on the coin in question is rather unclear. On the one hand, Lahiri states that the *vāhana* on the right side of the figure is a lion and that this side of Ardhanārīśvara has five hands (whereas the Śiva-half is two-armed and is accompanied by his bull *vahana*). He goes on to say that this indicates the *daśabhujā* (ten-armed) form of Durgā. This would suggest that that the right half of Ardhanārīśvara is occupied by the feminine principle and perhaps affording it primacy (due to both its right-sided placement and greater number of arms). Yet later, Lahiri describes the lion and five-armed half as situated on the left.

[61] R.K.K. Rajarajan, "Dance of Ardhanārī as Pattinī-Kaṉṉaki with special reference to the Cillapatikāram," *Berliner Indologische Studien*, 13/14 (2000); Raju Kalidos, "Ardhanari in South Indian Cult and Art," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 52 (1991); Raju Kalidos, "The Twain-Face of Ardhanārī," *Acta Orientalia* 53-54 (1992).

[62] Pande, *Ardhanarishvara the Androgyne*, 110.

[63] This quote from Kandasamy, "Ardhanārīśvara: Samples of Cōḻa Masterpieces," 494.

forms should be understood as derivations of Kaṇṉaki; Kaṇṉaki is the heroine and eventual goddess of the *Cilappatikāram* (a Tamil epic) who tears off her left breast, leaving her singly breasted on the right side. Kalidos hypothesizes that this "folk goddess finds chances for interaction with the Sanskritic Ardhanārīśvara" and subsequently adopts emblems of the latter; he thus differentiates between Ardhanārīśvara and goddess-centered forms he dubs Ardhanārī.[64] Similar sentiments are expressed by Rajarajan (in "Dance of Ardhanārī as Pattinī-Kaṇṉaki" and "Dance of Ardhanārī: A Historiographical Retrospection") who suggests there are (right-side female, left-side male) figures that have been mistakenly identified as Ardhanārīśvara rather than Ardhanārī (i.e., Kaṇṉaki or forms based upon her).[65]

Other scholars who document such cases merely present them as exceptional Ardhanārīśvara forms and say little more (e.g., Yadav) or relay the Kalidos hypothesis in explaining their existence (e.g., Goldberg). In my opinion, this conflation of right-female, left-male composite icons with Kaṇṉaki is overemphasized, downplays the explicit presence of Śiva and Pārvatī in many instances, and overlooks an exciting prospect worthy of attention: inverted Ardhanārīśvara images where the positions and primacies of Śiva and Śakti are decidedly reversed. Nevertheless, much of the attention afforded Ardhanārīśvara has been of an evidently art-historical bent, and many forms and features of the figure have been documented and examined accordingly.

Purāṇic Narratives and Temple Lore

Scholars have also focused on the presence of Ardhanārīśvara in the Purāṇas, a genre that notably includes narratives involving Hindu deities.[66] In *The Presence of Śiva*, Kramrisch offers a chapter dedicated to Śiva as "the androgyne god," with a clear emphasis on the Ardhanārīśvara form. Particularly, she examines a myth series wherein Ardhanārīśvara aids another god, Brahmā, with creation. Ardhanārīśvara appears in order to show Brahmā why his attempt at creation is misguided; "[when] the image of Ardhanārīśvara . . . formed itself in the brooding mind of the Creator, the memory of sexual intercourse as a means of creating mortal creatures came back to [Brahmā] with renewed force."[67] Subsequently, the male and female halves of Ardhanārīśvara split and produce male and female progeny that continue to multiply. Kramrisch demonstrates that Ardhanārīśvara serves an important creative function; its appearance and fission are essential for inciting and perpetuating procreation.[68] She indicates that this myth series is found in the *Vāyu* (c. 350 CE)*, Kūrma* (c. 550-850 CE)*, Liṅga, Śiva* (c. 600-

[64] The quote is from Kalidos, "The Twain-Face of Ardhanārī," 103; however, his rationale for using the Ardhanārī designation unfolds throughout the piece, right from the beginning. To start with, see pages 68-69.

[65] In addition to the previously cited "Dance of Ardhanārī as Pattinī-Kaṇṉaki with special reference to the Cillapatikāram," see R.K.K. Rajarajan, "Dance of Ardhanārī: A Historiographical Retrospection," in *Glimpses of Indian History and Art: Reflections on the Past, Perspectives for the Future*, eds. Tiziana Lorenzetti and Fabio Scialpi (Italy: Sapienza University of Rome, 2012).

[66] For an introductory overview of the Purāṇas, see Rodrigues, *Introducing Hinduism*, 188-190.

[67] Kramrisch, *The Presence of Śiva*, 201.

[68] Kramrisch, *The Presence of Śiva*, 207-208.

1000 CE), and *Viṣṇu* (c. 450 CE) *Purāṇas*.[69] Goldberg adds the *Mārkaṇḍeya* (c. 250 CE with one portion c. 550 CE) and *Padma* (c. 750-1000 CE) *Purāṇas* to this list.[70] Despite the thorough treatment of this narrative, Kramrisch, in her analysis of "the androgyne god," omits several other references to Ardhanārīśvara found in the Purāṇas.

Yadav, who provides a chapter documenting the presence of Ardhanārīśvara in literature, accounts for these omissions. She presents episodes from the *Skanda* (c. 8th century CE), *Matsya* (c. 250-500 CE), and *Kālikā* (c. 12th century CE) *Purāṇas* in which Śiva grants half his body to Pārvatī in order to reward her devotion and/or placate her for some reason (usually jealousy), yielding the Ardhanārīśvara form.[71] Yadav also presents an additional entry from the *Matsya Purāṇa* which details directions for the construction and/or visualization of an Ardhanārīśvara image.[72] She does a comprehensive job of documenting the presence of Ardhanārīśvara in textual sources and offers brief synopses of the above episodes, yet she does little in the way of critical analysis. On the other hand, Wendy Doniger offers a typology of androgynes and categorizes Ardhanārīśvara as a "splitting androgyne" in Purāṇic narratives where the figure undergoes a procreative fission (i.e., those presented by Kramrisch) and a "fusing androgyne" in those cases where Śiva and Pārvatī merge to form Ardhanārīśvara (i.e., those presented by Yadav).[73] Moreover, she offers a detailed analysis of the figure with respect to themes centering on gender and sexuality (see the "Feminist Critiques and Ardhanārīśvara" section below).

Scholars have also recognized the presence of Ardhanārīśvara in narratives outside the main Purāṇic corpus. For example, Butler identifies Ardhanārīśvara in the *Aruṇācalapurāṇam*, the *sthalapurāṇa* of Tiruvannamalai, Tamil Nadu. *Sthalapurāṇas* are "ancient stories of a sacred site;" works of this class draw together the traditions and legends relating to a particular shrine and its surrounding locale.[74] In the *Aruṇācalapurāṇam*, Pārvatī playfully covers the eyes of Śiva and, as a result, mistakenly plunges the world into darkness. She then travels to various places while undergoing a period of penance to atone for her misdeed; this culminates with Śiva awarding her his left side.[75] Hiltebeitel briefly acknowledges that a variant of this myth is present in Tiruchengode, Tamil Nadu, and provides another story involving "an exiled form of Pārvatī" connected to Melmalayanur, Tamil Nadu, that also results in Śiva and Pārvatī merging

[69] Kramrisch, *The Presence of Śiva*, 200.

[70] Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman*, 144.

[71] Yadav, *Ardhanārīśvara in Art and Literature*, 117-119.

[72] Yadav, *Ardhanārīśvara in Art and Literature*, 118.

[73] Doniger O'Flaherty, *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts*, 310-314. Note, she also adds the *Saura Purāṇa* to the list attributed above to Kramrisch on page 313.

[74] David Dean Shulman, *Tamil Temple Myths: Sacrifice and Divine Marriage in the South Indian Śaiva Tradition* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980), 4.

[75] Robert Butler, Introduction to *Sri Arunachala Puranam* by Saiva Ellapa Navalar, trans. Robert Butler (Tiruvanamalai: Sri Ramanasramam, 2015), xx-xxiv.

as Ardhanārīśvara.[76] Finally, a number of scholars have identified variations of what Doniger calls a "South Indian series of myths" wherein Śiva and Pārvatī coalesce into their composite form to challenge a sage (named Bhṛṅgī) fixated on devotionally circling Śiva alone.[77]

Devotional Poetry and Invocatory Verses

Goldberg also dedicates a chapter of her book to Ardhanārīśvara in devotional poetry. First, she looks at selections from the *Tēvāram* and then the *Ardhanārīśvara Stotra*. The *Tēvāram* refers to the first seven books in a larger compendium known as the *Tirumurai*, itself consisting of 12 volumes of Tamil writings.[78] In part, the *Tirumurai* was composed by some of the Nāyaṉmārs, 63 poet-saints renowned for their devotion to Śiva. The *Tēvāram* is attributed to three of these Nāyaṉmārs (said to have lived and composed between the 6th and 9th centuries CE) who comprise three quarters of the Nālvar (the four great saints of Tamil Śaivism).[79] Specifically, Goldberg highlights passages wherein the Ardhanārīśvara aspect of Śiva is evoked; the *Tēvāram* includes at least 100.[80] Largely, Goldberg examines the "poetic iconography" present in *Tēvāram* hymns, comparing descriptions therein with the insignias of temple icons. Her assessment (utilizing a feminist lens) yields the following conclusion: "Similar to iconography, devotional poetry can function as a regulative paradigm for male ideology, as well as an effective tool for the construction of gender identity in the religious imagination."[81] Next, Goldberg turns her attention to the *Ardhanārīśvara Stotra*, a work of devotional poetry attributed to Ādi Śaṅkarācārya (8th and/or 9th century CE), considered a principal proponent of *advaita* (nondual) philosophy.[82] As such, the *Ardhanārīśvara Stotra* oscillates between descriptions of Śiva and Pārvātī (the halves of Ardhanārīśvara) that both contrast and complement each other, pointing to an ultimate reality that transcends and includes all apparent opposites and contradictions. Once more, Goldberg "probed some of the possible gender meanings," reaching similar conclusions to those noted above (see the "Feminist Critiques and Ardhanārīśvara" section for more on these thoughts).

Yadav also cites the *Tēvāram* and the *Ardhanārīśvara Stotra* in her chapter on Ardhanārīśvara and literature but additionally includes selections from the Maithilī poet Vidyāpati (c. 1352-1448 CE), the *Kumārasaṃbhava* of Kālidāsa (c. 4th to 5th century CE), and the *Subhāṣitaratnabhāṇḍāgāra* (a collection of aphorisms whose compilation is ascribed to Nārāyaṇa Rāma Ācārya), all of which allude to Ardhanārīśvara.[83] Moreover, she recognizes

---

[76] For the Tiruchengode reference, see Alf Hiltebeitel, *The Cult of Draupadī Vol. 1* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1991), 447; for the Melmalayanur narrative in question, see pages 375-376.

[77] Doniger O'Flaherty, *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts,* 316.

[78] Norman Cutler, *Songs of Experience: The Poetics of Tamil Devotion* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), 190.

[79] Indira Peterson, *Poems to Śiva: The Hymns of the Tamil Saints* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989), 3. Śaivism refers to a current of Hinduism that holds Śiva as predominant.

[80] Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman*, 92.

[81] Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman*, 95.

[82] Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman*, 103.

[83] Yadav, *Ardhanārīśvara in Art and Literature*, 122-125.

invocatory verses where Ardhanārīśvara is intimated. These include the opening verses of the *Raghuvaṁśa* and *Mālavikāgnimitra* (both of Kālidāsa), as well as the beginning of each of the eight books of the *Rājataraṅginī* (c. 12th century CE) of Kalhaṇa.[84] The excerpts chosen by Yadav are verses of descriptive "poetic iconography" and praise. This chapter of hers is rather encyclopedic; she offers an inventory of literary references to Ardhanārīśvara and forgoes significant analysis.

In *Nataraja in Art, Thought, and Literature,* Sivaramamurti dedicates a section to verses describing Naṭarāja alongside the "Ardhanārīśvara aspect" of Śiva. He includes mention of the following texts within this section: the *Ānandasāgarastava* of Nīlakaṇṭha Dīkhita, the *Bṛhatkathāmañjarī* of Kshmendra, the *Saduktikarṇāmṛta* anthology (whose compilation is attributed to Śrīdharadāsa), the *Nṛttaratnāvalī* of Jāya Senāpati, the *Śrīkaṇṭhacarita* of Mankhaka, the *Kumārasambhava* of Kālidāsa, the *Vāsavadattā* of Subandhu, the *Bhikṣāṭanakāvya* of Utprekṣāvallabha, the *Subhāṣitaratnabhāṇḍāgāra*, the *Subhāsitaratnakoṣa* (an anthology of Sanskrit verses attributed to Vidyākara), and the *Haravijaya* and *Vakroktipañcāśikā* of Ratnākara.[85] Sivaramamurti seems content with simply proving that Naṭarāja is sometimes subject to a "blending of certain features of other iconographic forms of [Śiva]" via vivid description; yet, as with Yadav, he does without substantial critical analysis in this section.

Bronner and McCrea compellingly analyze the place of Ardhanārīśvara within the *Vakroktipañcāśikā* themselves; they highlight how, given the callousness of Śiva, Pārvatī either threatens or attempts to denounce her place as half of Ardhanārīśvara, yet he deflects her hostile declarations, distorts the conversation, and their fission is deferred indefinitely.[86] Likewise, Doniger, with her customary critical engagement, teases out themes from *Subhāsitaratnakoṣa* poetry involving Śiva and Pārvatī as "the androgyne." Interestingly, she recognizes that even Gaṇeśa (son of Śiva and Pārvatī) "indulges in androgyny in a strange imitation of his parents" within the *Subhāsitaratnakoṣa*; the tuskless half of the elephant-headed Gaṇeśa is presented as female, echoing Ardhanārīśvara.[87] Doniger also highlights an intriguing variation of *viraha* (longing in separation). Normally, *viraha* implies that lovers truly long for each other when faced with separation versus union. However, in the *Subhāsitaratnakoṣa* excerpt she provides, Doniger identifies an inversion of this theme whereby the male and female halves of Ardhanārīśvara are forced to long for each other, unable to sensuously engage due to their fusion.[88] Elsewhere in the *Subhāsitaratnakoṣa*, Doniger identifies moments of bewilderment at the Ardhanārīśvara form, particularly by Skanda

---

[84] Yadav, *Ardhanārīśvara in Art and Literature*, 121-122.

[85] See Sivaramamurti, *Nataraja in Art, Thought, and Literature*, 88-93.

[86] See Yigal Bronner and Lawrence McCrea, "The Poetics of Distortive Talk: Plot and Character in Ratnākara's 'Fifty Verbal Perversions' (*Vakroktipañcāśikā*)," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 29, no. 4 (August 2001): 440-443.

[87] Doniger O'Flaherty, *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts*, 325.

[88] Doniger O'Flaherty, *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts*, 319.

(another son of Śiva and Pārvatī); Skanda questions the figure before him, wondering how his father appears with a female breast and his mother appears with a beard on half her face.[89] Notably, Sivaramamurti also describes bewilderment (or at least confusion) occurring within Ardhanārīśvara itself; he notes how Kalhaṇa, in his *Ardhanārīśvarastotra*, presents the left (female) hand of Ardhanārīśvara attempting to colour the right (male) eye with collyrium, traditionally meant for women, while the right (male) hand tries to tie a serpentine armlet, traditionally worn by the male Śiva, on the left (female) arm.[90]

In his analysis of *stotras* (regularly glossed as "hymns of praise") from Kashmir, Hamsa Stainton also mentions the *Ardhanārīśvarastotra* attributed to the Kashmiri historian and poet, Kalhaṇa.[91] Stainton explains that this *stotra* is comprised, in part, of verses also found in the *Rājataraṅginī* (also ascribed to Kalhaṇa); the *Rājataraṅginī*, as mentioned, begins each of its eight books with invocatory hymns to Ardhanārīśvara.[92] Walter Slaje focuses on this *Ardhanārīśvarastotra* in his article, "Kalhaṇas Ode an der androgynen Gott Ardhanārīśvarastotra." Here he analyzes the authorship of the work, identifies themes in the composition (including the presence of epithets, allusions to mythology, and use of poetic conventions), and otherwise presents the "poetic iconography" used to depict Ardhanārīśvara before providing a German translation of the piece.[93] Interestingly, both Stainton and Slaje acknowledge a different *Ardhanārīśvarastotra*, one credited to another Kashmiri writer, Jagaddhara Bhaṭṭa. Stainton suggests that Jagaddhara Bhaṭṭ describes the paradoxical form of Ardhanārīśvara with wonder and amazement, inviting the audience to experience the wonderment of this form as well.[94]

Ardhanārīśvara as a Tantric Deity

Numerous scholars have associated Ardhanārīśvara with Tantra and/or the tantric. Tantra, as a term, has notably elicited myriad definitions from those studying it. For example, Saran describes Tantra as a permanent counterculture within Indic civilisation while Johari describes Tantra as the study of the macrocosm through the individual as microcosm. [95] Other scholars, like David Gordon White, emphasize sexual elements and differentiate "hard-core" transgressive practices from its domesticated and largely symbolic "soft-core" variants.[96] Elsewhere, White offers an alternative, tautological definition, describing Tantra as the subject

---

[89] Doniger O'Flaherty, *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts*, 324.

[90] Sivaramamurti, *Nataraja in Art, Thought, and Literature*, 130.

[91] Knowledge of this glossing comes from Hamsa Stainton, *Poetry as Prayer in the Sanskrit Hymns of Kashmir* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 2.

[92] Stainton, *Poetry as Prayer in the Sanskrit Hymns of Kashmir*, 85.

[93] See Walter Slaje, "Kalhaṇas Ode an der androgynen Gott Ardhanārīśvarastotra," *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenlandischen Gesellschaft* 165, no. 2 (2015).

[94] Stainton, *Poetry as Prayer in the Sanskrit Hymns of Kashmir*, 186.

[95] Prem Saran, *Yoga, Bhoga, and Ardhanariswara*: *Individuality, Wellbeing and Gender in Tantra* (London: Routledge, 2008), 212-213; Harish Johari, *Tools for Tantra* (Vermont: Destiny Books, 1986), 1.

[96] See David Gordon White, *Kiss of the Yoginī: "Tantric Sex" in its South Asian Contexts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 13-22.

matter of works that call themselves "Tantras."[97] However, White even concedes that not all works that call themselves "Tantras" are tantric; for example, the *Pañcatantra* is a collection of fables and animal stories.[98] With respect to this evident variety of definitions and plurality of expressions, Hugh Urban writes: "In the face of this intense confusion and contradiction, many scholars have abandoned the very idea of asserting a singular, monothetic definition of Tantra."[99] Indeed, many have shied away from Tantra (as a reified proper noun) in favour of identifying phenomena as tantric (as I will myself); often this reflects a proclivity toward "polythetic classification" (which allows for overlapping subsets of attributes in determining class membership).[100] In such cases, scholars have looked to recognize tantric phenomena via a series of descriptors akin to features characterizing family resemblances. Yet consensus still remains evasive. "Various scholars," Urban notes, "have offered different enumerations of such characteristics, ranging from six (Jefferey Kripal) to eighteen (Teun Goudriaan)."[101] Perhaps White shared an important tacit insight when stating he was providing a "working definition" of Tantra in the introduction to *Tantra in Practice*.[102] In fact, it may be argued that scholars only provide working definitions of Tantra (and of what constitutes the tantric), ones that relate to the understandings and aims of each scholar. This is not necessarily to say that their designations are wholly arbitrary. However, it is to say that the pursuit of unanimity may be an exercise in futility; there is no singular authoritative measuring stick against which we may gauge the usage of the term(s). Given the multifarious understandings, expressions, and definitions of Tantra and the tantric, as well as the noted absence of their unanimous and/or authoritative specifications, the following will highlight however scholarship has associated Ardhanārīśvara with these terms, whatever the connotations may be.

Ardhanārīśvara has been associated with phenomena deemed tantric in various ways. For example, there are iconographic depictions of Ardhanārīśvara said to include tantric motifs. Yadav states: "Ardhanārīśvara is no doubt always depicted as [a] Saumya and Śānta deity but if we talk of *tantra* [it] has the Bhairava face of *aghora mukha* with terrible weapons in hand. One such image holding a *khaḍvāṅga* and a human skull in the two right hands can be clearly noticed."[103] The image in question is found on the eastern wall of the *vimāna* of the Goliṅgeśvara temple in Biccavalu, Godavari district, Andhra Pradesh.[104] Goldberg also identifies a case wherein Ardhanārīśvara embodies "*aghora mukha mudrā*, that is, the wrathful and

---

[97] White, *Kiss of the Yoginī*, 16.

[98] White, *Kiss of the Yoginī*, 17.

[99] Hugh Urban, *Tantra: Sex, Secrecy, Politics and Power in the Study of Religion* (Berkley: University of California Press, 2003), 6.

[100] Urban, *Tantra: Sex, Secrecy, Politics and Power in the Study of Religion*, 6.

[101] Urban, *Tantra: Sex, Secrecy, Politics and Power in the Study of Religion*, 6.

[102] David Gordon White, Introduction to *Tantra in Practice*, ed. David Gordon White (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000), 9.

[103] Yadav, *Ardhanārīśvara in Art and Literature*, 178-179. *Khaḍvāṅga* refers to a long, studded club or staff and often engraved with skulls.

[104] Yadav, *Ardhanārīśvara in Art and Literature*, 95.

terrifying nature of the deity."[105] Mevissen, in "Corpus of Ardhanārīśvara Images from Nepal, Eastern India and Southeast Asia," catalogues "some of the numerous later 'tantric' images of Ardhanārīśvara with up to eight heads and up to eighteen arms."[106] Finally, as noted, Pande also documents an Ardhanārīśvara sculpture that wears a garland composed of heads on the male side which become skulls on the female half.[107] According to Yadav, these more terrifying depictions imply tantric influence.[108] Yet others, such as Padoux, suggest Ardhanārīśvara is tantric in general; in partial response to his own question (". . . is it possible to distinguish clearly Tantric deities from those that are not Tantric?"), he states, "A basic Tantric notion is that the deity . . . is polarized in masculine and feminine" and outright names Ardhanārīśvara a tantric form of Śiva.[109]

Ardhanārīśvara has also been described as a homologue of other tantric imagery. For example, the *śrīcakrayantra* also "conveys in aniconic form the belief in the interpenetration of the masculine and feminine principles of the ultimate reality."[110] This is conveyed by the overlap and intersection of upward and downward facing triangles signifying the male and female principles, Śiva and Śakti, respectively. Jayakar considers the *śrīcakrayantra* a "manifestation of the half-male, half-female [form], the Ardhanārīśvara."[111] Importantly, the *śrīcakrayantra* is the seminal symbol and focal point of worship within the Śrī Vidyā system, considered tantric in its orientation. In addition to the *śrīcakrayantra*, another nonfigurative homologue of Ardhanārīśvara has been identified in the *yoni-liṅga*. The *yoni* and *liṅga* respectively represent female and male sexual organs quite literally and feminine and masculine principles more abstractly. They are commonly found united, with the phallic *liṅga* rising from the horizontally positioned *yoni*, represented as a round or square vulviform. As such, Goldberg considers the *yoni-liṅga* "an aniconic version of the Ardhanārīśvara motif."[112] Notably, Goldberg and Doniger render a similar reading of the *yoni-liṅga* as they do its anthropomorphic counterpart. Both scholars note that the joint *yoni-liṅga* remains "lopsidedly male;" it is a marker of Śiva first and foremost, one that is generally found in the *garbhagṛha* of Śaiva temples.[113] Padoux acknowledges that the *yoni-liṅga* is rarely perceived of as tantric

---

[105] Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman*, 37.

[106] See Gerd Mevissen, "Corpus of Ardhanārīśvara Images from Nepal, Eastern India and Southeast Asia," in *Berliner Indologische Studien* 21 (2013).

[107] Pande, *Ardhanarishvara the Androgyne*, 111.

[108] Yadav, *Ardhanārīśvara in Art and Literature*, 178-179.

[109] André Padoux, *The Hindu Tantric World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 148-149.

[110] Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman*, 71.

[111] Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman*, 71. Goldberg takes this quote from Jayakar. See Pupal Jayakar, *The Earth Mother: Legends, Goddesses, and Ritual Arts of India* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1990), 123.

[112] Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman*, 120.

[113] Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman*, 120; Doniger O'Flaherty, *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts*, 317-318. The *garbhagṛha* is the "womb chamber/house," the *sanctum sanctorum* of a temple in which the main icon resides. For a description, see Bunce, *A Dictionary of Buddhist and Hindu Iconography*, 101.

within popular worship yet describes it as "iconographically Tantric" given its bisexual symbolism, nonetheless.[114]

Ardhanārīśvara is additionally associated with the raising of Kuṇḍalinī. The subtle body system proposed by *haṭhayoga* and tantric treatises is considered a microcosm of the Universe.[115] The subtle body has within it focal points of energy, known as *cakras*, which ascend from grossest to most subtle.[116] The five lower *cakras* correspond with the five elements (earth, water, fire, air, space/ether). The last of these is the *viśuddha cakra*, associated with *ākāśa* (space or ether) and *śabda* (sound).[117] Following the *viśuddha* is the *ājñā cakra*, located between or just above the eyebrows, considered the seat of the mind. Lastly, the *sahasrāra cakra*, representing pure consciousness, is located near the crown of the head.[118] The goal of the aspirant, through various practices and techniques, is to awaken and raise Śakti, as serpentine goddess Kuṇḍalinī, up from the lowest *mūlādhāra cakra* to merge with Śiva, located at the highest *sahasrāra cakra*; doing so is understood to bring about an experiential change in consciousness. In *The Tantric Way*, Mookerjee and Khanna state that Ardhanārīśvara is the presiding deity of the *viśuddha cakra*.[119] Often Ardhanārīśvara is alternatively considered presiding deity of the *ājñā cakra*.[120] Given that the *viśuddha* and *ājñā cakras* are situated between the *mūlādhāra* and *sahasrāra*, Ardhanārīśvara is sometimes taken to represent a stage *en route* to the culmination of Kuṇḍalinī ascension.[121] Yet Goldberg argues that "Ardhanārīśvara . . . is actually experienced in three progressive stages . . . that is, from the *viśuddha* [and through the *ājñā*] to the *sahasrāra*."[122]

Goldberg notes that the subtle body system also contains a great number of energy channels known as *nādīs*. The three main channels are *iḍā*, *piṇgalā*, and *suṣumṇā* which are associated with the moon (*chandra*), the sun (*sūrya*), and fire (*agni*), respectively. Importantly, she recognizes that *iḍā* is associated with the masculine and, conversely, *piṇgalā* with the

---

[114] Padoux, *The Hindu Tantric World*, 149.

[115] Goldberg uses the term *haṭhayoga* in her exposition of these themes but states that the "*tantra śāstras*" are very nearly related. See Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman*, 58. In fact, Gavin Flood asserts the subtle body system in question originates in the cult of the Tantric goddess Kubjikā. See Flood, *An introduction to Hinduism*, 99. Accordingly, this section draws from sources engaging both *haṭhayoga* and traditions dubbed tantric.

[116] Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman*, 70.

[117] Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman*, 70.

[118] There are schools of thought that list alternate numbers of *cakras*. For example, See Robert Svoboda, *Aghora II: Kundalini* (New Delhi: Rupa Publications, 1994), 71.

[119] Ajit Mookerjee and Madhu Khanna, *The Tantric Way* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1977), 155.

[120] Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman*, 72.

[121] For example, see Svoboda, *Aghora II: Kundalini*, 11.

[122] Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman*, 72. Note that Goldberg acknowledges an additional Ardhanārīśvara homologue within the practice of *nāda yoga* wherein the *nāda* sound (represented by a half-moon shape opening upwards) becomes absorbed into nasality (represented by a dot above the half-moon). Goldberg writes that *nāda* represents Śakti and that the dot represents Śiva; she contends that together "the symbol of the *ardha-candra* (half-moon) and *anusvāra* (dot) signify a sonic and aniconic representation of the anthropomorphic image of Ardhanārīśvara." See pages 84-85.

feminine. The *suṣumṇā*, which serves as the medial channel between them, "unites and consolidates" the *iḍā* and *piṇgalā* (and thus the feminine and masculine principles). Goldberg concludes that this "implies a distinct analogy or homology between the subtle physiology of the *yogin/ī* and the image of Ardhanārīśvara."[123] Specifically, she connects the male and female halves of Ardhanārīśvara to the "homologous designations gendered as female (*piṇgalā*) and male (*iḍā*)" in the subtle body; she also associates the *suṣumṇā nādī* with the "razor's edge" located between the male and female halves of Ardhanārīśvara.[124] In this connection, David Gordon White asserts that "every subtle body is . . . intrinsically androgynous . . . after the fashion of Ardhanārīśvara."[125] For his part, Saran characterizes the various modes of masculine and feminine principles intertwining within tantric attitudes and praxis as part and parcel of what he terms the "Ardhanariswara syndrome."[126]

Another pertinent mention of Ardhanārīśvara comes from Alain Daniélou who states that "any sexually ambiguous being is of a sacred nature . . . The hermaphrodite, the homosexual, and the transvestite [have] a symbolic value and are deemed to be privileged beings, images of the Ardhanarishvara. By virtue of this, they are considered to bring good luck and play a special role in magic and Tantric rites."[127] Daniélou does not substantiate this claim further, and I have not found this assertion corroborated elsewhere in scholarship. However, Pande does present an internet-gleaned essay, "Confessions of a Tantric Androgyne," in which the writer, informed by a process of self-discovery, states: "Tantra uses sexual symbolism and accepts androgyny as much as the West shuns and suppresses it. It was with tantric Hinduism that I finally felt I had come home."[128] Thus, it may be said that such sentiments do not rest with Daniélou alone.

According to Doniger, "Tantrism" proposes that sensuality is an instrument of liberation.[129] This is echoed by Saran who describes Tantra as recognizing the unity of *mukti* (liberation) and *bhukti* (sensuous enjoyment).[130] Doniger emphasizes sexuality with respect to the foregoing and suggests that Ardhanārīśvara may be read as a hierogram of such ecstatic union.[131] Tantric traditions are often affiliated with the use, either literally or symbolically, of the *pañcamakāra*, or "the five Ms:" *madya* (wine), *māmṣa* (meat), *matsya* (fish), *mudrā* (parched grain), and *maithuna* (sexual intercourse). These are elements "normally prohibited by

---

[123] The information found up to this point in the paragraph is taken from Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman*, 64-65.

[124] Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman*, 65-66.

[125] David Gordon White, *The Alchemical Body: Siddha Traditions in Medieval India* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1996), 252.

[126] Saran, *Yoga, Bhoga and Ardhanariswara*, 199-201.

[127] Alan Daniélou, *Shiva and the Primordial Tradition: From the Tantras to the Science of Dreams* (Rochester: Inner Traditions, 2003), 42.

[128] Pande, *Ardhanarishvara the Androgyne*, 66.

[129] Doniger O'Flaherty, *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts*, 332.

[130] Saran, *Yoga, Bhoga and Ardhanariswara*, 142.

[131] For discussion of sexuality as an instrument of liberation, see Doniger O'Flaherty, *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts*, 332; for mention of the hierogram, see 293.

mainstream social and religious standards."[132] Given the above, one might understandably view Ardhanārīśvara as symbolic of tantric *maithuna*, yet this association is not so cut and dry. While Doniger, in *Asceticism and Eroticism in the Mythology of Siva*, says that "[i]conographically, the image of the androgyne is the symbol of sexual union," she also (as indicated earlier) describes "the androgyne" as "representative of a situation in which union is physically impossible."[133] Moreover, Doniger specifically highlights "the Tantric androgyne" as one that represents a state "in which the erotic no longer needs to be sought or pursued, because it is always present in its totality;" it is indicative of total satiation and desirelessness.[134]

The framing of Ardhanārīśvara as emblematic of tantric nondualism is especially prevalent. For instance, Yadav states: "The Ardhanārīśvara aspect is basically the output of the Tantra philosophy which believes in the [inextricable] union of Śiva and Śakti. Thus we can say that the Ardhanārīśvara aspect of Śiva is closely related to Tāntricism also."[135] This is particularly (and problematically) emphasized in relation to the nondualism of "Kashmir Śaivism." Ardhanārīśvara even graces the covers of *Kashmir Śaivism* by Kamalakar Mishra and *Pārvatīdarpaṇa: An exposition of Kashmir Śaivism through the images of Śiva and Pārvatī* by Harsha V. Dehejia.[136] Given the widespread suggestion that Ardhanārīśvara is emblematic of the nondualism of "Kashmir Śaivism," the following will examine this alleged association.

Ardhanārīśvara, Nondualism, and "Kashmir Śaivism"

Before delineating how Ardhanārīśvara is posited in relation to "Kashmir Śaivism," an explanation for why this designation is placed in quotations should be provided. The term "Kashmir Śaivism" may be taken to imply that Kashmir is/was home to a singular form of Śaivism, one that is only found in the region, and/or that the religious life of Kashmir is sweepingly characterized by this flavour of Śaivism. However, Stainton clarifies that variegated forms of Śaivism have and do exist in Kashmir, forms of Śaivism found in Kashmir are not necessarily exclusive to the region, and other religious traditions continue to factor into the religious makeup of Kashmir, as they have historically.[137] Furthermore, he notes that "Kashmir Śaivism" is a relatively recent formulation that often serves as a shorthand way of also referring to precursory traditions.[138] Accordingly, the long history yielding "Kashmir Śaivism" as a distinctive tradition is often improperly considered (and/or undergoes conflation with its

---

[132] Hugh Urban, *The Power of Tantra: Religion, Sexuality, and the Politics of South Asian Studies* (New York: I.B. Taurus, 2010), 102.

[133] See Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *Asceticism and Eroticism in the Mythology of Siva* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), 257.

[134] The Alan Watts quote presented here is from Doniger O'Flaherty, *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts*, 319.

[135] Yadav, *Ardhanārīśvara in Art and Literature*, 178.

[136] See Mishra, *Kashmir Śaivism* (Varanasi: Indica Books, 2011) and Harsha V. Dehejia, *Pārvatīdarpaṇa: An exposition of Kashmir Śaivism through the images of Śiva and Pārvatī* (Motilal Banarsidas Publishers, 1997).

[137] Stainton, *Poetry as Prayer in the Sanskrit Hymns of Kashmir*, 282.

[138] Stainton, *Poetry as Prayer in the Sanskrit Hymns of Kashmir*, 280.

modern form).[139] In fact, "Kashmir Śaivism" is often used as a referent for the antecedent Trika tradition, if not specifically the nondualism of its Pratyabhijñā school of thought. All the same, this philosophical nondualism is critical to current understandings of "Kashmir Śaivism," and it is particularly relevant given that Ardhanārīśvara has been consistently associated with Pratyabhijñā in scholarship.

Padoux writes that "In the Trika, the Kashmirian school of nondualistic Śaivism, the godhead, metaphysically conceived as the Supreme Consciousness – unique, nondual – is also, inseparably, conscious light (*prakāśa*; masculine) and self-awareness (*vimarśa*; feminine)."[140] With these gendered allocations in mind, Yadav asserts that "Ardhanārīśvara is a perfect visual representation [of the] Pratyabhijñā system of epistemology of Kashmir Śaivism . . . the biune unity of *prakāśa* and *vimarśa*."[141] Pratyabhijñā (recognition) is predicated on the understanding that the whole gamut of reality is "only Śiva – the absolute consciousness."[142] This implies that consciousness (Śiva; masculine) may come to know itself in the very world it observes (Śakti; feminine). This understanding is elaborated through the concepts of *vimarśa* and *prakāśa* noted above. Mishra writes that "*vimarśa* is understood along with *prakāśa*. *Vimarśa* is also called *śakti* ('power,' 'force,' or 'potentiality), *kriyā* ('activity'), or *spanda* ('spontaneity'), just as *prakāśa* is also called Śiva or *jñāna* ('awareness' or 'knowledge'). Consciousness . . . is understood as *prakāśa-vimarśa,* Śiva-Śakti, or *jñāna-kriyā*."[143] This is to say that Śiva and Śakti are only connotatively different; denotatively, they are one and the same. Śiva (consciousness) is conceived of as dynamic, and the very dynamism (which includes the phenomenal world) of Śiva is called Śakti.

Unsurprisingly, Ardhanārīśvara is viewed as aptly symbolizing the understanding that Śiva and Śakti are denotatively the same. In this respect, Goldberg reflects on the Ardhanārīśvara icon: "Śiva (as Paramaśiva) is *prakāśa* (pure light), and Śakti is *cit* (pure consciousness) or *vimarśa* (reflection), ergo, in [Ardhanārīśvara] iconography Pārvatī carries a *darpaṇa* (mirror) in her left hand."[144] Dehejia expands on this notion: "To an aesthete steeped in the epistemology of Kashmiri Śaivism, the *darpaṇa* (mirror) of Pārvatī in one of the left hands of *ardhanārīśvara* is of great interest as it illustrates the all important concept of *pratyabhijñā* or cognition through recognition."[145] This is to say that "[every] aspect of reality is a light; it is a

---

[139] Stainton, *Poetry as Prayer in the Sanskrit Hymns of Kashmir*, 282.

[140] Padoux, *The Hindu Tantric World: An* Overview, 88-89.

[141] Yadav, *Ardhanārīśvara in Art and Literature*, 186.

[142] Paul E. Muller-Ortega, "On the Seal of Śambu: A Poem by Abhinavagupta," in *Tantra in Practice*, ed. David Gordon White (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000), 575.

[143] Mishra, *Kashmir Śaivism*, 261.

[144] Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman*, 57. It should be noted that this quote is taken from her chapter on Ardhanārīśvara and *haṭhayoga*. However, Goldberg presents this description as a general insight concerning Ardhanārīśvara iconography, and it certainly echoes the Pratyabhijñā thought covered in this section.

[145] Dehejia, *Pārvatīdarpaṇa,* 38.

reflection in the mirror of consciousness and has its ultimate reality in consciousness."[146] The idea here is that consciousness (Śiva) pervades all phenomena (even the most commonplace and apparently delimited) of the mirror that is the observable world (Śakti). Consciousness is that which is reflected, the reflection, and the dynamic ground of the mirror itself. The notion that Ardhanārīśvara and its *darpaṇa* serve as a metaphor for the epistemology of "Kashmir Śaivism" is also notably examined by Dehejia in *Leaves of a Pipal Tree: Aesthetic Reflections of some Hindu Myths and Symbols*.[147]

However, the limited ability for Ardhanārīśvara imagery to adequately reflect the nondualism in question has also been expressed. Mishra acknowledges "the symbol of Arddhanārīśvara [sic] is meant to suggest the unity of Śiva and Śakti," yet he opines that "[the] symbolism of Arddhanārīśvara seen in the stone images and paintings, however, is not a perfect one, because in the symbol one side is Śiva and the other side Śakti. But there is no such partition in Reality."[148] Mishra suggests that Ardhanārīśvara would better reflect the denotative sameness of Śiva and Śakti if pictured using a technique whereby one image (presumably of Śiva) would appear from a given angle while a different image (presumably Śakti) would appear from another.[149] Evidently, the history and historiography of so-called "Kashmir Śaivism" contain complications, and the purpose of this section has been to outline how scholars have (also complicatedly) associated Ardhanārīśvara with the term.

In "Divine Androgyny and the Play of Self-Recognition: Revisiting Some Issues in Gender Theory through an Unorthodox Interpretation of Ardhanārīśvara," Geoff Ashton places some of the above insights into dialogue with contemporary gender theory. Specifically, he situates Ardhanārīśvara within Pratyabhijñā theology and argues that the figure offers "a guide to enacting a play of self-recognition whereby one realizes the divine in all manifestations, even those that go beyond dualities (i.e., beyond the male-female binary toward alternative genders)."[150] After all, the absolute pervasiveness of consciousness in Pratyabhijñā thought suggests no remainder. This ultimately seamless state of affairs may, by some readings, suggest the arbitrariness of categories and inspire their eschewal. Yet Ashton holds that the Ardhanārīśvara image, when viewed through a Pratyabhijñā lens, "signifies the totality that lies not just behind *but among* all possible dualities."[151] He argues that the Pratyabhijñā system thus encourages the "unending investigation of the self through its countless manifestations – including its variegated masculinities and femininities as well as those gender minorities that oppose binarism."[152] This is to say that each expression in the all-encompassing *darpaṇa* of

---

[146] Raffaele Torella, *The Īśvarapratyabhijñākārikā of Utpaladeva: Critical Edition and Annotated Translation* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Limited, 2002), xxvii.

[147] Harsha V. Dehejia, *Leaves of a Pipal Tree: Aesthetic Reflections of some Hindu Myths and Symbols* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2005), 98-103.

[148] Mishra, *Kashmir Śaivism*, 165.

[149] Mishra, *Kashmir Śaivism*.

[150] Ashton, "Divine Androgyny and the Play of Self-Recognition," 176.

[151] Ashton, "Divine Androgyny and the Play of Self-Recognition," 185.

[152] Ashton, "Divine Androgyny and the Play of Self-Recognition," 190.

Ardhanārīśvara is imbued with divinity. However, not all scholars have read Ardhanārīśvara in such egalitarian terms.

Feminist Critiques and Ardhanārīśvara

Goldberg and Doniger have offered critical feminist readings of Ardhanārīśvara. Both scholars argue that Ardhanārīśvara lopsidedly extols the masculine despite being half female. Goldberg states that "the association of left-right in Indian tradition still conveys inferior-superior status" and points out that the feminine half of Ardhanārīśvara occupies this subordinate left positioning.[153] She provides ample examples, both iconographic and poetic, where the male half is convincingly privileged. For her part, Doniger writes that "Ardhanārīśvara is always regarded as a form of Śiva, not a form of Śiva and Pārvatī; the literal meaning of his name is 'The Lord (*īśvara*) who is half (*ardha*) a woman (*nārī*),' a masculine noun for a male androgyne."[154] Moreover, Doniger points to a number of Purāṇic tales where Śiva and Pārvatī merge into a singular figure so that Śiva may pacify her jealousy or anger.[155] The concession of half his body in these cases is again taken to indicate the primacy of Śiva within the Ardhanārīśvara figure. Even Goldberg, who offers an empowering reading of Pārvatī in relation to Ardhanārīśvara (i.e., she highlights the impressive ascetic disciplines accomplished by the goddess that result in her union with Śiva), still attributes the overall composite form to Śiva.[156]

Doniger, Goldberg, and Pande acknowledge that Ardhanārīśvara is often considered a symbol of equality, harmony, and wholeness but understand the figure to also represent, and perpetually reify, historical inequalities. In this connection, they relate the patriarchal undertones noted above with "Indian nuptial ideals." With reference to Pārvatī acquiring half the body of Śiva, Doniger contends that "[similarly], in Hindu marriage, the woman becomes half of her husband, but he does not become half of *her*."[157] Pande echoes this sentiment: "In the Indian nuptial ideal of *Ardha-nari*, the perfect wife or *pativarata* like Parvati in the myth of *Ardhanarishvara* becomes absorbed into half man: he does not become absorbed into her."[158] Goldberg adds: "Presented as the left half of her husband (*ardhanārī*), Pārvatī/Śakti, as the spouse-goddess, often is subdued and contained in this two-in-one image by the secondary status assigned to [her] via the subtle markings of culture."[159] These authors evidently indicate that Ardhanārīśvara has ties to traditional androcentric discourse and related nuptial ideals. However, the following section will elucidate that Ardhanārīśvara does not solely reflect the

---

[153] Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman*, 151.

[154] Doniger O'Flaherty, *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts*, 317.

[155] Doniger O'Flaherty, *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts*, 314.

[156] For example, while emboldening the female half of Ardhanārīśvara, Goldberg states that Śakti/Pārvatī "constitutes no less than half of Śiva's body." See Goldberg, *The Lord Who Is Half Woman*, 153. On page 141, Goldberg extolls the asceticism of Pārvatī that secures her unification with Śiva, though it is not clear which narrative(s) she refers to. There are stories of this sort, however, including one within the *Aruṇācalapurāṇam* mentioned earlier that will receive greater focus in Chapter 6.

[157] Doniger O'Flaherty, *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts*, 317.

[158] Pande, *Ardhanarishvara the Androgyne*, 88.

[159] Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman*, 133-134.

codification of tradition; it factors into conversations whose purpose is to eschew such conventions.

Ardhanārīśvara: Gender and Sexual Variance

Some scholars have suggested a relationship between Ardhanārīśvara and populations existing outside of and/or posing challenges to heteronormative and cisgender frameworks. In *The Man Who Was a Woman and Other Queer Tales from Hindu Lore*, Pattanaik asserts that "Śiva as the Ardhanārīśvara destroys the fettering [gender] binary paradigm."[160] Pattanaik uses Ardhanārīśvara as a departure point from which many questions spring about human biology, gender, and sexuality. He concludes that each person has both male and female qualities and that Ardhanārīśvara reflects this inherent commixture.[161] In connecting the deity to more specified groups, Pande inserts Ardhanārīśvara into the world of human affairs, claiming that "*Ardhanarishvara* is not simply a muse but a tangible reality. It flows into the 'real' world in the guise of transvestites, cross-dressers, transsexuals and homosexuals."[162] Pande appears primarily concerned with highlighting Ardhanārīśvara as a divine model to which nonbinary populations can point in assertion of their validity, emphasizing the *hijṛā* peoples in this respect (it is widely understood that *hijṛās* do not fit neatly into a male-female polarity and are officially recognized under the label of "third gender" in India).[163] Interestingly, however, Pande does not examine the ways Ardhanārīśvara does and/or does not factor into the lives of actual *hijṛās*. Saran, too, briefly indicates that *hijṛās* identify with Ardhanārīśvara.[164] Quite like Ashton connecting Ardhanārīśvara to those "beyond the male-female binary" in light of Pratyabhijñā thought, Pattanaik and Pande have notably made their assertions on hypothetical and/or theoretical grounds.

Yet Gayatri Reddy affirms in her ethnography that "hijras articulate their affinity with divine figures such as Siva, especially in his *ardhanarisvara* (half man/half woman) form."[165] In this connection, Reddy contextualizes their resonance: "Situated as they are in this [Indian] cultural universe, hijras also use these mythical and iconographic images to legitimize their lives and practices."[166] However, nothing more is said, and no concrete examples given, of the relationship between *hijṛās* and Ardhanārīśvara in her book. Drawing from her own ethnographic work, Nanda also claims that *hijṛās* resonate with Ardhanārīśvara but grants this

---

[160] Devdutt Pattanaik, *The Man Who Was a Woman and Other Queer Tales of Hindu Lore* (New York: Harrington Park Press, 2002), 126.

[161] Pattanaik, *The Man Who Was a Woman and Other Queer Tales of Hindu Lore*, 132.

[162] Pande, *Ardhanarishvara the Androgyne*, xii.

[163] *Hijṛās* and the "third gender" category will receive sustained attention in the subsequent chapter; for now, I will say that in the Indian context third gender is both a legal category and an umbrella term referring to a variety of people whose gender identity does not fit neatly into a static male-female binary.

[164] Saran, *Yoga, Bhoga and Ardhanariswara*, 207.

[165] Gayatri Reddy, *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India* (New Delhi: Yoda Press, 2005), 89.

[166] Reddy, *With Respect to Sex*, 89.

insight similarly cursory treatment.[167] Elaine Craddock offers slightly more insight in "Un/Desirable Encounters at the Intersections of Race, Class, and Caste in South Asia." She states that Tamil *thirunangais* (whom she suggests are known as "*hijras* in other parts of India") identify with Ardhanārīśvara and believe that their connection to the deity allows Aṇkāḷammaṉ (a form of Pārvatī that merges with Śiva) to speak through them "when they perform rituals of *kuṟi*, or fortunetelling, and *kaṟippu*, expelling malignant forces."[168] The *thirunangai*-Ardhanārīśvara connection is not otherwise explored in this work. For her part, Doniger seems to caution against thinking that Ardhanārīśvara legitimizes human populations. While she recognizes that Ardhanārīśvara holds androgynous qualities that go "praised in the abstract," she highlights that Śiva as "the androgyne" is also "satirized with banal literal-mindedness for [these] very qualities" in certain passages (namely, one wherein the would-be father-in-law of Śiva mocks him for being neither thoroughly male nor female).[169]

Additional Philosophical Associations

Ardhanārīśvara has also been linked to notions of *bhedābheda* (difference and non-difference) and *viśiṣṭādvaita* (qualified nondualism). The concept of *bhedābheda* holds that the individual soul (*jīvātman*) is both different and not different from the divine. Sometimes *bhedābheda* is explained in terms of the distinction between part and whole.[170] Sparks issued from a larger fire are, in essence, no different than the fire but do not amount to its totality; individual souls are analogously the same as, yet different from, the Absolute. In *viśiṣṭādvaita* thought, creation is viewed as inseparably dependent on, yet distinct from, Brahman (i.e., the Absolute); the manifold universe (including its sentient beings) is, as it were, the body of Brahman, its innermost spirit and controller.[171] Doniger suggests that both *bhedābheda* and *viśiṣṭādvaita* wrestle with "the problem of how, if at all, one may *unite* with god when one *is* god," and she takes "the androgyne" to represent this tension between sameness and distinctiveness.[172] After all, the distinct halves of Ardhanārīśvara indicate discernible difference while the simultaneous unification of these halves by a singular body suggests sameness.

Additionally, Ardhanārīśvara is associated with the concept of *coincidentia oppositorum*; that is, the merging of two opposites that must have something in common to be both opposed

---

[167] Serena Nanda, *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 1999), 20.

[168] Elaine Craddock, "Un/Desirable Encounters at the Intersections of Race, Class, and Caste in South Asia," *Feminist Review* 135, no. 1 (December 2023): 127 (for description of *hijṛās*) and 135 (for the Ardhanārīśvara association). However, it should be noted that "*thirunangai*" (translated along the lines of "respected woman") has been increasingly adopted within Tamil contexts, in part, so as to avoid the trappings thought to come with terms like "*hijṛā*."

[169] Doniger O'Flaherty, *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts*, 323.

[170] Swami Śivananda, *All About Hinduism* (Uttar Pradesh: Divine Life Society, 1999), 147.

[171] For more information on *viśiṣṭādvaita*, see Flood, *An introduction to Hinduism*, 243-245.

[172] See Doniger O'Flaherty, 333. Goldberg also connects Ardhanārīśvara to *bhedābheda* but does so rather cursorily. See Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman*, pages 104 and 107.

and united.[173] In other words, Ardhanārīśvara is interpreted as symbolic of a paradoxical wholeness that transcends and includes all apparent contradictions. Importantly, Śiva is known to embody paradoxical tendencies outside of his composite Ardhanārīśvara form. For example, he may exhibit both disciplined asceticism and excessive eroticism in the same narrative.[174] Thus, Ardhanārīśvara is considered a symbol of the paradoxical nature of Śiva, a quality attributed to him whether in composite form or otherwise.[175]

Ardhanārīśvara is also discussed alongside *puruṣa* and *prakṛti.* Masculine and feminine principles are sometimes associated with *puruṣa* (pure consciousness) and *prakṛti* (nature) respectively. Accordingly, Śiva may be identified with the former and Pārvatī the latter.[176] Doris Meth Srinivasan notes that "some purāṇic passages describe creation as due to the cooperation of Puruṣa and Prakṛti" and singles out the *Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa* for explaining that Ardhanārīśvara expresses this understanding of creation.[177] That the image of Ardhanārīśvara embodies *puruṣa* and *prakṛti* is an observation made by Bhattarcharyya, too.[178]

Ardhanārīśvara: Cult, Praxis, and Sites of Worship

Some scholars suggest the possibility of past cults centering on Ardhanārīśvara or, at least, of its potential historic prominence. In addition to the Tripurā coin identified by Lahiri mentioned earlier, this may be evidenced by a numismatic example of Ardhanārīśvara noted by Yadav: a coin attributed to the Kuṣāṇa ruler, Kanishka III, depicting Ardhanārīśvara on one side.[179] Ardhanārīśvara also appears referenced in travel accounts as early as the 2nd century CE; one observation attributed to Bardaisan describes the "Supreme God" of the Western Ghāṭs as a half-male, half-female figure.[180] Yet information on Ardhanārīśvara in the religious life of bygone eras is scant.

---

[173] This definition is from Doniger O'Flaherty, *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts*, 296 (note she is relaying a definition provided by Eliade). Also note that Doniger offers two different spellings. On 296, she writes *coniunctio oppositorum*; on 333, she uses *coincidentia oppositorum*.

[174] For a study on these themes, see Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *Śiva: The Erotic Ascetic* (United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 1981).

[175] For example, Flood connects Ardhanārīśvara to the ambiguity and paradox of Śiva. See Flood, *An introduction to Hinduism*, 150-151.

[176] See David Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses: Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition* (Berkley, University of California Press, 1988), 49-50.

[177] Doris Meth Srinivasan, *Many Heads, Arms, and Eyes: Oirign, Meaning and Form of Multiplicity in Indian Art* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 59.

[178] Bhattarcharyya, *Iconology of Composite Images*, 26-27.

[179] See Yadav, *Ardhanārīśvara in Art and Literature*, 13. In fact, Lahiri lists several Tripurā kings that declare themselves as worshippers of Śiva-Durgā, though it is only the mid-16th-century Vijayamāṇikya whom Lahiri connects with the numismatic depiction of Ardhanārīśvara specifically. See Lahiri, "Iconography of Ardhanārīśvara on a Tripurā Coin," 102.

[180] Yadav, *Ardhanārīśvara in Art and Literature*, 14. The Bardaisan account is found in an anthology attributed to Stobaeus, a 5th-century Macedonian and complier of extracts of Greek authors. Bardaisan lived from 154-222 CE and is known to have made contact with "religious" men from India during this time.

In terms of ritual, Shulman and Hiltetbeitel describe temple *liṅgas* whose left halves are demarcated by different colouring or accompanied by female jewellery, clearly indicating the Ardhanārīśvara motif and allowing devotees *darśan* (auspicious sight) of Śiva and the Goddess in union.[181] Dominic Goodall, in his analysis of certain passages from the *Guhyasūtra*, describes how the text directs devotees to adopt the appearance of Ardhanārīśvara in their pursuit of particular *siddhis* (supernatural abilities).[182] Törzsök points to a "ferocious Ardhanārīśvara" in the *Siddhayogeśvarīmata*, clarifying that "this is not a description but a prescription, given for the visualisation (*dhyāna*) of Bhairava in his half male half female form (*ardhanārīśvara*)."[183] Finally, L'Hernault and Marie Louise Reiniche discuss the appearance of Ardhanārīśvara during the Kārthikai Dīpa festival of Tiruvannamalai. On the tenth day of this festival, a processional image of Ardhanārīśvara is brought out into a courtyard of the Tiruvannamalai Aruṇāchaleśvara temple at the moment a giant fire is lit atop the Aruṇācala Hill; the processional Ardhanārīśvara points to a myth tied to the site in which Śiva and Pārvatī merge, while the fire marks where Śiva appeared as a *jyotirliṅga* (a column of fiery light). [184]

Rather than focusing on Ardhanārīśvara in relation to external ritual supports (e.g., processional Ardhanārīśvara images), Goldberg analyzes the figure as concerns the internal processes of yogic practitioners and in connection to devotional aims more broadly. In "Ardhanārīśvara: An Androgynous Model of God," she asserts that Ardhanārīśvara serves as "a model or cosmic blueprint of what is potentially possible for the human practitioner to realize in the context of *yoga sādhanā* (spiritual practice)."[185] This is to say that Ardhanārīśvara serves as a "meditational map," indicating an experiential state sought (or achieved) by yogic practitioners in their pursuit of undifferentiated consciousness.[186] Although this may read as rather conjectural, Goldberg actually draws on insights shared by an informant, Swami Oṃ Shivatva Muni, as she presents the "insider perspective" which sees Ardhanārīśvara as a signpost along the stages of *sādhanā*.[187] Goldberg and Pande also take the image of Ardhanārīśvara to indicate and encourage ardent devotion more generally. Both authors note narratives in which Pārvatī undertakes austerities as a prerequisite to unifying with Śiva as Ardhanārīśvara. In such cases, Pārvatī serves as a model devotee; in turn, Ardhanārīśvara

---

[181] Shulman, *Tamil Temple Myths*, pages 163 and 269; Hiltebeitel, *The Cult of Draupadī Vol. 1*, 447.

[182] Dominic Goodall, "Dressing for Power: On vrata, caryā, and vidyāvrata in the Early Mantramārga, and on the Structure of the Guhyasūtra of the Niśvāsatattvasaṃhitā," in *Śaivism and the Tantric Traditions: Essays in Honour of Alexis G.J.S. Sanderson*, eds. Dominic Goodall, Shaman Hatley, Harunaga Isaacson, and Srilata Raman Koninklijke Brill NV), 75-78.

[183] Judit Törzsök, "The rewriting of a Tantric tradition: from the Siddhayogeśvarīmata to the Timirodghāṭana and beyond," *Hal: Open Science* (2012): 2.

[184] Francoise L'Hernault and Marie Louise Reiniche, *Tiruvaṇṇāmalai: Rites et fêtes* (Pondicherry: Institut français de Pondichéry, 1989), 103-108.

[185] Ellen Goldberg, "Ardhanārīśvara: An Androgynous Model of God," in *Models of God and Alternative Ultimate Realities*, eds. Jeanine Diller and Asa Kasher (Germany: Springer Science & Business Media, 2013), 5.

[186] Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman*, 73. Recall that a similar discussion was provided with respect to the raising of Kuṇḍalinī (see the "Ardhanārīśvara as a Tantric Deity" section above).

[187] Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman*, 73.

represents, in their view, the possibility for any and all devotees to gain the favour of Śiva through steadfast devotion.[188]

Ardhanārīśvara is also associated with dance and theatre. For example, in the Andhra Nāṭya dance form, the male and female halves of Ardhanārīśvara are depicted with the help of a veil that covers half the face.[189] When the dancer embodies the female aspect, they expose the feminine half of the face and undertake the *lāsya* dance. Conversely, when embodying the male aspect, the masculine side of the face is exposed and the dancer performs the *tāṇḍava* dance.[190] Other traditions, such as the Bharata Nāṭya, rely more heavily on hand gestures to suggest the male and female aspects of Ardhanārīśvara.[191] With respect to the related realm of theatre, Debojit Majumder, in "Female Impersonators or Human Counterparts of Ardhanariswaras?," ventures to say that the female impersonators in Bengali *jatra* (a type of folk theatre) performances "can certainly be described as human counterparts of Ardhanariswara;" the author suggests that through deeply incarnating womanhood, the otherwise male performers embody "the fusion of Shiva and Parvati."[192] Other times Ardhanārīśvara is understood to be intimated. Nanda, Doniger, and Hiltebeitel recognize portrayals of Arjuna as Bṛihannala (Arjuna guised in feminine attire) that depict the character in a "vertically divided half-man/half-woman form" within modern enactments of the *Mahābhārata*; these scholars assert that a clear link between the transvestic Arjuna and Ardhanārīśvara is thereby made.[193]

Sites of worship wherein Ardhanārīśvara serves as presiding deity have received cursory attention at best. For example, Goldberg mentions visiting an Ardhanārīśvara temple in Mandi, Himachal Pradesh, but does not elaborate.[194] Yadav simply lists the Tiruchengode temple dedicated to Ardhanārīśvara in a section entitled "Find Spots of Ardhanārīśvara in India."[195] Bansal, in her book on Hindu pilgrimage, states there are two main temples in Guptkashi, Uttarakhand, one of which is dedicated to Ardhanārīśvara.[196] In *Shaivism in the Light of Epics,*

---

[188] Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman*, 141-142; Pande, *Ardhanarishvara the Androgyne*, 94.

[189] Pande, *Ardhanarishvara the Androgyne*, 123-124.

[190] Pande, *Ardhanarishvara the Androgyne*, 123-124. Also, Goldberg describes the *tāṇḍava* dance as rigorous and the *lāsya* dance as tender. See Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman*, 110. Anne-Marie Gaston also adds that Ardhanārīśvara is depicted in the Yakṣagāna dance tradition, though does elaborate as to how. See Anne-Marie Gaston, *Śiva in Dance, Myth, and Iconography* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982), 139.

[191] Gaston, *Śiva in Dance, Myth, and Iconography*, 139.

[192] Debojit Majumder, "Female Impersonators or Human Counterparts of Ardhanariswaras?"in *Androgyny and Female Impersonation in India: Nari Bhav*, eds. Tutun Mukherjee and Niladri R. Chatterjee (New Delhi: Niyogi Books, 2016). The first quote is from page 122, and the second quote is from page 125.

[193] See Serena Nanda, *Neither Man nor Woman*, 31; Alf Hiltebeitel, *The Cult of Draupadī Vol. 1: Mythologies: From Gingee to Kurukṣetra* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1991), 248 (here he shows a picture); and Doniger O'Flaherty, *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts*, 299.

[194] Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman*, xiii.

[195] Yadav, *Ardhanārīśvara in Art and Literature*, 195. This site is connected to the Tiruchengode myth mentioned by Hiltebeitel (see the earlier "Purāṇic Narratives and Temple Lore" section).

[196] Sunita Pant Bansal, *Hindu Pilgrimage: The Teerthas* (Delhi: Hindology books, 2008), 31.

Purāṇas, and Āgamas, Bhatt merely states that "Śiva as Ardhanārīśvara is worshipped in temples of the South."[197] Lochtefeld is slightly more detailed in *God's Gateway*; he describes an expansion of the Bilvakeshvar Temple site in Hardwar, financed by film composer Gulshan Kumar in the 1990s, that involved the construction of other temples, including one to Ardhanārīśvara.[198] Scholarship on Ardhanārīśvara sites of worship is undoubtedly lacking.

Ardhanārīśvara and Cult Syncretism

The notion of syncretism (particularly when applied to historical religiosity) has been problematized. In this connection, Stewart notably argues that assertions of syncretism misleadingly suggest structures (e.g., ritual, doctrinal, institutional) in place in the past that had actually yet to cohere.[199] Notwithstanding such issues, there are those who contend that Ardhanārīśvara is indicative of historic cult syncretism(s), and here I present their claims as a matter of elucidating how the deity is framed in scholarship.

Shukla plainly forwards Ardhanārīśvara as a syncretic figure in *A Study of Hindu Art and Architecture*.[200] Similarly, Yadav places Ardhanārīśvara in a class of composite figures that "represent [rapprochement] and unity between the different [Hindu] sects" alongside other examples, such as Harihara.[201] A few explanations are asserted in support of this possibility. First, according to Yadav, "syncretic images" may reflect the reconciliation and/or amalgamation of rivalling groups.[202] In this connection, she states that philosophical thought found in revered texts, such as the Upaniṣads, allowed for sects to interpret their different gods as various forms of an overarching unity, resulting in forms such as Ardhanārīśvara.[203] Second, Yadav seems to suggest that Ardhanārīśvara, whose earliest material expressions are ascribed to the Kuṣāṇa age, gained popularity in the later Gupta period due to reflecting "a policy of religious tolerance towards the different religious sects" followed by the Gupta kings.[204] Yadav also suggests that Ardhanārīśvara may have been foregrounded in instances where rulers of different dynasties intermarried and/or in cases of marriages between different groups of people more generally.[205] Finally, although unclearly articulated, she appears to hypothesize that Ardhanārīśvara may indicate the absorption of goddess cults by Śaiva traditions or vice

---

[197] Niddodi Ramachandra Bhatt, *Shaivism in the Light of Epics, Purāṇas, and Āgamas* (Varanasi: Indica Books, 2008), 167.

[198] James G. Lochtefeld, *God's Gateway* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 16.

[199] Tony K. Stewart, "In Search of Equivalence: Conceiving Muslim-Hindu Encounter Through Translation Theory," in *History of Religions* 40, no. 3 (February 2001): 262.

[200] See Dr. Lalit Kumar Shukla, *A Study of Hindu Art and Architecture* (Varanasi: Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series Office, 1971), 227.

[201] Yadav, *Ardhanārīśvara in Art and Literature*, 12.

[202] Yadav, *Ardhanārīśvara in Art and Literature*, 12.

[203] Yadav, *Ardhanārīśvara in Art and Literature*, 12. However, Yadav doesn't expand on what philosophical thought is being referred to.

[204] Yadav, *Ardhanārīśvara in Art and Literature*, 160. Again, the Kuṣāṇa Empire is dated around 30-375 CE and the Gupta from around 320-550 CE.

[205] Yadav, *Ardhanārīśvara in Art and Literature*, 160-161.

versa.[206] Whatever the historicity of these contentions, the imagery of Ardhanārīśvara points to Śaiva and Śākta streams of Hinduism, evidently lending itself well to readings of absorption, amalgamation, and/or mutual tolerance.

The theme of syncretism is also tied to the myth series involving Bhṛṅgī (see the earlier "Purāṇic Narratives and Temple Lore" section). Neha Singh briefly provides a version of the narrative and then asserts that Banerjea, in his *The Development of Hindu Iconography*, presents the Bhṛṅgī story as suggesting "the existence of sectarianism that was partially overcome."[207] However, it must be clarified that despite indicating that the Ardhanārīśvara icon encourages cult syncretism, Banerjea actually highlights Bhṛṅgī as one who fails to relinquish his sectarian proclivity.[208]

Analysis of Scholarship on Ardhanārīśvara

The foregoing overview indicates that scholarship on Ardhanārīśvara has primarily focused on its iconography, its place within devotional poetry and mythological narratives, its relationship to philosophical thought, and postulated connections to other phenomena (e.g., the deity is framed as a homologue of various tantric concepts and imagery). Importantly, in identifying these focuses I have also concurrently located glaring lacunas; there is very little covered in terms of Ardhanārīśvara sites of worship, related religious life, nor of its place within ground realities in general. As a result, much of its iconographic forms, mythologies, ritual connections, conceptualizations, and utilizations are unaccounted for or insufficiently attended to. Indeed, even the areas afforded focus within the scholarship examined in this chapter are rather conjectural and/or incomplete. For example, Pande and Doniger suggest that Ardhanārīśvara reflects androcentric nuptial ideals. Be that as it may, no sentiments of actual people are drawn upon regarding how the figure is viewed with respect to marriage and concomitant family life within their discussions. Even those scholars that connect Ardhanārīśvara to place-based lore (e.g., the *Aruṇācalapurāṇam* of Tiruvannamalai) provide little attention (if any) to living traditions involving the figure within the associated locales. Suffice it to say that investigations concerning real-world understandings of and engagements with Ardhanārīśvara are lacking on the whole.

In this connection, the links made between Ardhanārīśvara and peoples nonaligned with heteronormative and/or cisgender frameworks have been largely forwarded hypothetically and/or theoretically within scholarship (e.g., in the works of Pattanaik, Pande, and Saran). Granted, the prospect of such associations is arresting given the heteronormative (and perhaps cisgender) flavour Ardhanārīśvara is often accorded. Purāṇic narratives involving the deity, for example, depict Ardhanārīśvara as the result of Śiva and Pārvatī merging due to some male-

[206] Yadav, *Ardhanārīśvara in Art and Literature*, 154.

[207] Singh, "The Ardhanārīśvaramūrti in Early Medieval Indian Temple Art," 173.

[208] See Jitendra Nath Banerjea, *The Development of Hindu Iconography* (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1956), 553.

female affection (even if to resolve quarreling) or see Ardhanārīśvara split apart to demonstrate that procreation is only possible with two sexes. Furthermore, some scholars (e.g., Doniger) who recognize that Ardhanārīśvara may go praised as androgynous, caution that human embodiments of sexual and/or gender atypicality are considered of different sort and not likewise lauded. Nanda and Reddy, on the other hand, passingly suggest that *hijṛās* encountered in their fieldwork claim legitimation through associating themselves with divine models such as Ardhanārīśvara. Again, this is intriguing, especially when juxtaposed with the aforementioned heteronormative and/or cisgender connotations otherwise attached to Ardhanārīśvara. Yet rather than thoroughly engage the place of this composite deity within the lives of those embodying gender and/or sexual variance, only hypothetical, theoretical, or (at best) passing mention of Ardhanārīśvara as relevant to these populations exists within available scholarship. It is also worth noting that while a host of related designations, such as "transvestite," "cross-dresser," "transsexual," "homosexual," and "*hijṛā*," are linked to Ardhanārīśvara, other terms, including "transgender" and "*kinnar*" ("third gender" markers burgeoning within India), are curiously absent in the works of the authors examined in this chapter.

Conclusion

This chapter has acquainted the reader with Ardhanārīśvara through delineating its multiplex presentations within scholarship. In doing so, I analyzed publications dedicated to the deity and examined references found peppered throughout works whose focuses are not this composite figure. This extensive survey of scholarship culminated in my claims that there are lacunas and shortcomings therein. The primary research contexts of this dissertation are engaged with these issues in mind.

My upcoming chapters on the Durgā Pūjā and Kinnar Akhāḍā contexts primarily consider the place of Ardhanārīśvara within the lives of populations historically marginalized for their gender and/or sexual identities. This will allow me to move beyond the hypothetical, theoretical, and passing suggestions that Ardhanārīśvara is relevant to them. To describe their associated nomenclature, histories of oppression, and movements meant to counteract such maltreatment as complex would be an understatement. Thus, the following chapter is dedicated to navigating these matters. In doing so, I will present the populations in question and elucidate the issues they have advanced Ardhanārīśvara in response to.

Chapter 3
Contextualizing Matters of Gender and Sexual Variance

Introduction

Popular articles and news reports have linked Ardhanārīśvara to peoples identifying with gender and/or sexual orientations beyond cis and/or heteronormative varieties.[1] In contrast to those scholarly works which have done the same (discussed in the previous chapter), these sources more often do so in relation to situated events and with more sustained attention. This is particularly true for those pieces detailing the place of Ardhanārīśvara within recent Durgā Pūjā festivities and, to some extent, those covering Kinnar Akhāḍā initiatives. When initially reading through related sources, I was struck by how Ardhanārīśvara was framed in relation to specific communities, their marginalization, and associated advocacy. Additionally, I noted the apparent conflation of terms (namely "*hijṛā*," "*tṛtīyāprakṛti*," "third gender," "transgender," and "*kinnar"*) used to designate those involved.

This chapter introduces the populations associated with these designations and addresses themes of their conflation, marginalization, and emancipation through an examination of pertinent sociopolitical and legal developments. In part, this endeavour is inspired by the Foucauldian idea of a "history of the present," one which takes a contemporary issue and works out its genealogy to shed light on its current state of affairs.[2] Introducing these peoples and (re)tracing the aforementioned developments will contextualize the quandaries Ardhanārīśvara has been made to confront during recent Durgā Pūjā festivals and Kinnar Akhāḍā affairs. I also analyze how these uniquely South Asian discourses have been situated in broader conversations centering on gender and sexuality as well as within scholarship engaging these themes. In effect, the stage will be set to examine Ardhanārīśvara within the Durgā Pūjā and Kinnar Akhāḍā contexts focused on in subsequent chapters.

Hijṛās at Sophisticated Margins

For better or worse, the *hijṛā* peoples have received ample attention within scholarship. Despite some notable ethnographies offering more comprehensive and sensitive treatment, *hijṛās* have often, in reductionistic fashion, been framed as a (if not *the*) quintessential non-Western representative of gender and/or sexual variance, one that upsets dimorphic categories

[1] For an example of a popular source, see Rajat Ghai, "The Hindu canon is inclusive of the sexuality spectrum: Kavita Kane," *Down to Earth*, https://www.downtoearth.org.in/interviews/governance/the-hindu-canon-is-inclusive-of-the-sexuality-spectrum-kavita-kane-92354 (accessed Nov. 2023). For a news article, see Laxman Chaurasiya, "India's transgender became Ardhnarishwar, made Hindus proud on world stage," *Justice News*, https://www.justicenews.co.in/indias-transgender-became-ardhnarishwar-made-hindus-proud-on-world-stage/#google_vignette (accessed March 2025).

[2] David Garland, "What is a "history of the present"? On Foucault's genealogies and their critical preconditions," *Punishment & Society* 16, no. 4 (October 2014): 367.

of gender and/or sex.[3] In selecting the *hijṛās* to begin my consideration of the terms identified above, I aim not to perpetuate this framing. However, it is because of their widespread presentation as paragons of gender and/or sexual variance that I opt to start with them; largely because of this reputation, *hijṛās* have factored into each of the major sociopolitical, legal, and scholarly discourses discussed in this chapter, and familiarity with them is therefore important.

It is popularly understood that South Asian *hijṛā* peoples do not fit neatly into a male-female polarity and are thus generalized akin to "a middle gender that combines the characteristics of man and woman" or "neither man nor woman."[4] In part, these descriptions reflect the understanding that *hijṛā* populations are mainly comprised of phenotypic men who adopt vestiary practices considered feminine (i.e., wearing *sāṛīs*, nose rings, wrist bangles, etc.) and undergo penectomies and orchiectomies during "sacrificial emasculation" (known as a *nirvāṇ* operation).[5] Be that as it may, Gayatri Reddy notes that such characterizations are essentialist and misleading. She asserts that "hijras are not *just* a sexual or gendered category, as is commonly contended in [scholarship]. Like the members of any other community in India, their identities are shaped by a range of other axes."[6] Accordingly, in *With Respect to Sex*, Reddy offers a remedial ethnography; she examines the domain of sexuality in relation to aspects of kinship, religion, class, and hierarchies of respect as she details observations of everyday *hijṛā* life in Hyderabad and Secunderabad.[7] Her seminal book adds to the pioneering ethnography of Serena Nanda (which took place in Bastipore, Delhi, Chandigarh, Mumbai, and in and around Ahmedabad) and is one among a growing corpus reflecting increasing journalistic

[3] Sujata Moorti, "A queer romance with the *Hijra*," *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking* 3, no. 2 (Summer 2016): 18.

[4] The first quote is taken from Takeshi Ishikawa, "Hijras," *Indian Literature* 55, no. 6 (November/December 2011): 213. The second quote is found within, popularized by, and even helps form the title of Serena Nanda *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 1999).

[5] This description draws from one offered by Reddy. See Gayatri Reddy, *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India* (New Delhi: Yoda Press, 2005), 2. The word *nirvāṇ* may look familiar to some readers as it is etymologically tied to the Buddhist *nirvāṇa*, the latter referring to a state free of desires and the production of *karma* (volitional actions) that otherwise perpetuate the cycle of births and rebirths (*samsāra*). Relatedly, the *nirvāṇ* operation reifies an idealized asexuality (absence of sexual desire). This connection is outlined in Mathieu Boisvert, "Cultivating a female body: Appropriation of female rituality (*samskāra*) within the hijra community," in *Rethinking the Body in South Asian Traditions*, ed. Diana Dimitrova (London and New York: Routledge, 2021) 100. Moreover, Reddy and Nanda relay that *hijṛās* view *nirvāṇ* as a rebirth whereby one becomes "a real hijra." See Reddy, *With Respect to Sex*, 93 and Nanda, *Neither Man nor Woman*, 26. Although rebirth implies one remains in *samsāra*, a connection with *nirvāṇa* may yet exist in that *nirvāṇ* ensures irrevocable release from pre-*nirvāṇ* life. In this connection, Nanda recounts a myth in which Bahucharā Mātā (a Hindu goddess associated with *hijṛās*) calls upon an impotent man, Jetho, to undergo castration and dress in female clothing; there is a derivative belief that those who resist her call for emasculation will be born impotent for seven future births. Conversely, *hijṛās* who have heeded her call for *nirvāṇ* in this lifetime forgo rebirths of this sort. See Nanda, *Neither Man nor Woman*, 25.

[6] Reddy, *With Respect to Sex*, 2.

[7] Reddy, *With Respect to Sex*, 2.

and academic interest.[8] Drawing from these works as well as the scholarship of Boisvert and Saria, I will provide an introduction to some aspects of *hijṛā* life.

The above scholars recognize the complexities of *hijṛā* households, lineages, social arrangements, vocabularies, and religious standing. In doing so, they present a multifaceted, nuanced, and above all human demographic. *Hijṛās* exist variously all over the Indian subcontinent, sometimes living alone but often communally. According to Nanda, there are seven *hijṛā* "houses" (or *gharāṇās*) in India (Laskarwallah, Chaklawallah, Lalanwallah, Bendi Bazaar, Poonawallah, Ballakwallah, and Adipur); these "houses" may be more accurately thought of as clans or lineages.[9] Reddy confirms this structuring, asserting that Hyderabad is home to two of seven *hijṛā* houses, namely the Lasharwala and Sheharwala.[10] Although there is intracommunity cooperation between houses (for instance, there are interregional *hijṛā* events), factions are sometimes at odds with each other over areal disputes. *Hijṛā* houses claim *ilākas* (prescribed territorial boundaries) in which they reserve the right to work (which generally consists of ritual performance, sex work, and/or petitioning alms); Nanda and Reddy report examples of related conflicts in Chandigarh and Hyderabad, respectively.[11] *Hijṛā* houses ordinarily consist of a *nāyak* (the *gharāṇā* head), under which are *hijṛā gurus*, their *celās* (initiated disciples), and *nāti-celās* (disciples of a disciple).[12] While actual residences regularly have all-*hijṛā* occupants, this may be a rather urban affair; Saria points out that *hijṛās* often live within (or remain linked to) their natal homes in rural Odisha, for example.[13] The term "*hijṛā*" is evidently a broad label encapsulating more particularized social designations, also including *badhāi hijṛās* (those that confer ritual blessings), *kāndra hijṛās* (those engaging in sex work), and *nirvāṇ sultāns* (*hijṛās* that have undergone physical emasculation).[14] Moreover, the

---

[8] These locations cited on Nanda, *Neither Man nor Woman*, xviii. Note that Nanda actually refers to Mumbai as Bombay. The city changed its name from Bombay to Mumbai when the right-wing Hindu nationalist party, Shiv Sena, came to power; the name Bombay was associated with British colonial rule, an era viewed unfavourably by the party.

[9] Nanda, *Neither Man nor Woman*, 39. Nanda clarifies that these "houses," or "symbolic descent groups," should not be confused with physical households or living groups therein; members of a given "house" can and do occupy different households.

[10] Reddy, *With Respect to Sex*, 9. Evidently, one of the "houses" cited by Reddy is not found in the list Nanda provides. Yet Nanda also notes that the seven named houses "exist with some slight variation from region to region all over India," presumably accounting for this discrepancy. See Nanda, *Neither Man nor Woman*, 39. Boisvert also reiterates this structuring in Mumbai and Pune; he refers to these "houses" as *gharāṇā*, a term also used in the Hindustani musical tradition in reference to various schools or "houses" of interpretation. See Boisvert, "Cultivating a female body," 92-93 (and the first endnote on 113).

[11] Reddy is the one who provides the name for prescribed territorial boundaries when describing related tensions. See Reddy, *With Respect to Sex*, 9. Nanda, while discussing territorial disputes in Chandigarh, is the one who lists these work types. See Nanda, *Neither Man nor Woman*, 44.

[12] These titles are listed and discussed on Reddy, *With Respect to Sex*, 9-10. Vaibhav Saria notes that *nāti-celās* are analogous to grandchildren or *nātis*. See, Vaibhav Saria, "To Be Some Other Name: The Naming Games that Hijras Play," *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal*. 12 (2015): 14.

[13] Vaibhav Saria, *Hijras, Lovers, Brothers: Surviving Sex and Poverty in Rural India* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2021), 16.

[14] Reddy, *With Respect to Sex*, 56-57.

communities in question reference players in their social milieus with terminology such as *kothis* (men described as "like women" for their receptive role in intercourse and general "feminine" mannerisms), *panthis* ("real men" who take on a sexually penetrative role with *kothis* and/or women), and *berūpias* (men who impersonate *hijṛās* for a living).[15]

Although Nanda has claimed that *hijṛās* predominantly reside in North Indian cities for the opportunities there to perform their traditional roles, Saria, in *Hijras, Lovers, Brothers*, suggests that rural areas (the focus of their ethnography) are increasingly becoming the more comfortable contexts for *hijṛās* to make a living; increased railway connectivity has allowed greater access to these spaces, away from the urban centres where living costs are high and the rules (of *hijṛā* households) are more stringent.[16] Yet in both rural and urban contexts, *hijṛās* are linked to unique positions and functions within the religious sphere. Nanda remarks (and Saria corroborates) that *hijṛās* are associated with both auspicious functions and inauspicious potential in that they can confer either fertility or infertility.[17] Accordingly, they are hired, mainly by Hindu patrons, to bestow blessings at weddings and births.[18] Furthermore, *hijṛās* have their own patron deities, such as the Hindu goddess Bahucharā Mātā (whom *hijṛās* all over India worship), and celebrate particular festivals, such as the Koovagam Festival of Tamil Nadu, which centers on another Hindu *hijṛā* tutelary, Aravāṉ.[19] However, scholars also note the influence of Islam on *hijṛā* social organization and culture. In fact, in *Les hijras*, Boisvert states that several of his *hijṛā* informants claim that the term "*hijṛā*" comes from an Arabic word designating the exile of Mohammed (founder of Islam) from Mecca in 622.[20] Rather than solely indicating this geographical movement, Boisvert suggests that the term now additionally refers

---

[15] These descriptions of *kothis*, *panthis*, and *berūpias* are drawn from Reddy. See Reddy, *With Respect to Sex*, 46, 48, and 54 respectively.

[16] See Nanda, *Neither Man nor Woman*, 38, and see Saria, *Hijras, Lovers, Brothers*, 16. I have written "their ethnography" given Saria uses gender-neutral pronouns.

[17] Nanda, *Neither Man nor Woman*, 6. Interestingly, this ability is linked to *hijṛā* asexuality, and particularly the *nirvāṇ* operation that ensures it. See Reddy, *With Respect to Sex*, 56.

[18] This is mentioned on Reddy, *With Respect to Sex*, 109. Nanda echoes this point as well; see Nanda, *Neither Man nor Woman,* 41. Interestingly, Saria suggests that the presence of *hijṛās* at such occasions is largely a given in urban areas and that their appearances are often met with "fear and dread" in these contexts given their "tendencies to extort money and not back down from a fight;" conversely, *hijṛās* were actively invited to fulfill their ritual roles in the rural settings Saria engaged. See Saria, *Hijras, Lovers, Brothers*, 58.

[19] Bahucharā Mātā is recognizable in iconography by her rooster *vāhana*, her main temple is in the Becharaji village of Gujarat, and there are several narratives linking her to *hijṛās*, including another (i.e., in addition to the Jetho story mentioned earlier) taken to indicate that she offers protection to all those enduring a *nirvāṇ* operation). See Boisvert, "Cultivating a female body," 114 (for an endnote mentioning the rooster), and 106-107 (for temple and myth discussion). Koovagam is a small village in Tamil Nadu; Aravāṉ is a character in the *Mahābhārata* who agrees to be sacrificed in order to appease the overarching conflict between two family branches (the Pāṇḍavas and the Kauravas). However, Aravāṉ accepts his sacrifice on the condition he may enjoy marriage before death. No woman agrees for fear of immanent widowhood, so Kṛṣṇa takes on the female form of Mohinī and fulfills his wish. The Koovagam festival celebrates this event. See Boisvert, "Cultivating a female body," 109. Note that "third gender" people in Tamil Nadu are often known as *aravāṉis* due to their association with Aravāṉ.

[20] Mathieu Boisvert, *Les hijras: portrait socioreligieux d'une communauté transgenre sud-asiatique* (Montréal: Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 2018), 14.

to the shift *hijṛās* have made away from manhood.[21] Nanda also notes that the founders of the seven *hijṛā* houses were purportedly Muslim and that current house leaders resolve disputes in a *jamat*, or a "meeting of the elders," which she describes as a "Muslim cultural pattern."[22] Indeed, *hijṛās* may readily identify as Muslim, and Reddy observes that they principally did so during her fieldwork in Hyderabad while concomitantly incorporating Hindu practices; Quranic verses hung on Mecca-facing walls of *nāyak* households, *ḥalāl* meat was preferred, and *namāz* was performed, yet their patroness, the Hindu goddess Bahucharā Mātā, was also worshipped.[23] Similarly, Boisvert recognizes that *hijṛā* pilgrimages are undertaken to both Hindu temples (e.g., the Bahucharā Mātā temple of Becharaji, Gujarat) and Islamic *dargāhs* (mausoleums of Ṣūfī saints).[24] Saria, in the rural Odisha contexts of their ethnography, also recognizes "the way the crossovers between Hindu and Muslim theologies were lived [by *hijṛās*]."[25] In addition to identifying as Muslim, Boisvert recognizes that some *hijṛās* identity as Hindu, others as both Hindu and Muslim, and others still as neither.[26] At any rate, the *hijṛās* of India clearly demonstrate a religious life uniquely their own.

Membership in the *hijṛā* fold involves a particular constellation of rituality. Boisvert, drawing from fieldwork conducted in Mumbai and Pune (as well as pilgrimage sites away from these centers), examines "four rituals at the very core of [*hijṛā*] identity:" the *rīt* (ritual entry into the *hijṛā* community), the *dūdhpīlānā* (the milk drinking ceremony), the *nirvāṇ* (emasculation ritual), and *tīrthayātrā* (pilgrimage) to specific sacred sites associated with *hijṛā* identity.[27] The latter includes the aforementioned Koovagam festival and the main temple of Bahucharā Mātā in Gujarat. Boisvert frames the first three of these rituals as *samskāra*, understood here as "rites of passage," that serve feminizing functions in the *hijṛā* context.[28] The first, *rīt*, establishes membership into a *hijṛā gharānā* (i.e., one of the seven "houses") and the kinship between *celā* and *guru*; the new recruit receives feminine attire and, importantly, a new female name.[29] Saria adds that this indicates the transition from natal home to the *hijṛā* community as an individual also relinquishes their surname, and thus any *gotra* (ancestral lineage) and caste (i.e., hereditary social class), in the process.[30] The *dūdhpīlānā* ceremony involves a *dūdhmātā* ("milk mother") and her *dūdhbeṭī* ("milk daughter"), with both parties

---

[21] Mathieu Boisvert, *Les hijras*, 14.

[22] Both quotations from Nanda, *Neither Man nor Woman*, 40.

[23] Mention of the Quran, *ḥalāl*, *namāz*, and Bahucharā Mātā (although indicated by her Bedhraj Mata epithet) found on Reddy, *With Respect to Sex*, 104, 105, 104, and 108, respectively.

[24] Boisvert dedicated an entire chapter to *hijṛā* pilgrimage sites. See Boisvert, *Les hijras*, 63-80. Ṣūfīs are practitioners of what is now widely known as Sufism, a branch of Islam emphasizing a deep and personal relationship with God (i.e., Allāh).

[25] Saria, *Hijras, Lovers, Brothers,* 14.

[26] Boisvert, *Les hijras*, 32.

[27] Boisvert, "Cultivating a female body," 93.

[28] Boisvert recognizes significantly different connotations the term *samskāra* may hold, but, for the purposes of this discussion, he emphasizes its popular use in contemporary India in reference to rites of passage. See Boisvert, "Cultivating a female body," 93-94.

[29] Boisvert, "Cultivating a female body," 95.

[30] Saria, "To Be Some Other Name: The Naming Games that Hijras Play," 2.

sharing a glass of milk that represents a mother-daughter relationship forged between two *hijṛās*; unlike the *rīt*, this is not compulsory and regularly comprises *hijṛās* of differing *gharānās* who have chosen to formally establish this bond.[31] As mentioned, *nirvāṇ* operations entail penectomies and orchiectomies. Prior to the operation, devotion to Bahucharā Mātā is considered essential for its success. The operation itself is conducted by a *hijṛā*, known as a *dāī*, who is accompanied by the *guru* of whomever is being operated.[32] Nanda and Boisvert relay perspectives (encountered during fieldwork) that view the blood loss of surgery as an important removal of maleness.[33] The surgery is followed by a 40-day period of rest and recovery that involves physical seclusion and dietary restrictions that Nanda finds similar to those undertaken by women after childbirth and that Boisvert finds redolent of those following a first menses.[34] Nonetheless, both highlight the celebrations following this period; the post-operative individual is dressed as a bride and married to Bahucharā Mātā, formalizing her "rebirth" as a *hijṛā* and newfound *nirvāṇ sultān* status.[35]

Even this brief survey indicates the multifaceted fullness of *hijṛā* life. Yet despite their sophisticated social fabric and unique place within religiosity (including sought-after ritual functions), *hijṛās* are often stigmatized as "marginal mockeries" and "subjected to tremendous abuse."[36] An increasing number of autobiographical works, including *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* and *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story*, detail the firsthand hardships *hijṛās* face.[37] Indeed, at present, they continue to endure emotional and physical harm, societal ostracization, harassment by law enforcement, the denial of medical care, and are widely barred from educational and vocational opportunities.[38] Yet their current plights are not without precedents. In fact, much of their present pan-Indian predicaments (and emancipatory strategies) relate to the lingering effects of colonial encounters, so it is to this history I turn.

Colonial Impotence

Colonial British officials undertook the overtly derogative task of registering "eunuchs" under Part II of the Criminal Tribes Act (CTA).[39] Initially, the CTA was introduced in the North-Western Provinces and Oudh in 1871 and extended to the Bengal and Madras Presidencies (and

[31] Boisvert, "Cultivating a female body," 99.

[32] These descriptions taken from Boisvert, "Cultivating a female body," 101.

[33] See Nanda, *Neither Man nor Woman*, 28 and Boisvert, "Cultivating a female body," 102.

[34] See Nanda, *Neither Man nor Woman*, 28 and Boisvert, "Cultivating a female body," 104-105.

[35] See Nanda, *Neither Man nor Woman*, 29 and Boisvert, "Cultivating a female body," 106.

[36] The first quote is drawn from Reddy, *With Respect to Sex*, 55. The full quote reads "Hijras are stigmatized figures, marginal mockeries of a 'normal' Indian man (and woman)." The second quote is taken from Doniger O'Flaherty, *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 297.

[37] See Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015) and A. Revathi, *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* (India: Penguin Books India, 2010).

[38] These issues mentioned in Amit Kumar Singh, "From Colonial Castaways to Current Tribulation: Tragedy of Indian *Hijra*," *Unisia* 40, no. 2 (December 2022): 298.

[39] Jessica Hinchy, "Troubling bodies: 'eunuchs,' masculinity and impotence in colonial North India," *South Asian History and Culture* 4, no. 2 (February 2013): 196.

in effect to all colonial India) in 1876 and 1911, respectively.[40] Several groups, including the *hijṛā*, were categorized under "eunuch," which was defined as an "impotent man" and employed as "a catch-all term for Indian gender/sexual deviants, describing both a failure of masculinity and 'perverse' sexual behaviour."[41] The British considered *hijṛās* a criminal community prone to subversive acts of sodomy, transvestism, and the kidnapping and subsequent castration of male children.[42] Thus, any individual "reasonably suspected" of such activity would face criminal registration meant to prevent sodomy, erase the "eunuch" as a visible sociocultural category via prohibiting public performance and transvestism, and incite the gradual extinction of "eunuchs," namely *hijṛās*, through eradicating castration, represented as the chief goal of the CTA.[43]

As a term, "impotence" garnered unique connotations in 19th-century Victorian Britain; it was associated with effeminacy, homosexuality, and sexual aberrance.[44] Thus, rather than solely signalling sexual inability (as is generally the case today), the term indicated nonheteronormative identities and sexual activity, too. Moreover, despite adopting names, kinship terms, and fashion considered feminine (and accounts of *hijṛās* describing themselves as neither men nor women), official British correspondences used masculine pronouns when describing *hijṛās*.[45] This served to reify reputations of "failed masculinity" (i.e., "impotence"), discredit alternative notions of gender and sexuality as being dangerously perverse, and insidiously affirm the binary sex/gender conceptual framework widely characteristic of colonial ethnographers.[46] Of course, the "eunuch" would have also been an easy target for the more general Orientalist othering of South Asians as irrational and effeminate relative to the

[40] Shahnaz Khan, "Trans Individuals and Normative Masculinity in British India and Contemporary Pakistan," *Hong Kong Law Journal* 6, no. 1 (January 2016): 15. The point of the CTA extending to all colonial India is from Kavita Philip, *Civilising Natures: Race, Resources, and Modernity in Colonial South India* (Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2003), 174. Notably, Hinchy states that the initial 1871 CTA was only applied to the Punjab (outside the North-Western Provinces and Oudh) but was not fully implemented there and that the other provinces of British India never registered eunuchs (presumably under the 1871 CTA). See Hinchy, "Troubling bodies," 197.

[41] Hinchy, "Troubling bodies," 201.

[42] Hinchy, "Troubling bodies," 196. This reputation has stretched to contemporary times, perpetuated by relatively recent works. For example, see Zia Jaffrey, *The Invisibles: A Tale of the Eunuchs of India* (New York: Vintage Departures, 1996). Herein, one of the photo captions preceding the epilogue (which begins on page 277) describe an individual drugged and emasculated unwillingly. Some scholars have taken issue with Jaffrey as a result. For example, Vinay Lal argues that Jaffrey "leaves no room for doubt that the old and highly serviceable tropes of Orientalism and exoticism will continue to be brought to the fore in representing hijras." See Vinay Lal, "Not This, Not That: The Hijras of India and the Cultural Politics of Sexuality," *Social Text* 17, no. 4 (Winter 1999): 21.

[43] Hinchy, "Troubling bodies," 197. Hinchy does not state here what "performing in public" entails but even the noted prohibition of crossdressing may have been considered illicit public performance.

[44] Hinchy, "Troubling bodies," 201.

[45] Hinchy, "Troubling bodies," 197.

[46] Anuja Agrawal, "Gendered Bodies: The Case of the 'Third Gender' in India," *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 31, no. 2 (1997): 283.

empirical, manly, imperial West.[47] Nevertheless, the conflation of "impotent man" with "habitual criminal" was evidently a mechanism of containing/controlling a population viewed as threatening to British sensibilities. However, ironically, the imposition of this colonially rendered "impotence" sometimes fell flat.

Hijṛās were not the only group of people dubbed "eunuchs" under the CTA. Hinchy writes that from 1870-1871 enquiries into the different types of "eunuchs" were instituted, with the taxonomical endeavour yielding subclasses of "respectable" and "suspicious" varieties.[48] The *khwajasarai* (harem custodians understood as societally safe under the purview of their masters) were considered the "respectable" counterpart to the "deviant" *hijṛā*.[49] Yet classifying deviance was not always a straightforward process, in part, due to slippages in the understanding of "impotence." For instance, the *zenāna*, like the *hijṛā*, wore female clothing in public but, unlike the *hijṛā*, were not castrated and some even propagated families.[50] Interestingly, however, even *zenānas* who procreated self-identified as impotent, suggesting that impotence was a positive marker of authenticity and held local connotations at variance with British notions of the term.[51] Indeed, Reddy (more recently in Hyderabad) notes that the emasculating *nirvāṇ* operation is an indicator of *hijṛā* identity, affirms impotence and/or asexuality, and is considered the source of their sacred legitimacy and ritual power (akin to the renunciative power of *tapas*) to confer fertility to others.[52] Nonetheless, despite *zenāna* claims of impotence and sartorial practices conflated with "eunuchs," the British, puzzled by apparent *zenāna* virility, debated their proper classification. This confusion resulted in oscillations between the criminal registration and deregistration of *zenānas*.[53] Afterall, discerning which "eunuchs" were of a "deviant" variety was a British preoccupation, one that justified the inspection, registration, and ongoing surveillance of Indian bodies.[54]

---

[47] Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and 'the Mystic East'* (London: Routledge, 1999), 113.

[48] Hinchy, "Troubling bodies," 199.

[49] Hinchy, "Troubling bodies," 199. Khan also gives a description of the *khwajasarai* (spelled here *khwaja sara*): "Gendered as men, the former had a presence in the courtly culture of pre-colonial India where they frequently lived with biological and adopted families. Some of these individuals were harem guards while others were wealthy courtiers and also served as military commanders and administrative agents outside the palace." See Khan, "Trans Individuals and Normative Masculinity in British India and Contemporary Pakistan," 11.

[50] Hinchy, "Troubling bodies," 202. Reddy offers her own definition of *zenāna*: "a male (koti) dancer who adopts [female] gestures and mannerisms; wears female clothing only while performing; has a kinship network distinct from that of hijras." See Reddy, *With Respect to Sex*, 271.

[51] Hinchy, "Troubling bodies," 202.

[52] Reddy, *With Respect to Sex*, 96-98. Also, Reddy succinctly defines *tapas* as "asceticism; ascetic heat" on 271.

[53] Hinchy, "Troubling bodies," 203.

[54] Reddy also notes another dominant, albeit binary and reductive, "model of 'authentic' bodily difference – [concerned with] whether *hijras* were 'born' or 'made,' *asli* (real) or *naqli* (false) 'eunuchs' – even [though] authenticity did not necessarily guarantee a positive representation." See Gayatri Reddy, "Paradigms of Thirdness: Analyzing the Past, Present, and Potential Futures of Gender and Sexual Meaning in India," *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking* 5, no. 3 (Fall 2018): 49. Reddy appears to suggest that this reflected a British predilection in

Anyone "reasonably suspected" of eunuch-related deviance (which often amounted to wearing feminine clothing) was potentially subjected to intimate scrutinization, including the physical examination of genitalia for "abnormal" appearances by medical officials.[55] Distinguishing the "deviant eunuch" from "virile men" and "respectable eunuchs" was often an inconsistent affair, with government officers circumventing assessments made by doctors who themselves "admitted [an] inability to definitively diagnose the sexual nature of individuals" and conceded that "techniques of clinical observation often failed when it came to determining impotence." [56] Crossdressing often remained grounds enough to label an "impotent man" suspect of kidnapping, sodomy, and/or castration, resulting in their criminal registration.[57] Attempts were made to curtail "deviant eunuchs" on several fronts: they were prohibited from performing in public or "for hire" in "public houses," leaving many impoverished; wearing female clothing (an expression of *hijṛā* and *zenāna* identity) was illegalized; children residing with "eunuchs" were removed, ostensibly to prevent castration; and registered eunuchs were denied many civil rights, including the ability to write a will and serve as guardian to a child, all while police monitored their movements.[58]

Perhaps more subtly detrimental was the amalgam of disparate categories under the CTA "eunuch" banner. Officials understood "eunuch" to adequately represent a number of native terms, including *klība*, *ṣaṇḍha*, *paṇḍaka*, *napuṃsaka*, *ṭṛtīyāprakṛti*, and *keśava* (in addition to the *khwajasarai*, *zenāna*, and *hijṛā* mentioned earlier).[59] In effect, this compressed and/or collapsed social diversity under the insinuation of uniformity.[60] Yet Gannon, who examines this depository function of the colonial "eunuch," urges one to look beyond "the violence inherent in colonial translations."[61] While recognizing the problematic erasures of categories and their connotations when subsumed by alternative classifications, he posits the productive merit new categorizations may hold.[62] A pertinent example of this is "third gender," often used today as an umbrella label encompassing populations associated with the above terms. Although the CTA was repealed in 1952 by the legislature of an independent India,

---

and around the time of the CTA of 1871. Interestingly, Saria asserts that "*asliness*" and "*nakliness*" is also a serious concern for *hijṛās* themselves, with tensions between *hijṛā* individuals and/or groups often involving, if not centering on, accusations of "*nakliness*." The theme of *asli* and *nakli* contestations is an ongoing thread of discussion in Saria, "To Be Some Other Name: The Naming Games that Hijras Play."

[55] Hinchy, "Troubling bodies," 205.

[56] The first quote is taken from Hinchy, "Troubling bodies," 205 and the second from 198.

[57] Hinchy, "Troubling bodies," 200.

[58] Hinchy, "Troubling bodies," 197.

[59] Shane Gannon, "Exclusion as Language and the Language of Exclusion: Tracing Regimes of Gender through Linguistic Representation of the "Eunuch,"" *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 20, no.1 (January 2011): 3. For reference, these terms are each given significant attention in this article.

[60] I recognize that my wording resembles that of Gannon ("Thus, social diversity in the South Asian context was compressed, if not collapsed . . ."). See Gannon, "Exclusion as Language and the Language of Exclusion, 2.

[61] Gannon, "Exclusion as Language and the Language of Exclusion, 26.

[62] Gannon, "Exclusion as Language and the Language of Exclusion, 26.

providing the "denotification" of criminal tribes, internalized reputations of criminality persist.[63] Interestingly, in recent times the "third gender" designation has gained significant traction in the fight against the continuous rippling effects of these colonial (and other) oppressions.

Triennial Taxonomies

In the Indian context, notions of "third sex" and/or of "third gender" relate to the concept of *tṛtīyāprakṛti* (third nature). Zwilling and Sweet work towards examining *tṛtīyāprakṛti* as they trace the evolution of "third sex" constructs in ancient (or "pre-classical") India (before the Gupta dynasty c. 320 CE); they opt to use "third sex" rather than "third gender" to "emphasize the focus on differences with regard to sexual behaviour, physiology and reproductive capacity that are perceived as essential, as distinguished from the culturally viable social/behavioural roles associated with gender."[64] They begin their chronology with the late Vedic period (c. 8th to 6th centuries BCE), pointing to "biogenetic myths of origin" involving "androgynous or hermaphroditic images," including "a cow which is at the same time a bull" found within the *Ṛg Veda*.[65] Zwilling and Sweet interpret this imagery to express the sexlessness (i.e., the undifferentiated nature) of the source of creation but also recognize it as the "basic conceptual underpinning for the formation of a third-sex concept."[66] Zwilling and Sweet next posit the late-Vedic "virility obsession" as influencing the development of a "third sex" concept. They note that an emphasis on manhood as coextensive with sexual potency, evidenced by incantations to destroy the virility of enemies and/or restore it for oneself, occurs concurrently with "the earliest terminology referring specifically to sexual ambiguity." [67] This included mention of *napuṃsaka* ("not a male") animal offerings in related rites.[68] In these early usages, *napuṃsaka* carried "connotations of lack of procreative/generative ability, androgyny, hermaphroditism and castration."[69] Finally, the authors highlight the "third grammatical gender" connoting "neither female nor male" (as opposed to male or female) advanced in the

[63] Jennifer Terry, *Deviant Bodies: Critical Perspectives on Difference in Science and Popular Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 100. However, the NALSA v. Union of India writ petition (a judgment officially recognizing a "third gender" in India) suggests the CTA was repealed in August of 1949. See National Legal Services Authority v. Union of India, 5 SCC 438, 2014, section 16; the full text of the judgment is available here: https://web.archive.org/web/20140527105348/http://supremecourtofindia.nic.in/outtoday/wc40012.pdf (accessed March 2021).

[64] The quote is from Leonard Zwilling and Michael Sweet, "The Evolution of Third-Sex Constructs in Ancient India: A Study in Ambiguity," in *Invented Identities: The Interplay of Gender, Religion and Politics in India*, eds. J. Leslie and M. McGee (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 99. However, I will say that, despite this definition, Zwilling and Sweet take into account some very social connotations throughout their work. Also, their description of pre-classical India as being before the Gupta dynasty is on 99-100.

[65] Zwilling and Sweet actually write "a cow which is at the same time a bull" on Zwilling and Sweet, "The Evolution of Third-Sex Constructs in Ancient India," 101; my phrasing comes from Stella Kramrisch, *The Presence of Śiva* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1981), 200.

[66] Zwilling and Sweet, "The Evolution of Third-Sex Constructs in Ancient India," 101.

[67] Zwilling and Sweet, "The Evolution of Third-Sex Constructs in Ancient India," 101-102.

[68] Zwilling and Sweet, "The Evolution of Third-Sex Constructs in Ancient India," 102-103. According to Zwilling and Sweet, the first instance is found in the *Maitrāyaṇi Saṃhitā*.

[69] Zwilling and Sweet, "The Evolution of Third-Sex Constructs in Ancient India," 104.

late Vedic period.[70] In the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, which presents technical terms for the three Sanskritic grammatical genders, *napuṃsaka* is used as an abbreviation for this third type (previously it was signalled by *nastrīpumān*).[71] Notably, the formalization of this term clad with sexually ambiguous connotations was extended to "extra-grammatical contexts" and applied to populations deemed impotent and/or transvestic.[72] By the 2nd century BCE, there is evidence that *napuṃsaka* referred to a "third sex." Sanskrit grammarians of this time understood grammatical gender as reflecting the gender inherent in objects and persons. Zwilling and Sweet present an example wherein the grammarian Patañjali states that the masculine nouns *ṣaṇḍa* and *paṇḍaka* should be understood as *napuṃsaka*.[73] This has been interpreted as suggesting a "third sex" (i.e., *napuṃsaka*) of which there were at least "two subtypes: the impotent (*ṣaṇḍa*) and the gender variant (*paṇḍaka*), perhaps with connotations of transvestism and homosexuality."[74]

Two fundamental Indian medical treatises, the *Caraka Saṃhitā* (dated around the 1st or 2nd century CE) and the *Suśruta Saṃhitā* (around the 4th century BCE), present *napuṃsaka* as a bonified "third sex" with a biological basis.[75] The *napuṃsaka* individual is presented androgynously in that it results from a perfect balance of parental generative fluids (male semen and female blood) in its embryonic development (whereas a male birth occurs due to a predominance of the former and a female birth from predominance of the latter).[76] Pertinent to the present discussion is the introduction of *tṛtīyāprakṛti* (third nature) by the *Caraka Saṃhitā* for its use as an equivalent for *napuṃsaka*.[77] The term *tṛtīyāprakṛti* is also found in the *Kāmasūtra* of Vātsyāyana (c. 3rd century CE), a famous treatise involving eroticism from the *kāmaśāstra* genre; therein, we learn of sexual behaviours associated with *tṛtīyāprakṛti* people.[78] Relatedly, in *Redeeming the Kamasutra*, Doniger describes *klība* as "a catch-all term that traditional Hindus coined to indicate a man who is in their terms sexually dysfunctional . . .

---

[70] Zwilling and Sweet, "The Evolution of Third-Sex Constructs in Ancient India," 107.

[71] Zwilling and Sweet, "The Evolution of Third-Sex Constructs in Ancient India," 104-105.

[72] Zwilling and Sweet, "The Evolution of Third-Sex Constructs in Ancient India," 105.

[73] Zwilling and Sweet, "The Evolution of Third-Sex Constructs in Ancient India," 108-109.

[74] Zwilling and Sweet, "The Evolution of Third-Sex Constructs in Ancient India," 110. Note that Zwilling and Sweet elsewhere state these words can have other meanings. For example, see Leonard Zwilling and Michael Sweet, "The First Medicalization: The Taxonomy and Etiology of Queerness in Classical Indian Medicine," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 3, no. 4 (April 1993); *ṣaṇḍha* (spelled differently in this article) is discussed on 593 and *paṇḍaka* on 598.

[75] Zwilling and Sweet, "The Evolution of Third-Sex Constructs in Ancient India," 110.

[76] Zwilling and Sweet, "The Evolution of Third-Sex Constructs in Ancient India," 110. However, the authors do distinguish *napuṃsaka* from a "true hermaphrodite" for elsewhere "the terms *dviretas* and *strīpuṃsaliṅgin* implied a congenital sexual abnormality (*vikṛti*) which had its own specific causes" and simply because "missing from the medical accounts is any description of the third-sex person *per se*; there is not a word on how third-sex persons differ from males and females, either physically or psychologically, apart from generalities implying a mixture of male and female attributes." They note that Jains did describe anatomical differences between three sexes, but only in terms of the number of veins and muscles possessed. See page 111.

[77] Zwilling and Sweet, "The Evolution of Third-Sex Constructs in Ancient India," 112.

[78] *Kāmaśāstra* is comprised of two words: *kāma* (love, desire, pleasure, sex) and *śāstra* (here denoting a treatise). See Wendy Doniger, *Redeeming the Kamasutra* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 19.

including someone who is sterile, impotent, castrated, a transvestite, a man who had oral sex with other men, who had anal sex, a man with mutilated or defective organs, [etc.]."[79] Doniger emphasizes that Vātsyāyana eschews the pejorative *klība* when describing people who undertake homosexual and transvestic activities in the *Kāmasūtra*, instead using *tṛtīyāprakṛti*.[80] Moreover, the appetites and activities in question are described in a matter-of-fact manner, not disparagingly. However, I am cautious about the degree to which one can read the *Kāmasūtra* as legitimating *tṛtīyāprakṛti* individuals and/or associated sexual behaviours. Afterall, the *Kāmasūtra* is rather encyclopedic in nature. In this connection, Doniger and Kakar reference Shastri who writes: "[Vātsyāyana] clearly states that a treatise demands the inclusion of everything good or bad. Using their discrimination, [people] should accept only the good."[81] Therefore, although the *Kāmasūtra* uses *tṛtīyāprakṛti* instead of *klība,* it may be in a spirit of documentation rather than celebration. In fact, there is plenty to suggest that *tṛtīyāprakṛti* populations have faced discrimination throughout their history.

Daud Ali notes that the *nāṭyaśastra* (Indian treatise on dramaturgy) "instructs the actor playing the *tṛtīyāprakṛti* to relinquish his masculine nature and employ the walk of a woman."[82] He interprets this to indicate that "the category of thirdness was conceived of as a 'lack' in relation to masculinity, rather than femininity."[83] The *Ubhayābhisārikā* (c. 1st century BCE to 2nd century CE) is a play which portrays a *tṛtīyāprakṛti* individual and thus provides a glimpse into their possible social standing at the time; the *tṛtīyāprakṛti* character only receives facetious praise for "breasts that do not get in the way of a close embrace" and the "[absence of] menstrual periods to impede passion" and is generally dismissed and despised by the narrator.[84] Zwilling and Sweet also recognize disparaging reputations afforded to "third sex" individuals in the context of Buddhist and Jain monasticism in pre-classical India whereby "third sex" individuals were excluded from ordination, reflecting "society's disapproval of such persons."[85] Doniger concedes that Vātsyāyana does not employ *tṛtīyāprakṛti* on equal footing

---

[79] Doniger, *Redeeming the Kamasutra*, 114.

[80] Doniger, *Redeeming the Kamasutra*, 114. Here, Doniger describes *tṛtīyāprakṛti* here as "'third nature' or perhaps a 'third sexuality' in the sense of sexual behaviour."

[81] Wendy Doniger and Sudhir Kakar, Introduction to *Kamasutra* by Vātsyāyana, trans. Wendy Doniger and Sudhir Kakar (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), xxiii. Devadatta Shastri was a commentator on the *Kāmasūtra*.

[82] Daud Ali, "Censured Sexual Acts and Early Medieval Society in India," in *Sexual Diversity in Asia, c. 600-1950*, eds. Raquel A.G. Reyes and William G. Clarence-Smith (London: Routledge, 2012), 58.

[83] Ali, "Censured Sexual Acts and Early Medieval Society in India," 58.

[84] Zwilling and Sweet, "The First Medicalization," 603.

[85] Zwilling and Sweet, "The Evolution of Third-Sex Constructs in Ancient India," 121. However, the authors note: "Later, admission to the [Jain] mendicant order was also allowed to third-sex persons, based on their ability to control their sexuality. Much later (17th century) texts link this distinction to congenital versus non-congenital third-sex status, with the latter permitted ordination because they [predominantly experience male sexuality]." In this connection, Zwilling and Sweet state: "Thus, overtly for the Jains, as probably covertly for the Buddhists, a third-sex person could be admitted to the highest status in the community, provided he was typically masculine in his gender behaviour, did not give cause for scandal, and/or had important attributes that overrode his sexual difference." These quotes are from page 122.

with its male or female counterparts: "the very use of the word 'third' – which clearly implies a previous 'first' and 'second' – demonstrates that [Vātsyāyana] is thinking primarily in binary, more precisely dialectic terms: two opposed terms modified by a third."[86] The above accounts may be considered examples of precursors to extant sentiments.

Scholars, including Lal, Agrawal, and Goldman, caution against romanticized notions of an Indian culture that tolerates and meaningfully accommodates all varieties of gender and sexuality in its people. [87] These admonitions contrast with the views of Nanda, who asserts the "characteristically Indian ability to tolerate, even embrace contradictions and variation at the social, cultural, and personality levels that provides the context in which hijras cannot only be accommodated, but even granted a measure of power."[88] Though such views may be critiqued, they, along with evocations of the *tṛtīyāprakṛti* concept, proved instrumental in instantiating an official "third gender" in India. The National Legal Services Authority (NALSA) v. Union of India judgement of 2014, which granted the legal recognition of a "third gender" in India, points to the concept of *tṛtīyāprakṛti* as evidence of a historical, legitimizing South Asian "third gender" presence; within the judgment, the ethnographies of Nanda and Reddy are also cited to highlight the religious and political significance of "third gender" people.[89]

The Rise (and Fallout) of "Third Gender" Recognition

In the 1990s, the Indian government, alongside international NGOs, responded to global concerns centering on HIV/AIDS, which had involved outlining pathways of transmission and naming risk groups that included "homosexual" populations.[90] Notably, however, in an attempt to avoid mapping labels of one culture onto another, the NGOS in question largely replaced the category "homosexual" with MSM, or "men who have sex with men."[91] In an effort to identify an MSM paradigm that was "culturally indigenous," the *kothi-panthi* model was argued for, notably by Shivananda Khan and the Naz Foundation (a New Delhi-based NGO working on sexual health and HIV/AIDS) he founded.[92] The efforts were successful, and the *kothi-panthi* model, one signalling "effeminate men who have sex with more masculine men," became seen as a South Asian MSM variant by the National AIDS Control Office, with *hijṛās* viewed as a

[86] Doniger, *Redeeming the Kamasutra*, 117.

[87] See Lal, "Not This, Not That," 132; Robert Goldman, "Transsexualism, Gender, And Anxiety in Traditional India," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 113, no. 3 (July-September 1993): 395; and Agrawal, "Gendered Bodies," 290-292.

[88] Nanda, *Neither Man nor Woman*, 23.

[89] This is a point also recognized on Vaibhav Saria, "Begging for Change: Hijras, law and nationalism," *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 53, no. 1 (February 2019): 3.

[90] Reddy, "Paradigms of Thirdness," 50. "Homosexual" has been placed in quotations as done by Reddy.

[91] Reddy, "Paradigms of Thirdness," 50.

[92] Paul Boyce, "Conceiving *Kothis*: Men Who Have Sex with Men in India and the Cultural Subject of HIV Prevention," *Medical Anthropology* 26, no. 2 (April 2007): 183-184. Boyce uses NFI (Naz Foundation International); the bracketed description of the Naz Foundation is drawn from Reddy, "Paradigms of Thirdness," 53.

subcategory of this broader schema.[93] In part due to their entanglements with HIV/AIDS-related discourses, Reddy asserts that *hijṛās* became conceived of as both integral to MSM or *kothi* communities and as metonymic of "sexual difference" in LGBT studies.[94] Importantly, this also saw them actively targeted by government and health interventions, influencing their subjectivities and polities in turn.[95]

The 2000s saw an increasing transnational presence of transgender activist networks, with Indian activists calling for official recognition of the category "transgender" in order to bolster visibility and ensure access to resources; successfully, "transgender" emerged as a funding category distinct from MSM.[96] *Hijṛās*, already widely posited as emblematic of South Asian nonnormative sexuality, were now postulated as an Indian "transgender native" and linked with this global transgender category.[97] Moreover, there were efforts within the transgender movement to gain legal recognition as a "third gender." In 2014, this came to pass in a landmark ruling; the Supreme Court of India (in its NALSA v. Union of India writ petition) officially recognized the ability for "transgender people" to identify as a "third gender," while affirming that the fundamental rights granted by the Constitution are applicable to transgender peoples.[98] Famously, Bollywood actress, reality TV star, and activist Laxmi Narayan Tripathi offered her voice and celebrity to the cause, serving as a petitioner in the case (where she is referred to as both a *hijṛā* and transgender person) which involved disclosing first hand accounts of oppression.[99] Personal anecdote was buttressed by claims of historicity; the concept of *tṛtīyāprakṛti*, myths from the *Rāmāyana* and *Mahābhārata*, "Jain texts [that] make a detailed reference to [trans people]," and the presence of *hijṛās* in Islamic royal courts are all cited under a section of the NALSA writ petition titled "Historical Background of Transgenders in

[93] Reddy, "Paradigms of Thirdness," 51. Evidently, such MSM categorization suggests behaviours at odds with the asexual *hijṛā* ideals mentioned earlier. In part, this is due to a rather hasty conflation of disparate groups, yet one must also not overstate *hijṛā* asexuality; *kāndra hijṛās* are involved in sex work, for example.

[94] Reddy, "Paradigms of Thirdness," 52.

[95] The point of targeted interventions mentioned on Reddy, "Paradigms of Thirdness," 52 and subjectivities/polities on page 50.

[96] Reddy, "Paradigms of Thirdness," 52.

[97] For mention of "transgender native," see Reddy, "Paradigms of Thirdness," 49; description of *hijṛās* as lodged within a global "transgender" category is found on page 52. For a substantial discussion on the "transgender native" trope and issues of its implementation, see Evan B. Towle and Lynn M. Morgan, "Romancing the Transgender Native: Rethinking the Use of the "Third Gender" Concept," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 8, no. 4 (2002). A few points of theirs are worth highlighting at present, however. The "transgender native" trope is often tied to Western writers (though is not limited to them) and employed to legitimize contemporary transgender peoples through locating (regularly romanticized) nonnormative gender/sex practices and identities of different times and places. In this connection, the "transgender native" is evoked to "buttress the argument that Western binary systems are neither universal nor innate;" see page 474. As such, related works often problematically, "conflate time and place, collapsing historical and distant situations;" see 478. In doing go, specific historical and political conditions, as well as ontological assumptions, are largely ignored; see 484.

[98] Saria, "Begging for Change," 3. However, it should be specified that "transgender persons may be afforded the right of choice to determine whether to opt for male, female or [transgender/third gender] classification." See National Legal Services Authority v. Union of India, 5 SCC 438, 2014, section 7.

[99] See National Legal Services Authority v. Union of India, 5 SCC 438, 2014, sections 4 and 10.

India" to positively emphasize the endemic presence of "third gender identity" within the nation.[100] As mentioned, the ethnographies of Nanda and Reddy are cited in the writ petition so as to reference the religious and political significance of "third gender" peoples.[101] The "inhuman" impact of colonialism is also recognized, including the registration, control, and surveillance that occurred under the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871.[102] However, despite these inclusions, reception of the NALSA v. Union of India judgement was not without its critiques.

Reminiscent of the depository colonial "eunuch" category, Saria notes that the above judgement, in recognizing a "third gender," also collapsed disparate forms of gender variance under this nominal banner; the ruling placed "hijras, *eunuchs*, *aravanis*, *thirunangis*, *kothis*, *jogtas*, *jogappas*, and *shiv-shaktis*" all beneath the umbrella "transgender" label.[103] Moreover, the emphasis on *hijṛās* throughout the judgment, as well as their ongoing conflation with "transgenders" throughout the document, posits *hijṛās* as the quintessential "third gender" representative.[104] In this connection, categorizations of "thirdness" have been criticized for not reflecting their internal heterogeneity, including variegated identities and practices of identification.[105] Glossing over demographic demarcations was not the only issue decried; devils were also found in the details. After indicating the right for an individual to self-determine their gender, the petition states "Hijras/Eunuchs . . . have to be considered as Third Gender, over and above binary genders under our Constitution and the laws" and "As TGs [(i.e., transgender people)] in India, are neither male nor female, treating them as belonging to either of the aforesaid categories, is the denial of these constitutional rights."[106] In addition to this rhetoric contradicting self-determination, the judgement also makes dubious connections between gender and sexuality. For instance, Saria suggests that the judgement insinuates that "transgender persons are . . . acceptable of state and legal recognition [when] they achieve

[100] The "third gender identity" phrasing taken from National Legal Services Authority v. Union of India, 5 SCC 438, 2014, section 6; see sections 12-15 for the "Historical Background of Transgenders in India." Note that the "Jain texts" are not specified; these could include, however, a number of texts referenced by Zwilling and Sweet. See Zwilling and Sweet, "The First Medicalization," 12-16.

[101] Saria, "Begging for Change," 3. See National Legal Services Authority v. Union of India, 5 SCC 438, 2014, section 44 (for mention of Nanda) and section 15 (for mention of Reddy).

[102] See National Legal Services Authority v. Union of India, 5 SCC 438, 2014, section 16 for mention of mechanisms of registration, surveillance, and control connected to the CTA of 1871; "inhuman" description is in section 6.

[103] Saria, "Begging for Change," 3. The NALSA v. Union of India writ petition offers descriptions of these groups; see National Legal Services Authority v. Union of India, 5 SCC 438, 2014, section 44. I placed these populations in quotations simply because they are spelled and listed as Saria writes them; Neither Saria nor the writ petition provide diacritical transliterations for these terms.

[104] Reddy recognizes the instantiation of *hijṛās* as the quintessential South Asian "third gender." See Reddy, "Paradigms of Thirdness," 50.

[105] Suparna Bhaskaran, *Made in India: Decolonizations, Queer Sexualities, Trans/national Projects* (New York: Pallgrave Macmillan, 2014), 98.

[106] Saria also raises these points; see Saria, "Begging for Change," 4. For the quotes, see National Legal Services Authority v. Union of India, 5 SCC 438, 2014, sections 74 and 119.

heterosexuality through biomedical and psychological interventions."[107] Furthermore, Saria notes that it expressly withholds recognition of gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals in its working definition of the transgender category, plus fails to broach discussing the controversial anti-sodomy law in Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code (more on this later).[108] As such, reactions to the judgement were mixed, with some no doubt hoping it amounted to a steppingstone *en route* to further developments – and further developments there would be.

The Detriments and Opportunities of Trans Legislations

The NALSA v. Union of India writ petition was followed by a series of legislations that also placed "transgender" populations at the center. The Rights of Transgender Persons Bill of 2014 (RTP Bill of 2014) was forwarded by Tiruchi Siva, leader (at the time) of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) political party of Tamil Nadu.[109] It outlines anti-discrimination measures (including penalties for hate speech); the reservation of spots for transgender persons in primary, secondary, and higher education, as well as government employment; and the implementation of Special Transgender Rights Courts, among other items.[110] The RTP Bill of 2014 passed through the Rajya Sabha and was introduced in the Lok Sabha, but its discussion (and passing) met delays.[111] In part, this was due to the drafting of another bill by the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment (MSJE) meant for implementing the NALSA v. Union of India ruling; this resulted in The Rights of Transgender Persons Bill of 2015 (RTP Bill of 2015).[112] This latter bill has been described as "massively diluted" and "unrecognizable" in relation to the bill unanimously passed by the Rajya Sabha.[113] Concordantly, Saria, who regarded even the RTP Bill of 2014 with suspicion, describes a number of issues with the 2015 proposal.

First, Saria notes the lack of involvement felt by transgender activists regarding the formulation of the RTP Bill of 2015. Even worse, transgender community-based organizations were given just over a week to study the bill and register their complaints and recommendations after the bill was uploaded to the MSJE website.[114] In haste, these

---

[107] Saria, "Begging for Change," 4. However, this is not to suggest that SRS (sex reassignment surgery) is mandatory for transgender/third gender recognition by the state; see National Legal Services Authority v. Union of India, 5 SCC 438, 2014, section 20 (here the judgement states no one shall be forced to undergo surgery).

[108] Saria, "Begging for Change," 4. See National Legal Services Authority v. Union of India, 5 SCC 438, 2014, section 107 (regarding withholding recognition of gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals) and section 18 (regarding the unwillingness to confront the anti-sodomy law).

[109] Saria, "Begging for Change," 5-6.

[110] See The Rights of Transgender Persons Bill, 2014, Rajya Sabha, Bill No. 49 of 2014, chapter IX, clause 50 (hate speech); chapter V, clauses 19 and 21 (reserved placements); chapter VIII (rights courts). Bill available at: http://164.100.47.4/BillsTexts/RSBillTexts/asintroduced/trangder-E.pdf (accessed March 2021).

[111] See Anivinda Pulickal and Tiruchi Siva, "A Story of Two Bills," *The Indian Express*, https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/transgenders-persons-bill-rajya-sabha-private-member-bill-3195872/ (accessed March 2021). This is also discussed in Saria, "Begging for Change," 6-7. The Rajya Sabha is the upper house, and the Lok Sabha is the lower house, both of the bicameral Parliament of India.

[112] Saria, "Begging for Change," 7.

[113] See Pulickal and Siva, "A Story of Two Bills."

[114] Saria, "Begging for Change," 7.

organizations forwarded numerous concerns, including the continued silence on the anti-sodomy law of Section 377 IPC (Indian Penal Code) used to routinely harass those suspected of associated intercourse; other concerns included confusions regarding how the RTP Bill of 2015 interprets the rights of marriage, adoption, and inheritance present in the NALSA v. Union of India judgement.[115] Echoing colonial registration and surveillance, the bill also includes the requirement of a state issued "Transgender Certificate;" activists argued this would challenge the right for one to choose their gender (another objective of the bill) and felt such "identity policing" could intensify pre-existing tensions between groups concerning who gets recognized as an authentic transgender person.[116] Additionally, some activists felt that transgender recognition by a mental health professional ought to qualify one for the provisions set out in the bill (which particularly pertains to those transgender persons not already belonging to a Scheduled Caste or Scheduled Tribe under the Other Backward Classes).[117] Other issues were also raised, but they are more germane to a subsequent iteration of the bill.

The RTB of 2015 ultimately did not pass, and in its place the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Bill of 2016 (TPB of 2016) was introduced in the Lok Sabha.[118] However, activist response was perhaps even more irate towards this legislation; problematic wording confused "transgender" with "intersex," earlier provisions for reserving placements in educational and employment sectors were removed, and it reaffirmed the need for transgender certification.[119] Furthermore, though application for the "Transgender Certificate" is described as optional, it is mandatory in order to alter any official documents, and transgender certification would be granted by "District Screening Committees" under this bill.[120] This amounted to eliminating the sufficiency of self-identification and empowered the state to enumerate and monitor.[121] Regarding this latter point, Reddy relays a question posed by Wendy Brown: "When does legal recognition become an instrument of regulation and political recognition become an instrument of subordination?"[122] Saria makes no bones about it; the TPB of 2016 broadens state disciplinary powers and aims to bring *hijṛās* to heel. For example, the bill sets out punitive measures against "whoever compels or entices a transgender person to indulge in the act of begging."[123] Due to the subsumption of *hijṛās* under the

---

[115] Saria, "Begging for Change," 7.

[116] Saria, "Begging for Change," 8. The reason this was felt to jeopardize the right for one to choose their gender is explained here by Saria as follows: "the criteria for a real hijra shifts with context and may rest on proliferating variables such as biology, sartorial presentation, marital status, parenthood, occupation, and membership." The certification would potentially pigeonhole an individual, curtailing evidently important fluidity.

[117] Saria, "Begging for Change," 8. However, it is not hard to imagine that mandating any institutional body to affirm and/or validate gender identity would be inevitably contentious.

[118] Saria, "Begging for Change," 9.

[119] For the points on confusion of "transgender" with "intersex" and the removal of reserved placements see Reddy, "Paradigms of Thirdness," 55. For points on activist response and intent of transgender certification see Saria, Begging for Change," 9.

[120] Saria, "Begging for Change," 9.

[121] The point of removing the ability to self-identify found on Reddy, "Paradigms of Thirdness," 55.

[122] Reddy, "Paradigms of Thirdness," 56. Wendy Brown is an American political theorist.

[123] Saria, "Begging for Change," 10.

"transgender" umbrella, this would achieve an erasure of practices associated with the former. The "begging" done by *hijṛās* is called *challa mangna* and regularly involves humour, sartorial presentation, and "the flamboyant and markedly hijra [practice] of hand-clapping" which can both signal *hijṛā* presence and subversively persuade alms (among other functions).[124] Given that *challa mangna* techniques are taught to novice *hijṛās* by their *gurus*, the TPB of 2016 potentially criminalizes these *gurus* under its anti-beggary laws, silencing the claps and rupturing the relations of *hijṛā* kinship.[125] Significant criticism of the bill resulted in a report by the Standing Committee on Social Justice and Empowerment (SC Report) that delineated community concerns, yet the government decided to disregard the SC Report in late 2017 and go ahead with the TPB of 2016.[126]

As indicated, "transgender" is increasingly recognized as a transnational designation and use of this umbrella term may compromisingly conceive of South Asian identities and expressions as "local variants" of the transgender category.[127] This "risks replicating colonial forms of knowledge production" and/or "overriding other epistemologies of gender/sexual variance."[128] Additionally, Dutta and Roy acknowledge how, despite carrying global clout, the transgender category may hegemonically privilege certain caste/class positionalities. For example, they recognize that many marginalized individuals cannot access the internet and/or lack fluency in English, "the hegemonic transnational medium through which categories like transgender disseminate."[129] As a result, these populations cannot negotiate the usage of transgender rhetoric at high levels of activism while remaining restricted to this framework of representation in order to secure funding and recognition.[130] Thus, "transgender" carries varying, sometimes conflicting, connotations and/or utilizations, leading to tensions between groups. Dutta and Roy report a case wherein one set of activists (previously identifying as *kothi* and MSM) are accused by another group of masquerading as transgender in order to secure

---

[124] The description of *hijṛā* "begging" as *challa mangna* on Saria, "Begging for Change," 10 and sartorial practices and humour on 16. In this connection, it is worth noting that *hijṛās* are not always considered a bother in these contexts (as they are too often presented); Saria (on page 15) relays an example where the noted humour has a train erupt with laughter. The quotation on handclapping from Reddy, *With Respect to Sex*, 122, with more detailed discussion of the practice(s) on 136-138.

[125] Saria, "Begging for Change," 10-11. Here Saria also extends this conversation to include *hijṛā* households; another clause of the bill criminalizes whoever "forces or causes a transgender person to leave household, village or other place of residence." Given that it often happens that legal minors leave their natal homes to join *hijṛā* communities, this clause may potentially criminalize *hijṛā* households. In relation to the erasure of handclapping associated with *challa mangna*, it is also worth noting that similar outcomes have been noted following the perhaps well-intentioned but ill-conceived #ChangeTheClap campaign of 2017 in Pakistan. See Claire Pamment, "The *Hijra* Clap in Neoliberal Hands: Performing Trans Rights in Pakistan," *TDR: The Drama Review* 63, no.1 (Spring 2019).

[126] Saria, "Begging for Change," 11-13.

[127] Aniruddha Dutta and Raina Roy, "Decolonizing Transgender in India: Some Reflections," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 3 (August 2014): 328. Although I have raised this point earlier, it is echoed in this source (and the "local variants" phrasing is found therein).

[128] Dutta and Roy, "Decolonizing Transgender in India," 321.

[129] Dutta and Roy, "Decolonizing Transgender in India," 323.

[130] Dutta and Roy, "Decolonizing Transgender in India," 323.

funding.[131] This suggests local terminologies may be used in common parlance while "the politically correct discourse du jour" is evoked in official settings – and that understandings of "transgender" may differ from official renderings, pliably (and perhaps contentiously) encompassing people not recognized as transgender by the state or by other trans-identifying people.[132]

Notwithstanding questionable transgender legislations and disconnects between subcultural and official uses of the term, there are noted positives regarding its emergent expressions. Despite its transnational reputation and outside origins, "transgender" does not have to be viewed as problematically exogenous; many South Asian individuals feel "transgender" is an adequate term to express who they are.[133] Furthermore, there are adoptions, hybridizations, and translations of the term, plus its use in conjunction with local designations (such as *hijṛā* and *kothi*), that mark unique contextual articulations.[134] One is thus also reminded of the hopeful point Gannon makes in asserting the productive merit new categorizations may hold.[135] Indeed, while access to transgender-allocated resources and the ability to negotiate related rhetoric has proved arguably inequitable, the transgender category has also created new possibilities for social recognition, citizenship, service provisions, politics, and funding.[136] Accordingly, Dutta and Roy do not urge disengagement with the transgender category, but advocate for its "decolonization," taken to imply "the ability to freely question, critique, and, if necessary, reject globalizing discourses or practices."[137] Such critical engagement may yield a repurposing of the transgender category, including its provisional use as "an analytic rubric for variant and liminal gendered *positions* . . . to access the benefits or services provided through the category . . . [so] one does not have to *identify* with any pre-given understanding of transgender."[138] Dutta and Roy argue that this process of "deontologizing transgender" must occur alongside the denudation of a "scalar hierarchy between 'transnational' and 'local' or 'regional' discourses" while also deconstructing and democratizing LGBTIQ activism.[139]

---

[131] Dutta and Roy, "Decolonizing Transgender in India," 329.

[132] Quotation from Dutta and Roy, "Decolonizing Transgender in India," 330; the points I offer are in part inspired by discussions on this page, too.

[133] Dutta and Roy, "Decolonizing Transgender in India," 322-323.

[134] Dutta and Roy, "Decolonizing Transgender in India," 323.

[135] Gannon, "Exclusion as Language and the Language of Exclusion," 26.

[136] Dutta and Roy, "Decolonizing Transgender in India," 321 (social recognition and citizenship) and 334 (service provisions, politics, and funding).

[137] Dutta and Roy, "Decolonizing Transgender in India," 320.

[138] Dutta and Roy, "Decolonizing Transgender in India," 334. I have used "provisional" because Dutta and Roy frame these thoughts under "a provisional conclusion to [their] reflections." It is unclear if "provisional" here holds connotations of temporariness or conditionality (or what conditions the latter may entail). Nonetheless, I believe the word helps cushion what I foresee as inevitable pushback by those who disagree with this use of the transgender category; surely there are those who view "transgender" as an important and very particular identifier who would disavow other applications.

[139] Dutta and Roy, "Decolonizing Transgender in India," 335. LBTIQ is an acronym used by the authors; though they do not unpack it, I believe it refers to lesbian, bisexual, trans, intersex, and queer peoples.

Given the historical and ongoing tensions between coloniality and populations associated with the transgender appellation in South Asia, the notion of decolonizing the transgender category offers promise. However, not all claims of decolonization in relation to transgender discourses have been unanimously taken as admirable within India. A cluster of associated issues will be discussed below and round out the contextualizing content this chapter will have provided in service of navigating those that follow

Issues of (Trans)Nationalism

In the opening paragraph of its "Historical Background of Transgenders in India" section, the NALSA v. Union of India writ petition claims that the "[transgender] community . . . have got a strong historical presence in our country in the Hindu mythology and other religious texts."[140] That Hindu mythology is named while "other religious texts" are lumped together and unspecified is quite telling. This section goes on to provide a paragraph detailing how the *Rāmāyana* connects to transgender peoples and another regarding how they are linked to the *Mahābhārata*; meanwhile, the "Jain texts" that "make a detailed reference to [transgender people]" are given a vague, one-sentence entry and made to share the same paragraph referencing the place of *hijṛās* in bygone Islamic royal courts.[141] Importantly, this apparent Hindu emphasis is not a one-off.

In fact, Upadhyay claims that "Hinduism is often invoked to demonstrate how precolonial [India] was accepting of peoples of diverse genders and sexualities."[142] However, they (the preferred pronoun of Upadhyay) insightfully rebuke such invocations, dubbing them "revisionist narratives" and reminding readers that "structures of brahminical cisheteropatriarchy predate colonialism in the Indian subcontinent."[143] Moreover, Upadhyay cautions that while some events (such as the eventual judgment to repeal the colonial-era anti-sodomy law of Section 377 IPC) have been framed as acts of decolonization, there are ongoingly "other simultaneous processes at play which are not so decolonial in praxis."[144] In this connection, they argue that emphasizing Hindu-affiliated content (as the NALSA v. Union of India writ petition does) in service of legitimizing marginalized gender identities and/or sexual orientations, while perhaps being strategic for queer rights movements, is frequently suspect if not outrightly problematic. Doing so, they contend, regularly goes beyond merely romanticizing the past and instead amounts to decidedly "appropriating queer and trans struggles."[145] Specifically, Upadhyay argues that Hindutva (a political ideology associated with Hindu

[140] See National Legal Services Authority v. Union of India, 5 SCC 438, 2014, section 12.

[141] See National Legal Services Authority v. Union of India, 5 SCC 438, 2014, section 13 (for *Rāmāyana*), section 14 (for *Mahābhārata*) and section 15 (for Jain texts and bygone Islamic royal courts).

[142] Nishant Upadhyay, "Hindu Nation and its Queers: Caste, Islamophobia, and De/coloniality in India," *International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 22, no. 4 (2020): 465. Here the author provides a list of books that invoke Hinduism in this way.

[143] Upadhyay, "Hindu Nation and its Queers," 466.

[144] Upadhyay, "Hindu Nation and its Queers," 465.

[145] Upadhyay, "Hindu Nation and its Queers," 466.

nationalism) discourses appear to be tolerant of such populations "as long as they assimilate within the Hindu fold" and their allegiances can be leveraged in service of undermining perceived "foreign" threats, often Islamic populations internal and external to India.[146] Interestingly, Davé notes that the right-wing and Hindutva-aligned Bharatiya Janata Party (the ruling party of India as of this writing in 2024) had (in the 1990s) embodied what Paola Bacchetta calls a "xenophobic queerphobia" for rallying against *Fire*, a film featuring a lesbian relationship, with the assertation that homosexuality is at odds with Indian/Hindu values.[147] Certainly this is fodder for charges holding that acceptance of identities beyond the cisgender and/or heteronormative within Hindutva discourses amounts to a politically-motivated strategy.

Accusations of Islamophobically coopting trans struggles in order to bolster Hindu hegemony relates to a final designation requiring introduction: *kinnar*. This term is sometimes described as serving to replace "*hijṛā*" given that the latter has widely taken on negative connotations in contemporary India.[148] In this connection, Liz Mount examines concerted efforts by Indian transwomen to distance themselves from *hijṛā*-identification through an aptly named "I am Not a Hijra" online photo project.[149] However, not everyone feels "*kinnar*" reflects a respectable alternative. For instance, Saria notes that "[the term '*kinnar*'] has been received with suspicion by some activists, since it could possibly be an alibi to absorb hijras within ascendant right-wing Hindu nationalism."[150] Embrace of the term "*kinnar*" (derived from Sanskrit and associated with Hinduism) over the term "*hijṛā*" (derived from Arabic and associated with Islam) could alone trigger such concerns. However, more worrisome is the fact that Laxmi Narayan Tripathi (whom the reader will recall was a petitioner in the NALSA case leading to "third gender" recognition) has been accused of appealing to Hindutva ideology and of championing the *kinnar* designation as a means of downplaying and/or erasing Islamic

[146] Upadhyay, "Hindu Nation and its Queers," 467. Hindutva, translated as literally "Hindu-ness," indicates ideologies and political movements aiming to establish a hegemonic Hindu presence in India. The term is championed by the political right of India, namely the Sangh Parivar, a "family of organizations" that includes the Rāṣṭrīya Svayamsēvak Saṅgha (RSS) and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP). Though both promote Hindutva, the RSS sees its task as building a strong and united India via education and discipline while the VHP considers its mission to be the conservation of Hindu temples, idols, and Hindu religious rituals, and is dedicated to serving Hindus worldwide. These differences between the RSS and VHP noted on Chandrima Chakraborty, *Masculinity, Asceticism, Hinduism: Past and Present Imaginings of India* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2011), 347-348.

[147] Naisargi N. Davé, *Queer Activism in India: A Story in the Anthropology of Ethics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 140-142.

[148] Saria, *Hijras, Lovers, Brothers,* 4.

[149] See Liz Mount, ""I Am Not a Hijra": Class, Respectability, and the Emergence of the "New" Transgender Woman in India," *Gender & Society* 34, no. 4 (2020). Herein, the author analyzes a 2016 social media photo series in which feminine-presenting gender-nonconforming people assigned male at birth hold signs that claim transgender identities and emphasize distinctness from *hijṛā* stereotypes/identification; see 621 for this description.

[150] Saria, *Hijras, Lovers, Brothers*, 4.

legacies within "third gender" spaces.[151] This is particularly concerning given that *hijṛā* life traditionally includes Islamic features. Indeed, purported *kinnar*-Hindutva connections have been linked to charges of "homohindunationalism."[152] In turn, this has brought about great friction in and among "third gender" communities.

Anchoring into Ardhanārīśvara

In the beginning of this chapter, I stated that I would contextualize the quandaries Ardhanārīśvara has been made to confront in recent Durgā Pūjā festivals and Kinnar Akhāḍā affairs. Although the specifics of these negotiations will be reserved for chapters to follow, it is nonetheless worth reviewing the foregoing in relation to Ardhanārīśvara at present. The mistreatment of communities, both historical and contemporary, now associated with the "third gender" marker should be abundantly clear; this chapter has offered evidence with respect to pre-colonial, colonial, and independent eras of the Indian subcontinent. Even the sociopolitical and legal developments ostensibly intended to amend "third gender" marginalization have involved their problematic categorization(s) and insidiously yielded grounds for "third gender" surveillance, control, and cooption. Even the more admirable features of these legislations and developments have yet to be fully realized; "third gender" people continue to face discrimination (and/or the lingering effects of past discrimination).[153] It is no wonder, then, that associated populations feel the continued need to fight for improved conditions, drawing on all that they may, including upon figures like Ardhanārīśvara.

The idea of incorporating Ardhanārīśvara into initiatives meant to emancipate Indian "third gender" peoples may now seem unsurprising. After all, Ardhanārīśvara is a deity affiliated with Hinduism, and this chapter has outlined that Hindu content is often cited when attempting to portray a history of gender and/or sex inclusivity within the Indian context. In addition to those linking the figure to "third gender" populations on hypothetical and/or theoretical grounds, the preceding chapter noted that some ethnographies, namely those of Nanda and Reddy, also briefly cite the presence of actual *hijṛā* peoples resonating with Ardhanārīśvara. This dissertation affirms and expands upon their observations, suggesting, too, that "third gender" folks other than the *hijṛā*-identifying also frame Ardhanārīśvara as signalling the legitimacy of their gender and/or sexual identities and orientations. It takes little imagination to see how Ardhanārīśvara could be interpreted as such a divine Hindu legitimizer given its male-female bifurcation. However, the fact that Ardhanārīśvara is affiliated with Hinduism has been

[151] Daniela Bevilacqua, "From the Margins to Demigod: The Establishment of the Kinnar Akhara in India," *Asian Ethnology* 81, no. 1/2 (2022). Regarding accusations of appealing to Hindutva, see 67; for talk of excluding Islamic features, see 54.

[152] See Upadhyay, "Hindu Nation and its Queers," 469; here the author describes "homohindunationalism" as the assimilation of queer and trans bodies within the Hindu nationalist project to uphold Brahminical supremacy and Islamophobia.

[153] For a discussion of ongoing issues, see Singh, "From Colonial Castaways to Current Tribulation."

met with both enthusiasm and hesitation in (and in response to) “third gender” initiatives incorporating the figure.

As noted, Upadhyay acknowledges that it may be strategically sound for Indian queer rights activists to legitimize gender and sexual variance through emphasizing Hindu-affiliated content. To be sure, the integration of Ardhanārīśvara into related campaigns by some such actors has been impactful, due in no small part to the perceived Hindu nature of the figure. However, this Hindu affiliation has garnered support and resistance, with some feeling the linkages claimed between Ardhanārīśvara and “third gender” peoples are controversial and/or outright misguided. Moreover, even activists within (or allying with) “third gender” communities have distanced themselves from framing Ardhanārīśvara as a squarely Hindu figure so as to avoid misunderstandings that would peg them as Hindutva supporters. The following chapter will unpack these sentiments further. For now, it suffices to say that while Ardhanārīśvara has been increasingly forwarded to aid in counteracting past and present “third gender” oppression, this has taken place and been responded to in various fashions.

Conclusion

This chapter centered on “*hijṛā*,” “*ṭṛtīyāprakṛti*,” “third gender,” “transgender,” and “*kinnar*” designations within the Indian context. Particularly, it focused on the conflation, marginalization, and emancipatory efforts of peoples associated with these categories through examining relevant sociopolitical and legal developments. The most recent specific event identified was the decision to implement the TPB of 2016 by the Indian government. The conflicted histories, discourses, and legislations leading up to and surrounding this 2016 bill are together the background against which the initiatives focused on in the next two chapters were forwarded.

The attention dedicated within this chapter to the above populations, including their place in scholarly and political discourses, is not to overtheorize, academize, or politicize their identities. However, despite this dissertation being anchored in Ardhanārīśvara, the sensitive issues and complex plights of the marginalized “third gender” populations associated with the figure would be ill-served without this contextualization. Thus, the present chapter should help illuminate the next, which deals with demographics, issues, and initiatives connected to the implementation of Ardhanārīśvara during recent Durgā Pūjā festivities.

Chapter 4
Pink, White, and Blue Fabrics: Observing Durgā Pūjā with Ardhanārīśvara

Introduction

This chapter examines the incorporation of Ardhanārīśvara into the Durgā Pūjā celebrations of Kolkata by activists aiming to uplift those marginalized by virtue of their gender and/or sexuality. In tracking and analyzing related developments (primarily from 2015 through 2022), Ardhanārīśvara emerges as a figure both presented as firmly established within religiosity and framed in inventive ways. This strategic interplay between the known and the novel allows for the disenfranchised communities in question to align with Ardhanārīśvara in service of their upward social mobility. In this connection, the deity, linked as it is with the Indian Hindu majority, is notably connected to the term "transgender," one of global currency. This association is part and parcel of significant developments in the history of Ardhanārīśvara that will be delineated across the pages that follow and indicates that the figure is meaningfully factoring into unique and ongoing formulations of gender and sexual variance within India.

In 2015, numerous news outlets reported that the Kolkata-based Pratyay Gender Trust had an idol modelled after Ardhanārīśvara for the annual Durgā Pūjā festival; "[the] Pratyay Gender Trust is a sexuality rights initiative that was started in 1997-98 by members of Calcutta's kothi, hijda, and other gender non-conforming/transgender women who remain excluded from the mainstay of broad human rights movements."[1] Media coverage widely touted their figure – which was centered in a festival display – as "India's first transgender Durga Puja idol."[2] This idol became the first in a series to follow; through 2024, each year since (aside 2017) has seen a newsworthy installation making use of this Ardhanārīśvara motif. I learned of the first iteration around the time of its debut; my curiosity easily piqued as I was researching Ardhanārīśvara temples at the time. Nonetheless, the integration of Ardhanārīśvara into Durgā Pūjā festivities, compelling as it was, remained in the back of my mind for years. However, all that would change in the summer of 2019 when I met with Anindya Hajra, a founding member of the Pratyay Gender Trust (PGT hereafter), during a stay in Kolkata.

In anticipation of travelling to Kolkata, I tried my luck at reaching the PGT via a contact number made publicly available. Ardhanārīśvara in its Durgā Pūjā context(s) remained of

---

[1] This description taken from the "About" section of their Facebook page. See Pratyay Gender Trust, "About," *Facebook*, https://www.facebook.com/PratyayGenderTrust/ (accessed March 2021). The reader may note that *hijṛā* has been spelled "hijda" in the above quote; this is how it was presented in the link provided here.

[2] For examples, see Indrani Basu, "How India Got Its First Transgender Durga Idol," *Huffpost*, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/how-india-got-its-first-transgender-durga-idol_n_561ead92e4b028dd7ea65245 (accessed March 2021); Tasmayee Laha Roy, "Kolkata to worship its first transgender durga idol this puja," *The Economic Times*, https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/magazines/panache/kolkata-to-worship-its-first-transgender-durga-idol-this-puja/articleshow/49410121.cms (accessed March 2021); Priya Prakashan, "India's first transgender Durga Puja idol in Kolkata is breaking stereotypes in Navratri 2015!," *India.com*, https://www.india.com/news/india/indias-first-transgender-durga-puja-idol-in-kolkata-is-breaking-stereotypes-in-navratri-2015-638879/ (accessed March 2021).

peripheral focus, yet I was nevertheless curious to learn more about their understanding and use of the figure. To my surprise, Anindya responded and suggested we meet in a South Kolkata café the day before my scheduled departure from India. Importantly, she informed me that in 2018, the Ardhanārīśvara mantle, as it were, moved to the hands of the activist Ranjita Sinha (herself not of the PGT). I reached out to Ranjita as I had the PGT and was thankfully met with the same willingness to talk. Both Anindya and Ranjita spoke of activistic intentions behind implementing Ardhanārīśvara, the intriguing fashioning(s) of goddess Durgā as Ardhanārīśvara that would follow, and the resistances faced as a result. Each year saw Ardhanārīśvara posited as a marker of inclusion, one that simultaneously called for the acceptance of those marginalized due to their gender identity and/or sexual orientation while denouncing agents of ostracization. Anindya and Ranjita – self-identifying transwomen themselves – also described the presence of Ardhanārīśvara as resonant with transgender communities.[3] I was particularly struck by the situatedness of these occasions, for previously, as stated (see Chapter 1), I had largely encountered hypothetical and/or theoretical mentions of Ardhanārīśvara as relevant to related demographics. Accordingly, Ardhanārīśvara as conceptualized and utilized within Durgā Pūjā shifted into my central focus.

My initial talks with Anindya and Ranjita occurred informally. However, they generously agreed to do formal interviews at a later date once I received ethical clearance from my university. Ultimately, these would take on a semi-structured format and occur nearly two years later, in 2021, via Zoom amidst the COVID-19 outbreak.[4] After some delays due to the pandemic, I was also (finally) able to attend Durgā Pūjā alongside Ranjita in 2022, a year which saw the introduction of a new Ardhanārīśvara figure into the festival. The following draws from my interviews, my fieldwork in Kolkata, related media coverage, and relevant scholarship as I describe and analyze the Ardhanārīśvara installations in question. In order to adequately do so, I will first introduce Durgā Pūjā itself.

Introducing Durgā Pūjā

The goddess Durgā is a central deity in the Śākta branch of Hinduism; Śākta traditions hold the Goddess (i.e., Śakti or Devī) as supreme. This divine feminine principle is understood to manifest in various forms. Among them, Durgā is popularly recognized as preeminent, particularly in the region of West Bengal. Durgā is commonly depicted with eight or more arms, each wielding a weapon associated with a male Hindu god, which she receives from them in order to fight the forces of evil. She is also shown with her lion or tiger v*āhana*, often attacking Mahiṣa, a shapeshifting demon she famously defeats in battle; in part, Durgā Pūjā celebrates

[3] As will be discussed later, both Anindya and Ranjita use "transgender" as a "loose marker" so as to include South Asian forms of gender and sexual variance.

[4] Zoom is a software program that allows videoconferencing. The interviews were conducted in English, spoken by both Anindya and Ranjita (and the language through which their primary and secondary schooling occurred).

this event.[5] Textual accounts of an autumnal festival celebrating the goddess Durgā date back to the 6th-century CE "Devī-Māhātmya" section of the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa*.[6] According to Rachel Fell McDermott, potentially the earliest mention of the festival as practiced in Bengal is found in the *Rāmacarita* (1050-1150 CE) of Sandhyākaranandin, which references festivities in Varendi (present-day northern Bengal).[7] She adds that since at least the 14th century, Pūjā digests (which McDermott describes as "medieval Bengali ritual texts") have been written on the Durgā festival.[8] Analyses of these digests have yielded insights concerning the developments of Durgā Pūjā. For example, the 15th-century *Viṣṇuyamalā* and 16th-century CE *Caṇḍimaṅgal* describe the worship of Durgā as taking place in households during the month of Aśvin (September-October), a time in which Durgā Pūjā is also observed today.[9] Importantly, this household worship hints at an important shift that saw her festival worship move largely into the public sphere.

The celebration of Durgā Pūjā in the public domain owes largely to shifting power relations in the Bengal region. In this connection, McDermott notes "[that although there is] controversy as to when and under what specific conditions Durgā Pūjā was first celebrated in Bengal, no one doubts that it arose among a class of newly affluent landowners who used the festival as a self-authenticating ritual for the conferral of a new status, as an opportunity for conspicuous displays of wealth, and a visible show of strength and power."[10] It is beyond the scope of this work to detail all of the elements that gave way to such landownership; it suffices here to say that most of these landowners had ties to the British through employment, trade, and/or inherited status.[11] Ironically, however, it was the financial weakening of these *zamindars*

[5] In addition to its martial associations, Durgā Pūjā is also connected to the autumnal equinox and associated time of harvest (Durgā being the motherly source behind life and its abundances), as well as the temporary return of daughters to their natal home; Bengali traditions hold that Durgā Pūjā commemorates the homecoming of Durgā (often referred to as Umā or Gaurī in this context) to Bengal, for a time leaving her husband Śiva and their abode on Kailāsa. For mention of these associations, see Caleb Simmons and Moumita Sen, "Introduction: Movements of Navarātri," in *Nine Nights of the Goddess: The Navarātri Festival in South Asia*, eds. Caleb Simmons, Moumita Sen, and Hillary Rodrigues (New York: State University of New York Press, 2018), 1. These authors refer to the festival in question as Navarātri. Thus, it is important to highlight, as McDermott describes, that Navarātri is "the equivalent of Durgā Pūjā in the rest of India." See Rachel Fell McDermott, *Revelry, Rivalry, and Longing for the Goddesses of Bengal: The Fortunes of Hindu Festivals* (New York: Colombia University Press, 2011), 24.

[6] McDermott, *Revelry, Rivalry, and Longing for the Goddesses of Bengal*, 12. The "Devī-Māhātmya" remains central to Durgā Pūjā; in it, Durgā defeats Mahiṣa, and the text is regularly referenced, recited, and enacted during Pūjā time. See Ṛṣi Mārkaṇḍeya, *Devī-Māhātmyam*, trans. Svāmi Jagadīsvarānanda (Chennai: Sri Ramakrishna Math Printing, 2014).

[7] McDermott, *Revelry, Rivalry, and Longing for the Goddesses of Bengal*, 12.

[8] McDermott, *Revelry, Rivalry, and Longing for the Goddesses of Bengal*, 12-13.

[9] McDermott, *Revelry, Rivalry, and Longing for the Goddesses of Bengal*, 13. According to David L. Curley, the *Caṇḍimaṅgal* was written by Cakrabartī in the second half of the 16th century CE. See David L. Curley, "Kings and commerce on an agrarian frontier: Kālteku's story in Mukunda's *Caṇḍimaṅgal*," *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 38, no. 3 (September 2001): 301.

[10] McDermott, *Revelry, Rivalry, and Longing for the Goddesses of Bengal*, 20.

[11] McDermott, *Revelry, Rivalry, and Longing for the Goddesses of Bengal*, 29. Bhattacharya notes examples of such personages, including Raja Krishnachandra Raya (1710-82/83), "the most likely initiator of the

(landowners) under the colonial Permanent Settlement Act of 1793 that saw Durgā Pūjā take on new social vibrancy. The Settlement Act "abolished the mechanisms whereby *zamindars* might exact timely payment from their own tenants, effectively ensuring their powerlessness in meeting their financial commitments."[12] Amid these changing conditions, finances were combined among people, and the *bāroiyāri* Pūjā (Pūjā sponsored by twelve friends) debuted in 1790.[13] Bhattacharya notes that the *bāroiyāri* Pūjā of Calcutta was primarily an urban affair and that early initiators vigorously collected subscriptions from its famous and wealthy residents in order to facilitate the festivities.[14] Importantly, McDermott highlights that "[the] *sarbajanīn* (or public) Pūjā of Kolkata today is heir to this intermediate *bāroiyāri* type; now, instead of twelve friends, the Pūjās are sponsored by neighborhood groups and civic associations that vie with each other to produce the best, most opulent, and most beautiful displays."[15]

Central to these contemporary public celebrations of Durgā Pūjā are its *paṇḍāls*, temporary structures erected for the festivities. Generally, each *paṇḍāl* contains a sculptural image of the goddess Durgā (and her *vāhana*) subduing Mahiṣa while flanked by her children: gods Gaṇeśa and Kārttikēya, and goddesses Lakṣmī and Sarasvatī. However, this barebones framework is nowadays brought to life with extravagance as rivalry ensues between various groups as they compete to produce the most impressive *paṇḍāl* displays. The colourfulness of present-day Pūjās can be traced to the 1920s "when public festivals of the *sarbajanīn* variety, with their illuminations, temporary houses for the Goddess, processions and gatherings, and free musical entertainment, were initiated and celebrated with great enthusiasm."[16] This trend continued, and *paṇḍāl* displays became more elaborate. "Since the 1960s, when the art [installations] exploded in imaginative design, there have been scores of examples of creative experimentation, as artists have vied with each other for novelty and acclaim."[17] McDermott continues: "Truly, since the 1960s Durgā has been made to fit almost every whim of fashion. She has been clothed with shells, paper, grass, coins, and wax. Even more radically, her entire body has been fashioned from paddy, gold, oyster shells, fish scales, nuts, mirrors, sawdust, tea leaves, sugarcane husks, coconut, biscuits, toffy, rubber pipes, recyclables like rusty forks,

---

public *puja*" who "earned his spurs by backing the British at the battle of Plassey, thereby inadvertently linking the fortunes of Durga to those of the new regime of the East India Company." See Tithi Bhattacharya, "Tracking the Goddess: Religion, Community, and Identity in the Durga Puja Ceremonies of Nineteenth-Century Kolkata," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 66, no. 4 (November 2007): 934.

[12] McDermott, *Revelry, Rivalry, and Longing for the Goddesses of Bengal*, 19.

[13] McDermott, *Revelry, Rivalry, and Longing for the Goddesses of Bengal*, 19.

[14] Bhattacharya, "Tracking the Goddess," 950. The reader may note that Calcutta is elsewhere spelled Kolkata; the former has been used above as this is how the city was widely rendered during the time being described. In 2001, the West Bengal government officially changed the spelling to Kolkata in order to better reflect its Bengali pronunciation, so I too use the latter spelling when addressing more contemporary matters.

[15] McDermott, *Revelry, Rivalry, and Longing for the Goddesses of Bengal*, 19.

[16] McDermott, *Revelry, Rivalry, and Longing for the Goddesses of Bengal*, 114.

[17] McDermott, *Revelry, Rivalry, and Longing for the Goddesses of Bengal*, 114.

matchsticks, empty toothpaste tubes, [etc.]."[18] New materials are not the only changes to have taken place; style, scope, content, and participation have also transformed.

By the 1970s, there were reports of "*paṇḍāl*-hopping" (i.e., festivalgoers travelling from one compelling installation to the next), and by the 1980s there were "big budget" *paṇḍāls* funded by commercial companies hot on the scene.[19] As *paṇḍāls* grew in elaborateness so too did the practice of pitting them against each other in competition. "By 2008 so many different prize-awarders had come forward, ranging from companies to newspapers to charities, that it has become difficult to keep count."[20] Examples of *paṇḍāl* awards include "most green," "most child-friendly," and "most caring."[21] Despite undeniable popularity, these extravagant and commercial turns have sat uneasily with some; Ghosal, for example, offers descriptions of "carnivalesque degradation" and the spirit of old becoming "gradually shaded into the commercial arena."[22] As fair as these sentiments may be, it must be said that dissipating traditionalism does not mean sweeping vacuity. Rather, an important trend should be highlighted: the emergence of themed *paṇḍāls.* While sometimes these themed displays may simply be playfully stylized to appear constructed by playing card cards or Lego, other times they offer more incisive imagery.[23] McDermott, for example, notes that one *paṇḍāl* from 2001 was shaped like the World Trade Center following its 9/11 terrorist attacks.[24] Moreover, the inner-*paṇḍāl* figures may be fashioned in the likeness of public personalities. Moumita Sen examines an instance where Mamata Banerjee, founder of the All India Trinamool Congress (abbreviated AITC or TMC) and chief minister of West Bengal (at least at the time of this writing), is benevolently presented in the position of Durgā; on the other hand, McDermott describes a disparaging representation of Bill Clinton as the malevolent Mahiṣa in the aftermath of his sex scandal.[25] Tacit here is the implication that *paṇḍāls* also serve to showcase social commentary. The spirit of themed innovation and the purposing of the *paṇḍāl* as a public platform to voice concerns merge in the PGT Ardhanārīśvara Durgā Pūjā installation to which I now turn.

---

[18] McDermott, *Revelry, Rivalry, and Longing for the Goddesses of Bengal*, 114-115.

[19] McDermott, *Revelry, Rivalry, and Longing for the Goddesses of Bengal*, 133. Ghosal echoes this point, claiming that corporate sponsors first arrived on the scene during the 1980s. See Chandikaprosad Ghosal, "Kolkata's Changing Puja Ethos," *Economic and Political Weekly* 41, no. 46 (November 2006): 4727.

[20] McDermott, *Revelry, Rivalry, and Longing for the Goddesses of Bengal*, 137. To clarify, I do not mean to suggest that only "big budget" *paṇḍāls* are pitted in competition; even the more modest ones may be implicated.

[21] McDermott, *Revelry, Rivalry, and Longing for the Goddesses of Bengal*, 138.

[22] Ghosal, "Kolkata's Changing Puja Ethos," 4729.

[23] These playing card and Lego stylizations are ones I have personally seen before.

[24] McDermott, *Revelry, Rivalry, and Longing for the Goddesses of Bengal*, 143-144.

[25] See Moumita Sen, "Politics, Religion, and Art in the Durgā Pūjā of West Bengal," in *Nine Nights of the Goddess: The Navarātri Festival in South Asia*, eds. Caleb Simmons, Moumita Sen, and Hillary Rodrigues (New York: State University of New York Press, 2018), 108 and McDermott, *Revelry, Rivalry, and Longing for the Goddesses of Bengal*, 144. Although McDermott does not explicitly mention said sex scandal, I infer that it took place given she twice mentions Monica Lewinsky elsewhere (on pages 143 and 151).

Taking Space

Durgā Pūjā begins on Mahālāya (the new-moon night of Aśvin), followed by days of preliminary rites as the Moon begins to wax.[26] However, celebrations and worship generally begin in earnest following Ṣaṣṭī (the sixth lunar day) as Durgā is awoken from her slumber via the *bodhana* (awakening rite).[27] The seventh (Saptamī), eighth (Aṣṭamī), and ninth (Navamī) lunar days round out the nine nights of Durgā Pūjā, yet there is also a tenth day (Vijayā Daśamī), when the festival images (*pratimā* or *mūrti*) are ritually dismissed and immersed in water.[28] In Kolkata, the days leading up to Vijayā Daśamī see massive amounts of people visiting the thousands of publicly displayed *paṇḍāls* peppered throughout the city. Among these, in 2015, one modest *paṇḍāl* with Ardhanārīśvara as its focal point garnered especially significant attention. This year saw numerous news outlets report that the PGT had established "the first transgender idol" in Durgā Pūjā history. In relation to this story, I scoured the internet, reading all that I could about the widely covered episode while gathering as many questions as I did answers along the way. Fortunately, Anindya, a core PGT member who was instrumental in implementing the 2015 *paṇḍāl* (as well as its follow-up in 2016), graciously agreed to speak with me via Zoom in February of 2021. The following draws from both her eloquent explanations and news media reports as I expound the events under consideration.[29]

Anindya is a prominent advocate for gender justice and human rights – especially as concerns economic and livelihood issues – who co-founded the PGT. In our conversation, she described the PGT as a collective that began forming around 1998, one that is currently comprised largely of trans persons. She said that the PGT "started as an anti-violence and anti-harassment space [for those] negotiating extremely violent families or educational institutions or social spaces . . . [where we could] talk about our experiences and form bonds of friendship and solidarity." Anindya explained that the PGT has since expanded its focuses to include questions of labour, education, and politics as faced by transgender people. In foregrounding these experiences and issues, the PGT facilitates public workshops and presentations, including

[26] McDermott, *Revelry, Rivalry, and Longing for the Goddesses of Bengal*, 4. For a detailed explanation of these rites, see the fourth chapter of Hillary Peter Rodrigues, *Ritual Worship of the Great Goddess: The Liturgy of the Durgā Pūjā with Interpretations* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003).

[27] McDermott, *Revelry, Rivalry, and Longing for the Goddesses of Bengal*, 4. Here McDermott describes *bodhana* as emulating the "untimely" (*akāl*) awakening of Durgā by Rāma as he petitioned her help in his battle against Rāvaṇa; her awakening is viewed as untimely because the gods and goddesses are understood to be regularly sleeping at this time of year. Alternatively, Rodrigues, states that the *bodhana* may occur on the fifth day (Pañcamī) if the sixth lunar day will end before 4 p.m. See Hillary Rodrigues, "Bengali Durgā Pūjā: Procedures and Symbolism," in *Nine Nights of the Goddess: The Navarātri Festival in South Asia*, eds. Caleb Simmons, Moumita Sen, and Hillary Rodrigues (New York: State University of New York Press, 2018), 200.

[28] Vijayā Daśamī is associated with both the victory of Durgā over Mahiṣa and Rāma over Rāvaṇa. Thus, it marks the culmination of both the Durgā Pūjā and Rām Līlā festivals; the latter (famously celebrated in Benares and consisting of folk reenactments of Rāma's life and the burning of Rāvaṇa effigies) therefore overlaps with the Durgā Pūjā (though it begins about two weeks prior). For details on the Vijayā Daśamī as it pertains to the Durgā Pūjā, see Rodrigues, *Ritual Worship of the Great Goddess*, 236-247.

[29] Note that all ensuing quotations reflect what was said during our interview unless otherwise specified.

their annual Rituparno Ghosh Memorial Lecture.[30] With respect to their 2015 initiative, Anindya told me that "[the] idea was to create a more broad-based, general space for trans persons, so that's when we thought [to] do Durgā Pūjā publicly. Many trans persons have been involved in doing the Durgā Pūjā, but they have mostly been private individuals . . . in terms of it happening in somebody's house, etc. But we wanted to do it in the community space." To do so would also help counter the "narratives that [the PGT] have come across where trans persons [express] experiencing levels of exclusion and [their] dignity being shorn away in Durgā Pūjā spaces." In this connection, the PGT took aim at a male, upper caste/class stronghold in a statement released regarding their *paṇḍāl*: "[We] attempt to question [Pūjā] practices and caste/class structures and to cross gender lines – as 'women' and 'outcastes' – who have traditionally been barred from taking part in integral aspects of socio-religious functions such as Durga Pujas, where decision making powers and participation has by and large remained in the control of men and powerful upper castes/classes."[31] One clear goal of the PGT was to evoke critical discussions focused on renegotiating social standards of inclusivity and understandings of gender norms, roles, and identities. In the media, Anindya unequivocally stated: "We are hoping this will lead to broader conversations on gender and inclusion."[32] Another goal was to secure visibility for trans persons in the public sphere; this was expressed recurrently throughout my conversation with Anindya. Yet the activistic agenda of this project was not the only motivation. Anindya was sure to let me know that, "Yes, visibility was a factor, [but] the other thing that we felt was the sheer excitement of doing something like this."

After all, 2015 was, as Anindya described, "[a] time when conversations around trans persons [were] kind of slowly emerging out of the box, or the closet, or however you want to put it, because there was a policy recognition." The policy recognition referenced here is the NALSA v. Union of India verdict of 2014 (discussed in Chapter 3). Anindya mused over how their *paṇḍāl* came about the year after the judgment. However, when asked if it was conceived in direct relation to the NALSA v. Union of India case, she replied, "No, I don't think there was a conscious attempt . . . I think there was a long birthing process. It wasn't just the 2014 verdict, but it was a long-standing desire to see a certain kind of reclaiming that can take place. That [had] been something that [was] in my head. And I'm sure it was in a lot of people's heads because the way it got picked up and the way it got accepted within the trans community was phenomenal." I should note that Anindya was careful to clarify that she uses "trans person" as "a very loose marker . . . [not in the] definitive and instrumental sense it is currently being used;" she explained, for example, that some core members of the PGT identify specifically as *hijṛā*. Also informing her "loose marker" use of the term is her recognition of "[contentious]

[30] Rituparno Ghosh was an openly queer Bengali filmmaker and actor who died in 2013.

[31] Quote as presented in Shreya Pareek, "Kolkata Welcomes Country's First Transgender Durga Puja Idol. Breaks All Stereotypes," *The Better India*, https://www.thebetterindia.com/36364/transgender-durga-idol-in-kolkata/ (accessed May 2021).

[32] Quote as presented in Indrani Basu, "India's First Transgender Durga Puja will Be In A Small Neighborhood in Kolkata," *Huffpost*, https://www.huffpost.com/archive/in/entry/india-transgender-durga_n_8292488 (accessed May 2021).

questions around the authentic trans experience versus the fake trans experience, [that is to say] who is the authentic trans person versus the fake trans." Insightfully, she noted how these discourses relate to influential legislations, the global currency that "transgender" as a term holds, and South Asian movements resisting the "transgender" label in favour of traditional and/or local terminologies. Aware of these myriad perspectives, debates, and identities connected to the "trans" marker, Anindya envisioned the 2015 *paṇḍāl* as an "open space;" if their *paṇḍāl* was to be called a "trans space," one "could just as well say a *kothi* space or a *durani* or a *launda* space . . . it was imagined as a space for any and every imagined gender nonconforming, questioning, nonbinary [community] to come together and explore and access and derive and make meanings in [any] way that they can . . . or even sometimes question that space."[33] At the center of this thought-provoking space would be Ardhanārīśvara.

Foregrounding Ardhanārīśvara

When brainstorming the design of their *paṇḍāl*, Anindya thought of incorporating Ardhanārīśvara and proposed it to the PGT community who "readily accepted it because somewhere in the back of our heads [Ardhanārīśvara] acted as a marker." In turn, a decision was made to "foreground the Ardhanārīśvara . . . as a sort of symbol or a leitmotif for [the] inclusion of trans persons." I asked why Ardhanārīśvara was viewed as an apt symbol for the inclusion of trans people. Anindya replied, "We have been aware of how Ardhanārīśvara – as an icon, as religious iconography, or even as a thematic or concept, this merging of the binaries – [points to] something much beyond the two . . . I have heard many trans persons talk about [it] even in the past." Anindya also spoke to a more general awareness of Ardhanārīśvara, highlighting "the way that [the figure] is invested in the community, not just within the trans space, but in the way it sort of has resonance in the larger community that trans persons live in." She expanded, describing that Ardhanārīśvara is referred to in cultural productions, including dance and theatre, while citing Hyderabadi Śiva-Śakti performances as an example.[34] This familiarity with Ardhanārīśvara was in line with her hopes of "using an image or an iconography that is easily available to people, [rather than] something that is obscure or something that becomes too esoteric for people to relate to because it's also of the spirit of doing something in the public domain – especially around [a] festival, religious and otherwise –

[33] Scholarship has presented *durani* as a local term for *hijṛā* unique to Kolkata. For example, see Sibsankar Mal and Grace Bahalen Mundu, "Hidden Truth about Ethnic Lifestyle of Indian Hijras," *Research Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 9, no. 3 (July-September 2018): 622. *Launda* refers to male dancers that dress in female attire for *launda naach* folk dances, notably in the Hindi belt of Northern India, though many come from West Bengal. See Rohit K. Dasgupta, "Launda Dancers: The Dancing Boys of India," *Asian Affairs* 44, no. 3 (October 2013): 1.

[34] This dance may be the performance described by Pande, who states: "[the] dance of *Ardhanarishvara* is performed in the Kuchipudi style in Andhra Pradesh and popularly known as Andhranatyam. The body is divided by a veil which covers half the face . . . [and the] costume is also divided so that the right side is in masculine dress and the left side in feminine." See Pande, *Ardhanarishvara the Androgyne: Probing the Gender Within* (New Delhi: Rupa & Co., 2004), 123-124. I suggest this may be the same dance referenced by Anindya given that Hyderabad was the capital of Andhra Pradesh at the time Pande published this description; Hyderabad is now capital of Telangana and remains *de jure* capital of Andhra Pradesh.

to use a metaphor that is accessible. For a variety of reasons, Ardhanārīśvara seemed quite ideal for fitting the bill."

In our discussion, the theme of reclamation surfaced on a handful of occasions. "I think it's interesting how Ardhanārīśvara as a figure triggered our imaginations in the way that we were to reclaim or even reimagine the space that the Durgā Pūjā offers," Anindya reflected. In part, she suggested that this reclaiming of public space for trans persons related to an emboldening felt by their reclamation of Ardhanārīśvara itself. She continued: "I think the way the trans community kind of reclaimed that figure . . . proved to be a flashpoint, you know, where it brought to surface the deep and underlying sets of issues and the structural exclusions that this community faced. Ardhanārīśvara became as a leitmotif for people to be able to verbalize perhaps a dislike, if I were to put it, the prejudice [they face] as a threat." In line with the "open space" Anindya envisioned for their *paṇḍāl*, this reclaimed figure was seen as welcoming to people of all stripes and framed as resonating with populations marginalized for their gender and/or sexuality. In reference to the 2015 initiative, Dr. Tirthankar Guha Thakurta, a Kolkata-based psychiatrist and queer-rights activist, said, "Non-heterosexual and trans identities are not invisible in Hindu culture. Many mythological stories are about the experiences of queer characters [and] identities. Stories of Mohini, Ardhanarisvara and Sikhandi do help individuals."[35] Here, Ardhanārīśvara appears posited as a "queer character," one helpful to people unaligned with cisgender and heterosexual frameworks. Similarly, while reflecting on their Ardhanārīśvara installation, Bhanu Naskar (another PGT member) said, "The ardhanarishvara Durga was such a huge hit [in 2015]. Why can't a *hijra* (transgender) worship Ma Durga in the form she wants to?"[36] The suggested fondness felt for Ardhanārīśvara by those embodying gender and/or sexual variance is something I touched on with Anindya.

In speaking with her, I recognized the primarily activistic aims of the PGT (namely their desires to stake presence in a public forum and incite conversations on inclusion) but asked if she felt trans folk (in the "loose marker" sense) also resonated with Ardhanārīśvara in a devotional manner at their *paṇḍāl*. Anindya plainly replied, "Yes, I think that happened. That happened very strongly." Yet Anindya decidedly stopped short of describing Ardhanārīśvara as a "trans deity" and, in fact, took exception to the multitude of reports describing the Ardhanārīśvara of their *paṇḍāl* as such. Rather, she expressed cognizance of multiple meanings, stating: "I am not dismissive of the fact that [Ardhanārīśvara] may have resonance with queer folk or trans persons in particular in the manner that [it does], but I would think it is slightly reductive to make Ardhanārīśvara just about being trans; it isn't so." She went on to recognize

[35] This quote is from Rushati Mukherjee, "Praying for acceptance," *Hindustan Times*, https://www.hindustantimes.com/kolkata/praying-for-acceptance/story-zCJ1u3U3P2XiZ9RBs5bZUI.html (accessed May 2021). Mohinī is a female incarnation of the otherwise male god Viṣṇu, and Śikhaṇḍī is a character from the Mahābhārata; in many versions, Śikhaṇḍī is born female and, in the course of the narrative, becomes male.

[36] This quote is from Yajnaseni Chakraborty, "Durga Puja: How changing times reflect in the goddess," *DNA India*, https://www.dnaindia.com/lifestyle/report-one-pujo-many-avatars-2262533 (accessed May 2021). The conflation of *hijṛā* with "transgender" (presumably by the article author given the in-text bracketing) reflects a tendency examined elsewhere in this dissertation (see Chapter 3).

that, for some, Ardhanārīśvara relates to a sense of nonduality or gender nonbinary-ness, whereas others may suggest Ardhanārīśvara actually reinforces a gender binary. Moreover, she opined that "the ontology of Ardhanārīśvara, the iconography, the theology behind it, the philosophy . . . are complex and layered conversations. You can't just make it about one thing." Nonetheless, the media machine buzzed with its rather singular narrative, one touting "India's first transgender Durgā Pūjā idol," accompanied by photos of an Ardhanārīśvara-infused Durgā (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: The PGT Ardhanārīśvara installation under construction.[37]

Durgā Has Surgery

The standard *paṇḍāl* ensemble – Durgā (and her *vāhana*), Gaṇeśa, Kārttikēya, Lakṣmī, Sarasvatī, and Mahiṣa – have been stylized in countless fashions, constructed with all manner of materials, presented in varied sizes, and represented in the likeness of both beloved and controversial figures. As such, it is uncommon to dream up a Durgā that stands out, let alone one that becomes a media darling. Yet the PGT decided on a model that did both. Their attention-grabbing, Ardhanārīśvara-inspired icon was significant in that it modified the standard Durgā, in all her female glory, so that half the body was of the male Śiva. The female half was a golden yellow and the moustached male half a shimmering white. As is custom, the central figure was accompanied by its *vāhana* and flanked by Gaṇeśa, Kārttikēya, Lakṣmī, and Sarasvatī, with Mahiṣa conquered underfoot. Aligned with "orthodox prescriptions," Kārttikēya and

[37] This image is taken from Monalisa Das, "For a progressive puja, Kolkata's first Durga Puja organized by a transgender community," *The News Minute*, https://www.thenewsminute.com/news/progressive-puja-kolkatas-first-durga-puja-organized-transgender-community-35231 (accessed November 2023).

Lakṣmī were coloured yellow, Gaṇeśa red, Sarasvatī white, and Mahiṣa a "loud green."[38] The *vāhana* demonstrated an equine quality in line with "Durgā's original vehicular animal, [which] was either a horse or a stylized lion with a horse's head."[39] One article described the backdrop as "[fashioned] in traditional Bengali ekchala style [and] adorned with the daker saaj, a style where embellishments are primarily made from silver foil (rangta) and enhanced with silver sequins" (see Figure 4).[40] Evidently, much of the installation emitted a traditional aesthetic, save for the hybridized centerpiece. However, this central figure was not the only break from tradition; the process of its creation also bucked convention.

With only a couple of weeks remaining until Durgā Pūjā, members of the PGT sought the assistance of China Pal, heralded as one of the few women artisans of the famed Kumartuli artisan district of Kolkata.[41] To have China Pal involved, someone who broke through the glass ceiling of a male-dominated field, would be fitting given the barriers the PGT sought to break with their *paṇḍāl*. Fortunately, at a time when most studios had completed and sold off their works, China Pal retained a spare Durgā display for which there were no takers. Furthermore, she was willing to work towards the specifications requested of her so as to realize the Ardhanārīśvara image. This involved erasing the femininity from half of the readymade Durgā, including the removal of one breast. It is widely understood that Ardhanārīśvara is the result of Śiva granting half his body to Pārvatī (see Chapter 2), yet here Ardhanārīśvara is yielded when space is made for maleness on the goddess Durgā. Of all the noteworthy events experienced throughout the Durgā Pūjā of 2015, Anindya told me that this process fascinated her most. As she described to the press, "The very process of making the idol was almost like a sex reassignment surgery."[42] She also spoke fondly of their working relationship with China Pal: "She's one of the most widely known and recognized faces of Kumartuli. Of course, she has had her own odds [as a woman], but she's now quite a celebrity . . . with all due regard to her achievements and the kind of openness that she showed to us, I must say, had it not been her, I don't think we would have had the confidence to work and collaborate in the making of that Ardhanārīśvara." For her part, China Pal had the following to say: "I had taken on the mantle of idol-making following the bereavement of my father in 1994. Since then, the idols churned out

---

[38] McDermott, *Revelry, Rivalry, and Longing for the Goddesses of Bengal*, 107.

[39] McDermott, *Revelry, Rivalry, and Longing for the Goddesses of Bengal*, 107.

[40] Quote as presented in Premankur Biswas, "God of All Things" *The Indian Express*, https://indianexpress.com/article/lifestyle/god-of-all-things/ (accessed May 2021). This "ekchala," or *ekcāl*, style consists of a "single wooden frame, which [extends] from the floor behind the images of Durgā and her children to form a halo-like half moon slightly above their heads;" the "daker saaj," or *ḍaker sāj*, as insinuated, consists of "intricately cut tinsel decorations." See McDermott, *Revelry, Rivalry, and Longing for the Goddesses of Bengal*, 107.

[41] For example, see Jhimli Mukherjee Pandey, "The Women Behind the Goddess," *The Times of India*, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/the-women-behind-the-goddess/articleshow/54502334.cms (accessed May 2021). Also, for a survey of the Kumartuli district (which is alternatively spelled Kumortuli) and its artisans, the *kumors*, see Krishna Dutta, *Image-makers of the Kumortuli and the Durga Puja Festival* (New Delhi: Niyogi Books, 2016).

[42] Quote as presented in Biswas, Premankur, "God of All Things," *The Indian Express*, https://indianexpress.com/article/lifestyle/god-of-all-things/ (accessed July 2021).

from my workshop have travelled places [and] garnered myriad accolades. However, never before did I get the opportunity to collaborate in as unique an enterprise as this. The emotional investment on this occasion has been inexplicably high. For those who have been, time and again, shunned by the self-styled custodians of society, I couldn't help but extend my support to this brave endeavor and do my bit to help mainstreaming their cause."[43] Mainstreaming indeed took place as media outlets ran with the story. However, reception of the PGT initiative included a medley of both resonance and resistance.

Figure 4: Detailed image of the completed PGT Ardhanārīśvara.[44]

Resistance, Acquiescence, and Refusal

The PGT *paṇḍāl* – ornamented with palm-leaf hand fans, decorative handicrafts, and large paintings depicting gender and sexuality-based tribulations – surely caught the attention of passersby.[45] However, its Ardhanārīśvara *pratimā* reached the eyes and ears of many beyond the vicinity; its media spotlight was bright, and the widespread publicity translated into a great

[43] Quote as presented in Annesga Ghosh, "Kolkata's First Durga Puja By Transgenders Promises to Be Amazing," *Youth Ki Awaaz*, https://www.youthkiawaaz.com/2015/10/first-durga-puja-in-kolkata-by-transgenders/ (accessed May 2021).

[44] Image taken from Soham Chandra, "Transgender Durga Idol – Ardhanariswar … Hype, Misconception or Exceptional Interpretation??!!," *Wanderlust* (blog), http://sohamchandra.blogspot.com/2015/10/transgender-durga-idol-ardhanariswar.html (accessed November 2023).

[45] These descriptions were drawn from the link in the preceding footnote (where one may also see images of the outer *paṇḍāl*).

deal of public support. Yet this unforeseen degree of attention also stoked uneasiness. Anindya hinted at such dismay early in our conversation: “It's interesting what happened as a result of [Ardhanārīśvara] being chosen in terms of the experiences that emerged later, in terms of the resistances that we faced, and how that figure became very contested. That very figure became extremely contested. Ardhanārīśvara as a figure [became controversial] because of the particular association that kind of erupted, you know . . . perhaps [because of] the way that we imagined [Ardhanārīśvara] to be.”

For although its members thought to showcase Ardhanārīśvara, worked alongside China Pal in designing its display, and spoke extensively of the *paṇḍāl* to the press, the PGT actually operated in association with Udyami Yubak Brinda (UYB), a local Pūjā club from the Joy Mitra Street area of Kolkata. Anindya informed me that the PGT had desired collaboration from the outset; their limited resources necessitated partnership, they would need logistical assistance given their inexperience with such an undertaking, plus they hoped to work inclusively with the broader community. Fortunately, Bhanu Naskar was both a core member of the PGT and a principal member of the UYB Pūjā planning committee since its inception 27 years earlier. As such, Bhanu “acted as the catalyst for [a] conversation to emerge,” according to Anindya, and the UYB agreed to partner with the PGT and to the centering of Ardhanārīśvara. However, despite their multifaceted involvement, Anindya felt that the UYB viewed the PGT mainly as financial help, stating, “[They] largely looked at us as an NGO coming in with some degree of funding . . . they possibly saw us as a sponsor. But we weren't sponsors really. We were active. We wanted to be active collaborators.” Nonetheless, the PGT did acquire finances (for commissioning the *pratimā*, construction of the *paṇḍāl*, lighting the display, etc.) in spades. “Interestingly enough, perhaps because of what came across to people as the novelty of the initiative, there was a lot of interest, which also means that we collected funds from multiple levels,” Anindya reflected. She explained that normally subscriptions are collected in localized areas for community Pūjās and that this practice was taken up by the UYB. Yet because the PGT was not tied to the UYB locality (save for Bhanu Naskar) and “tied more with the whole nature of the Pūjā . . . [we] could collect funds from individual donors, private donors who wanted to remain unnamed, [and] really large business families [that were] extremely rich,” Anindya explained. However, this welcomed PGT involvement morphed into media attention, which “became the catalyst for the Pūjā committee to really realize what [they] got themselves into in terms of who they were collaborating with and that we were just not the cash cows that the Pūjā committee needed . . . but that there was a larger politics at play.”

Initially, the UYB had no issue with the use of Ardhanārīśvara. Anindya surmised that they likely saw it as another passing “theme Pūjā” without giving it too much thought, despite the PGT being stalwartly “clear that we were interested to foreground the Ardhanārīśvara, either as a symbol or a leitmotif for inclusion of trans persons.” However, when news of a “transgender idol” reached public attention, the UYB wished to distance themselves from the endeavour. Their uncomfortableness with this association was compounded as larger Pūjā organizations from the area, who had given money to the smaller UYB, rebuked the club for

"handing over their Pūjā to the *hijṛās*," as Anindya recollected. In this connection, Anindya recognized that "the small club we were collaborating with actually found themselves to be in an embarrassing spot . . . compromised because they were collaborating with a group of trans persons." She also conceded that the UYB may have fairly felt the rug was being pulled from under them, recalling "we were outsiders . . . because, except for Bhanu who lived in that area and who was an integral part of that Pūjā, all of us did not have to stay there. And we had no stake in the Pūjā beforehand . . . [yet] a large part of the control and the publicity and the visibility would be hogged by us . . . in many ways [we] trans persons, we of no social or capitalist power, were calling the shots." Tensions continued to mount as the Pūjā approached, and the UYB insisted that its PGT counterparts cease from associating their *paṇḍāl* with the trans community and to refrain from emphasizing Ardhanārīśvara in this respect. Emphatically, the PGT responded, "That can't be. That was the basic premise from which we were beginning. [We] understand that you may be reluctant to collaborate with us any further. We respect your decision, but we would then like to move away being mindful of our differences," Anindya recalled. "We had told them very clearly, if you don't want to collaborate with us, please do not collaborate with us, but please don't dictate terms to us [regarding] what we can call ourselves and what we cannot." It seemed as though the UYB and PGT might ultimately split, but their rift proved temporary as fences would mend in time for Durgā Pūjā.

According to Anindya, a number of variables saw the UYB acquiesce. She recounted that "a few of the media houses had done a story [about] how we were facing issues from the Pūjā committee . . . so there was a lot of scrutiny on them, and they didn't want to project themselves in such a poor light." She expressed feeling sympathetic towards the UYB given this public pressuring. However, attempts at persuasion also occurred internally. As older members of the UYB continued to demonstrate reluctance, Anindya stated that "the younger generation of club members started taking more ownership and leadership and said, no, we can't let this climate of prejudice continue." It should be noted that UYB member Rajib Bajpayee, while recognizing that some community members held "backward and unwarranted" views towards the PGT, suggested that the UYB planners "never wanted the puja to be isolated but [wanted] to make it an inclusive space."[46] Yet the pragmatism of remaining aligned with the PGT was not lost on Anindya either; to part with the PGT would be to relinquish the resources they amassed. In her opinion, the prospect of a financial crunch was likely paramount in their decision making. At any rate, Anindya felt "it wasn't [due to] some great realization" that the UYB agreed to the *paṇḍāl* as planned because the following year they refused to collaborate if Ardhanārīśvara would again be center stage.

[46] The first quote is taken from Indrani Basu, "India's First Transgender Durga Puja will Be In A Small Neighborhood in Kolkata," *Huffpost*, https://www.huffpost.com/archive/in/entry/india-transgender-durga_n_8292488 (accessed November 2023); the second quote is taken from Siliconindia, "Ardhanarishvara: The First Transgender Idol of Durga in India," *Siliconindia*, https://www.siliconindia.com/news/general/ardhanarishvara-the-first-transgender-idol-of-durga-in-india-nid-188275-cid-1.html (accessed November 2023).

Change of Location and Discontinuation

The PGT hoped to involve themselves again in the 2016 Durgā Pūjā, but the UYB was laying out preconditions that the former was not willing to accept, including the discontinuance of incorporating Ardhanārīśvara. Anindya surmised that "[they] didn't want to be typecast . . . We were interested in the Pūjā as [an] act of public reclaiming of space, and I don't think the Pūjā Committee really wanted to become an instrument for that, honestly." This left the PGT seeking collaboration elsewhere at the last minute. Fortunately, they found a group willing to work with them, and 2016 would see the PGT involved once more. Yet for all the attention-grabbing success of the 2015 *paṇḍāl*, its follow-up was remarkably quiet; I found a single article briefly indicating that "in 2016, the [PGT] Puja changed location, and was held in South Kolkata."[47] In part, this was perhaps due to Ardhanārīśvara being presented in the abstract rather than anthropomorphically. Anindya informed me that their new *paṇḍāl* partners had already ordered their Durgā idol, and the PGT felt it would be inappropriate to request a change in its construction at the eleventh hour. "So, we couldn't perhaps play around Ardhanārīśvara in terms of the central idol," Anindya explained. "But we decided we could keep that as a running theme around the decor of the *paṇḍāl*, and so we developed the entire space with illustrations and art and text, which were to keep [in line] with the Ardhanārīśvara." This included having the colouring of the backing *paṇḍāl* wall divided down the middle in order to reflect the bifurcation of Ardhanārīśvara. Their partnering South Kolkata club was aware of the Ardhanārīśvara *paṇḍāl* the year prior, so Anindya said that "they knew what we were coming in with. They were aware of the baggage that we were carrying, quite frankly, and our intentions." She spoke of their welcoming nature: "We were very clear [about] exploring other means of continuing on that Ardhanārīśvara theme, and they were very open to that. In fact, they were very welcoming . . . and they gave us the full canvas to play with." However, despite these evidently smoother working relations, the PGT chose to discontinue Ardhanārīśvara the following year.

One reason the PGT chose to pause their Durgā Pūjā efforts was its taxing nature. Their dependence on collaboration – the uncertainties and variables inherent in that process – played into these stresses. Reflecting on the "heavy negotiations" of collaboration, Anindya recalled the PGT feeling depleted of the bandwidth to carry on in that manner. If they were to continue, it would have to be their own independent venture. Yet there were other factors influencing their decision to discontinue, too. Anindya recalled the PGT "questioning what was happening in the political climate of our country around that same time." The PGT members were wary of annual involvement in the Durgā Pūjā being taken as subscription to Hindutva ideology. She elaborated: "2016 was two years into the Hindutva government that we have in place currently. We were seeing what was growing around us . . . [including] the violence on

[47] Kaustav Bakshi and Arnab Adak, "Androgynous Divinity: Celebrating Transsexuality in the Kolkata Durga Puja," *In Plainspeak*, https://www.tarshi.net/inplainspeak/ardhanarishwara-celebrating-transsexuality-in-the-kolkata-durga-puja/ (accessed May 2021).

Dalit bodies and religious minorities."[48] In this connection, Anindya brought up practices of Hinduization in tandem with the erasure of Islam; she raised the governmental support of renaming Allahabad to Prayagraj as one example.[49] Importantly, she felt similar processes had also stretched into the sphere of (trans)gender politics. Anindya informed me of a "a very deliberate and political foregrounding of the term '*kinnar*.'" Echoing concerns highlighted in the previous chapter, Anindya indicated that this designation is being applied to, and increasingly taken up by, trans and/or *hijṛā* individuals/communities; some feel this is a "Hinduizing of the *hijṛā* identity" and is part and parcel of "the whole process of erasing of the Islamic past," she explained.[50] These sentiments are bolstered by the fact that the Kinnar Akhāṛa, a Hindu-identifying religious order mainly comprised of *kinnar*-identifying figures, has appointed Laxmi Narayan Tripathi as its *ācārya mahāmaṇḍaleśvara* (order head). Tripathi, a petitioner in the NALSA v. Union of India case, is often described in terms of Hindutva leanings and solidarity with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), itself associated with Hindu nationalism.[51] In this connection, it is cited that Tripathi vocally supported reconstructing the Rāma temple of Ayodhya and has even called for a "*kinnar* battalion" to take up arms against Pakistan.[52] It is thus hardly a coincidence that Tripathi and others of similar ideological inclinations would be tapped to sit on the National Council for Transgender Persons, Anindya surmised. As such, she cautioned that "one has to be mindful as to how [transgender identities] are being operationalized in the public domain in the context of the current regime that is in power." Selectively foregrounding a given ideology can obfuscate alternate perspectives, Anindya

[48] Dalit peoples have endured a history of being characterized as "untouchable," designated so lowly that they are beyond the pale of the Hindu caste system. The Dalit name was devised by ex-untouchables themselves in preference to legal categories imposed upon them, such as Depressed Classes, Scheduled Castes, as well as the category of *harijans* ("children of god") introduced by M.K. Gandhi in his questioning of untouchability in India. The Dalit Panthers (a radical group founded by ex-untouchables in Bombay in 1972) urged Dalits to rally around the title and pair its connotations of oppression (Dalit meaning something along the lines of "crushed underfoot" and/or "broken into pieces") with pride and defiance. See Ronki Ram, "Religion, identity and empowerment: the making of Ravidassia Dharm (Dalit religion) in contemporary Punjab," in *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary India*, ed. Knut A. Jacobsen (Ney York: Routledge, 2016), 374.

[49] The BJP government of Uttar Pradesh, in 2018, issued an order whereby the city of Allahabad would see its Islamic name officially changed to Prayagraj, a variant of its pre-Mughal Sanskrit name, Prayāga.

[50] In the back of her autobiography, Tripathi has an index of terms wherein she describes '*kinnar*' as simply "another name for hijra." However, the trend of foregrounding the former at the expense of the latter, as Anindya points out, has been seen as analogous to the renaming of Allahabad given that *hijṛā* is an Urdu word (Urdu being a language associated with Muslims/Islam on the Indian subcontinent). For a note on the etymological roots of *hijṛā*, see Reddy, *With Respect to Sex*, 237.

[51] The BJP is considered the parliamentary wing of the Sangh Parivar. For an example of Laxmi Narayan Tripathi being framed as having Hindutva leanings, see Sayan Bhattacharya, "The Transgender Nation and its Margins: The Many Lives of the Law," *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal* 20 (2019): 15.

[52] The Sangh Parivar claims the Babri Masjid Mosque was built in 1528 by order of the Mughal Empire, believing it to have replaced an 11th-century temple to Rāma which commemorated his birthplace in Ayodhya. This sentiment led to the destruction of the Mosque in 1992 by angered Hindus. The thought of reinstating the Rāma temple (before eventually doing so) was a rallying cry in Hindutva political campaigns. This call for a "*kinnar* battalion" against Pakistan, India's largely Islamic neighbor – an Other to Hindutva sensibilities – has been noted in Bhattacharya, "The Transgender Nation and its Margins," 5.

additionally warned. Through wishing to distance themselves from association with Hindutva campaigns and being mindful of the heterogenous array of beliefs held by trans people, the PGT opted instead to break from their involvement with the Durgā Pūjā (and their use Ardhanārīśvara) for the time being given the obvious Hindu connection.

The Return of Ardhanārīśvara

In 2018, news of Ardhanārīśvara at the Durgā Pūjā broke once more. It was reported that "the Ardhanarishwara image returned in a *bari'r pujo* (a *puja* which is open to all but held privately inside a house) organised by the transgender activist Ranjita Sinha at her Gokhale Road home."[53] At present, Ranjita runs a CBO (community-based organization) in Kolkata called Gokhale Road Bandhan, which she described to me as primarily concerned with HIV interventions for MSM (men who have sex with men) and the wellbeing of transgender and *hijṛā* populations. Additionally, she runs the ATHB (Association of Transgender/Hijṛā in Bengal), a network consisting of nine partners throughout West Bengal; she proudly characterized this as the first registered transgender network in India. Ranjita was gracious enough to speak with me in January of 2021 via Zoom during the COVID-19 pandemic. Two points she shared with me ought to be emphasized. First, Ranjita told me that her incorporation of Ardhanārīśvara happened independently of the PGT, though she expressed awareness of their 2015 Ardhanārīśvara *pratimā* and spoke appreciatively of the PGT in general.[54] Second, Ranjita informed me that she showcased Ardhanārīśvara in 2019 and 2020 in her home as well; she explained that these three (2018 through 2020) Durgā Pūjā appearances occurred in line with a tradition prescribing the use of one design for three consecutive years within a given home. The latter two years resembled the first in terms of general proceedings and even made use of the same Ardhanārīśvara installation. As such, I will discuss the three years as a unit, just as Ranjita had, though with particular focus on 2018 given the political event that inspired Ranjita to utilize Ardhanārīśvara initially.

The 2018 Ardhanārīśvara installation was elaborately and meticulously crafted: the golden female half and white male half each had multiple arms that spread like wings above the closely positioned Gaṇeśa, Kārttikēya, Lakṣmī, and Sarasvatī; the distinctly leonine *vāhana* clawed Mahiṣa; and the predominantly golden and intricately detailed *ekcāl* structure encompassed the whole ensemble (see Figure 5). This dazzling reintroduction of Ardhanārīśvara was due to the fact that 2018 had something to celebrate; the composite figure was meant to commemorate the decriminalization of "gay sex" in India (i.e., the repealing of an anti-sodomy

[53] See Kaustav Bakshi and Arnab Adak, "Androgynous Divinity: Celebrating Transsexuality in the Kolkata Durga Puja," *In Plainspeak*, http://www.tarshi.net/inplainspeak/ardhanarishwara-celebrating-transsexuality-in-the-kolkata-durga-puja/ (accessed July 2021).

[54] Similarly, Anindya spoke of Ranjita with respect and expressed awareness of her use of Ardhanārīśvara while clearly stating the PGT were not involved.

law).[55] In a press interview, Ranjita, who at the time was a member of the West Bengal Transgender Development Board, stated: "I have deliberately chosen this year to organise the Puja to celebrate the Supreme Court verdict that relieved Indians of the baggage of British colonial legacy. The goddess as Ardhanarishvara is a significant symbol of our movement against gender discrimination."[56] Specifically, Ranjita was referring to the then-recent (September 2018) decision by the Indian Supreme Court to repeal large portions of Section 377 IPC (Indian Penal Code), a colonial-era law criminalizing homosexual acts introduced in the 1860s. Vanita and Kidwai describe that "[the] British antisodomy law of 1860 was progressive in Britain insofar as it reduced the punishment for sodomy from execution to ten years' imprisonment. However, when introduced in India in 1861 as Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, it was a retrogressive step."[57] They go on to state that although this law was rarely invoked to punish anyone for homosexuality, police used it to blackmail men in parks and public places, it was used to stir up antagonism against homosexuals in the contexts of trials for other offenses (such as murder and rape), and it was also brought against an All India Radio program on sex education for "promoting homosexuality."[58] The repealing of this archaic law may have been the impetus for utilizing Ardhanārīśvara, but far more should be said for how the ensuing Durgā Pūjā celebrations would come to pass.

A Burning Story

Ranjita told me that each Pūjā she hosted and helped facilitate involved trans people at every level, beginning with the construction of the Ardhanārīśvara *pratimā* in 2018. She described deciding on the use of Ardhanārīśvara less than three weeks before the start of Durgā Pūjā. Consequently, the artisans she approached had already sold off their festival images. However, one artisan, Bishwanath Paul, agreed to come and supervise the creation of the aforementioned Ardhanārīśvara-centered installation by a member of the trans community, Joe Tapashi Dutta.[59] Trans people were also involved in the preparation of *bhog* (offerings of food for the deity) and the distribution of *prasād* (the same offerings returned to devotees after being received, enjoyed, and thus sanctified, by the deity).[60] Ranjita explained that the festival

[55] The repealing of this anti-sodomy law was widely framed as the decriminalization of "gay sex." For example, see Nishita Jha, "India Just Decriminalized Gay Sex," *BuzzFeed News*, https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/nishitajha/india-section-377-gay-sex (accessed November 2023).

[56] Sumanta Ray Chaudhuri, "Durga puja pandals in Kolkata celebrate Supreme Court verdict on section 377," *Hindustan Times*, https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/durga-puja-pandals-in-kolkata-celebrate-supreme-court-verdict-on-section-377/story-0cI6dSzu5njtDYiOSsMm2L.html (accessed July 2021).

[57] Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai, "Introduction: Modern Indian Materials," in *Same-Sex Love in India: Readings from Literature and History*, eds. Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2001), 195.

[58] Vanita and Kidwai, "Introduction: Modern Indian Materials," 195.

[59] Names of the artisan and trans artist from Runa Mukherjee Parikh, "By us, for all," *The Hindu Business Line*, https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/blink/know/by-us-for-all/article25259301.ece (accessed November 2023).

[60] Andrea Farran (her name at present) touches on the enjoyment of offerings by the deity and the subsequently "transvalued" status of said offerings as they are returned to devotees. See Andrea Pinkney,

rites were even overseen by a priest who identifies as a trans man. By and large, the Pūjā and its Ardhanārīśvara centerpiece were well-received; Ranjita described her modest home overflowing with traffic, even mentioning the attendance of celebrities. On the other hand, she acknowledged some pushback from Brahmin detractors; Ranjita chalked this up to potential concerns that a Pūjā run by marginalized peoples may amount to the diminishment of a Hindutva-informed notion of Brahminical power. Nonetheless, the fact that trans people were so involved, even with image construction and ritual procedures, merited media attention.[61] It was, as Ranjita said, "a burning story for everyone."

Figure 5: The Ardhanārīśvara Durgā of 2018.[62]

The extensive involvement of trans people had me wonder if/how Ranjita felt Ardhanārīśvara particularly relates to this population. I thought that the male and female halves

"Prasāda, the Gracious Gift, in Contemporary and Classical South Asia," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 81, no. 3 (September 2013): 736; she discusses *bhog* specifically on 739.

[61] For example, see Sumanta Ray Chaudhuri, "Durga puja pandals in Kolkata celebrate Supreme Court verdict on section 377," *Hindustan Times*, https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/durga-puja-pandals-in-kolkata-celebrate-supreme-court-verdict-on-section-377/story-0cI6dSzu5njtDYiOSsMm2L.html (accessed July 2021); Sengupta, Anuradha, "Durga Puja: A Festival For Everyone," *Outlook Traveller*, https://www.outlookindia.com/outlooktraveller/explore/story/69150/durga-puja-is-a-festival-that-is-all-about-inclusion (accessed July 2021); and Sromona Bhattacharyya, "Durga Puja Festivities: Kolkata's Transgenders Organise The First Puja Where Everyone Is Welcome," *The Logical Indian*, https://thelogicalindian.com/exclusive/transgender-durga-puja/ (accessed July 2021).

[62] Image taken from Kaustav Bakshi and Arnab Adak, "Androgynous Divinity: Celebrating Transsexuality in the Kolkata Durga Puja," *In Plainspeak*, https://www.tarshi.net/inplainspeak/ardhanarishwara-celebrating-transsexuality-in-the-kolkata-durga-puja/ (accessed November 2023).

of Ardhanārīśvara could possibly represent a temporal shift, one indicating a transition from male to female or vice versa. Instead, Ranjita shared a view perhaps suggesting that the figure could indicate either a state of pretransition or a state that transition does not necessarily fully alter: "Ardhanārīśvara is symbolic of man and woman in the same body and we [trans] people are thinking that we . . . are birthed in a male body with a female soul and otherwise some of our transmen are born in a female body with a male soul." While Ranjita described "transgender" as an umbrella category much in line with the legislative rhetoric discussed in the previous chapter, she also distinguished the term from "*hijṛā*" in certain respects. She clarified that she identifies as a transwoman and not as a *hijṛā* because she "is not in the *hijṛā* profession." Moreover, she explained that "*hijṛā* is a culture . . . [with] a hierarchy" in which she is not situated. Yet she elaborated that "*hijṛā* is part of the transgender umbrella . . . throughout this umbrella lots of gender variant people [are] there." Ranjita reminded me of the unfair ostracization faced by those under this umbrella. She then specified that the trans community has "[no] support from any sector – [there's] no work in private jobs or government jobs. *Hijṛās* are a profession; [even] they can enjoy their livelihood. But we peoples, we transgenders, are very much discriminated because we have educational backgrounds, but we don't get any job or [assistance] from anywhere." For these reasons, Ranjita told me it was decided that the Durgā Pūjā would be organized and operated "with our own."

God is for Everyone

While the PGT expressed reservations over presenting Ardhanārīśvara as a religious icon chiefly for trans people, Ranjita (who was aware of the reservation) saw framing Ardhanārīśvara this way as beneficial. She told me that trans people must have a stake in all areas of society, including religion, and that aligning with Ardhanārīśvara may help this along. However, although trans folk may have been at the forefront of her household Pūjās, Ranjita saw the festivities as anything but exclusionary. "God is for everyone," she told me. This inclusive sentiment underscored the full nine nights of Navāratri celebrated in her home (she juxtaposed this with only celebrating the final four days as is common in the Bengali Durgā Pūjā). On each of these nine nights, a different marginalized group was given the spotlight and provided *āhuti* (veneration or adoration). Acid attack victims, those with HIV, LGBT peoples, sex workers, and homeless girls were the examples Ranjita gave; the latter group was even provided *kumārī pūjā* (a well-known ceremony involving the worship of young girls as Devī).[63] "[For] 9 days we are celebrating all of our diversity in one place. We are sharing our views, sharing our ideologies, our positivity, our negativity – all is going on in the night," Ranjita fondly described.

At several junctures, Ranjita framed this welcoming spirit alongside familial sentiments. "We are in the same family – transman, transwoman, *hijṛā*, *kothi*, effeminate males, [etc.]," she said. In this connection, she would interchangeably refer to the Ardhanārīśvara *pratimā*

[63] Ranjita told me that her *kumārī pūjā* occurred on Aṣṭamī and that this is the day in which *kumārī pūjās* normally occur in Bengal. However, McDermott appears to suggest *kumārī pūjā* may also occur on Saptamī. See McDermott, *Revelry, Rivalry, and Longing for the Goddesses of Bengal*, 4.

affectionately as Mā (mother). Emphasizing this maternal aspect, Ranjita said, "We lost our mothers . . . [many] in our community . . . they don't have their families" and explained that accordingly "they think the idol is their own mother." For this very reason, Ranjita said that she had not submerged her Ardhanārīśvara idol in the Hooghly River, a distributary of the Ganges, as is traditionally done at the close of Durgā Pūjā in Kolkata; rhetorically, she asked how one could cast off their mother in such a way. Thus, not only did Ranjita have the 2019 and 2020 Durgā Pūjā proceedings within her home echo those of 2019, but she indicated using the same *pratimā* each year.[64] Near the end of our conversation, Ranjita surprisingly proved her sincerity; she walked outside while we were on videocall to show me her Ardhanārīśvara idol in a room dedicated to it on the backside of her building, months after the 2020 Durgā Pūjā formally wrapped up. Following up on her maternal framing of Ardhanārīśvara, I asked Ranjita about the male half of the figure, wondering if it thus represented something fatherly. She replied: "Yes, [Ardhanārīśvara is] mother and father" and went on to associate the male half of the figure with transmen, stating that transmen are "doubly getting stigma" in the Indian context and that their struggles are afforded little attention. "That is why the Pūjā is not only [about] the mother . . . [and] why the mother and father both are [present] in our house," explained Ranjita.

Despite the use of familial rhetoric, Ranjita, did not explicitly express any intention of reimagining or expanding upon any mainstream family model(s). However, this very theme was identified by Kaustav Bakshi in an article written about the 2018 Ardhanārīśvara installation: "the symbolism and iconography associated with the image of the Ardhanarishwara . . . becomes a powerful reminder of how androgyny, gender liminality, and sexual fluidity, idolised in the union of Shiva and Shakti, is a reality which heteronormative society can no longer afford to ignore . . . The [installation], worshipped by members of the queer community, connected by their identity and politics, challenges the heteronormative, biologically determined idea of the family. The worship of the Ardhanarishwara image, therefore, works symbolically on different levels, interpolating a mass festival with extremely powerful discourses of non-normativity."[65] This reading of the installation is particularly interesting given that Durgā Pūjā is widely associated with a rather conventional family structure. After all, many Bengali Hindus take Durgā Pūjā to signal the annual return of Durgā as daughter to her natal home, children in tow, temporarily leaving her husband Śiva and their Kailāsa home.[66] That Ardhanārīśvar can serve as parent(s) to transgender people whose human families have abandoned them indicates an intriguing formulation of relatedness. Ramberg, in pointing to marriages the goddess Yellamā

[64] 2020 was during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, other than having to wear masks, Ranjita described the Pūjā as resembling those of the two prior years; given pictures she sent me, it appeared that social distancing restrictions were largely flouted.

[65] See Kaustav Bakshi and Arnab Adak, "Androgynous Divinity: Celebrating Transsexuality in the Kolkata Durga Puja," https://www.tarshi.net/inplainspeak/ardhanarishwara-celebrating-transsexuality-in-the-kolkata-durga-puja/ (accessed July 2021).

[66] McDermott discuss this aspect of the festival at length. See McDermott, *Revelry, Rivalry, and Longing for the Goddesses of Bengal*, Chapter 3 (pages 76-102).

has with *jogappas* and *jogatis*, argues that gods and goddesses do not simply reflect and/or inform human relations; kin relations may occur *with* them.[67] Indeed, the familial bonds formed with Ardhanārīśvara can be considered indicative of legitimate kinship.

Devotionalism and Distancing

The Bakshi quote provided above also indicates the presence of devotionalism centered on Ardhanārīśvara. This was affirmed by Ranjita, who even lamented that the demands of media interviews left her "[little] time to worship with God." She also stated that despite those criticizing their trans-led Pūjā, "we [remained] very much focused on our worship with the God." However, other times Ranjita seemingly contradicted these sentiments, at one point saying, "This is our mother; this is not our God . . . [when] your mother is coming down into your home, how can you define this?" Yet this qualification seemed less to do with denying a sense of divinity and more to do with distancing their Pūjā from the confines of a strictly Hindu (i.e., Brahminical) framework. Such statements came at a time when Ranjita was contemplating the stance of their detractors while explaining her break from the Brahminical customs the former wished to maintain: "They think this is a God, and we think this is our mother . . . This is totally different from the concept of Pūjās in Hinduism; they are doing Pūjā through their rituals, but we are doing the Pūjā through our humanitarian grounds." Of course, Ranjita had already explained that rituals did in fact take place with a trans priest at the helm, no less. Thus, in part, I believe she was again trying to distinguish their Pūjā from those of a regimented Brahminical system, which she described as "a kind of patriarchy," wishing not to situate their Ardhanārīśvara in this paradigm. Evidently, she was also indicating that their installation and Pūjā had activistic elements – even saying, "This is part of our activism; this is not only a Pūjā" – and intended no religious exclusivism. Ranjita reminded me at several points that their Pūjā was open to everyone and that Ardhanārīśvara was a marker for all marginalized peoples, be they religious (of any affiliation) or non-religious.

Interestingly, Ranjita also touched upon the merits of trans folk embracing their religious, namely Hindu, situatedness. She emphatically stated, "We are part of every sector of civil society . . . [so] transgender people must come out in every sector – not only jobs, not only education, not only health, but also through spirituality." She lauded her friend Laxmi Narayan Tripathi and the Kinnar Akhāṛa in this respect. Ranjita was also sure to clarify that the presence

[67] Lucinda Ramberg, *Given to the Goddess: South Asian Devadasis and the Sexuality of Religion* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2014), 214. Here, Ramberg is critical of anthropological views suggesting such relations are anything less than legitimate kinship. Her fifth chapter is largely dedicated to examining how Yellamā factors into kinship with people; it is here that she explicitly highlights relations with *jogatis* and *jogappas*. *Jogati* refers to a "female woman" (i.e., someone sexed female in childhood) dedicated to Yellamā; Ramberg states that *jogatis* are "also called and [label] themselves devadasis, which is a pan-Indian term usually translated as slave (*dasi*) of the god (*deva*)." *Jogappa* refers to a "male woman" (i.e., someone sexed male in childhood) dedicated to Yellamā. The long quote presented in this footnote is from page 3, and the descriptions of *jogatis* and *jogappas* provided here draw from pages 3 and 248. Note that *jogatis* and *jogappas* are mainly found in and around North Karnataka and South Maharashtra.

of trans figures in Hinduism is no recent phenomenon. "We have an ancient history," she said. "In mythology we [are] there . . . in Ardhanārīśvara, in Bṛihannala, in Lord Kṛṣṇa."[68] She explained that pointing to these examples can be useful, surmising that people may think, "They have mythology, why not accept them?" Of course, Ranjita had done her part by facilitating three Ardhanārīśvara-centered Pūjās, just as the PGT did for a couple of years beforehand. I asked if Ranjita felt Ardhanārīśvara was embraced and/or pointed to by trans people (in the "loose marker" sense) beyond these Durgā Pūjā examples. She said, "Nowadays I see this trend is coming out" and explained to me that for a long time Indian trans communities "have been [unable to] come out with their gods and their rituals" but that Ardhanārīśvara may be one of the easier figures to have recognized and accepted. However, Ranjita was careful once again to inform me that even as Ardhanārīśvara factors into "[transgender] identity, religion, and culture," the trans individuals engaging the figure may be "not properly Hindu." She wished to stress not only the diversity of beliefs within transgender populations, but also the amalgam of beliefs that can be individually held. She used herself as an example, stating that she went to a Christian school, that she has a (presumably Hindu) *guru*, and that she has visited *dargāhs* (Islamic Ṣūfī shrines) – instilling within her the sense that "every religion [has] their own strengths."

Attending a Landmark Year

Following my Zoom interview with Ranjita, she invited me to join her in Kolkata for the 2021 festivities. Unfortunately, restrictions surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic rendered travelling to India impossible. I was particularly disheartened by this because Ranjita informed me that her Ardhanārīśvara *pratimā* would find new shelter for the first time. Specifically, she said it was being moved into Garima Greh, a shelter for homeless transwomen and transmen in the Purbalok area of Kolkata.[69] Ultimately, things would work out, however; not only was I able to see this *pratimā* in Garima Greh during the Durgā Pūjā of 2022, but this year also saw the doubling up of Ardhanārīśvara with the debut of a second idol.

In 2022, Durgā Pūjā was set to enter full swing on October 1st (as this marked Ṣaṣṭī), so my fiancée Aurélie and I arrived in Kolkata a few days earlier. Our lodging was also in the Purbalok area, a mere 10-minute walk from Garima Greh, the two-storey trans shelter Ranjita oversees. This shelter and its attached *paṇḍāl* (we had to travel through the *paṇḍāl* to enter the shelter) served as our base through all the festival days. When we first arrived, I was taken by the artistically stretched and draped pink, white, and blue fabrics that constituted the *paṇḍāl*

[68] In the Mahābhārata, Arjuna (a major character in this Epic) takes on the form of a eunuch, Bṛihannala, while in exile. With respect to Kṛṣṇa, Ranjita explained that all devotees of Kṛṣṇa are considered women in relation to him, even those that present other-than-female outside of devotionalism. Thus, she seemed to highlight understandings which allowed for a sense of gender fluidity.

[69] This move garnered some media attention. For example, see Ajanta Chakraborty, "Ardhanarishwar gets a permanent home after 3 years," *The Times of India*, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kolkata/ardhanariswar-gets-a-permanent-home-after-3-yrs/articleshow/86850065.cms (accessed November 2023).

structure. In speaking with Ranjita, my initial assumption was confirmed: the choice of colouring was meant to evoke the transgender flag. At the back of the *paṇḍāl* was the new *pratimā.* Ranjita explained that this new image was constructed to celebrate her fifth consecutive festival of presenting Durgā as Ardhanārīśvara; in this connection, 2022 was suitably described as a "landmark year."[70] The new *mūrti* and overall installation, though considerably larger, resembled the design used in the four preceding years. To fill out the décor, a sizeable cut-out of Ardhanārīśvara was brought down from the second floor of Garima Greh and placed near the main attraction (see Figure 6), while framed photos of the *pratimā* used in previous years were hung around the inner *paṇḍāl* walls. Interestingly, the subject of these photographs was found just inside the adjacent shelter.

Figure 6: Inside the Garima Greh *paṇḍāl* with Ranjita and some shelter residents.

Although a new Ardhanārīśvara image was created, their first one was still in use. It was placed inside the trans shelter for Durgā Pūjā, and Ranjita shared that following the festival, one idol would be brought back to her private residence while the other would remain in the shelter permanently. I was told that worship of this image would occur year-round with shelter residents taking turns in performing veneration. On that note, it must be said that both festival images were very much ritually engaged during my stay (see Figure 7). At first, I thought that

[70] See Bishwanath Ghosh, "Landmark Durga Puja for transgender community," *The Hindu*, https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/kolkata/landmark-durga-puja-for-transgender-community/article65878774.ece (accessed November 2023).

these images were being engaged using traditional liturgies meant for the goddess Durgā. However, I noticed that Ranjita and an accompanying trans priestess seemed to make distinctive offerings to the male and female halves. When I inquired about this, Ranjita explained that a special Ardhanārīśvara Pūjā had been devised by the transgender priest involved in the first year she introduced the deity; he is from a Vaiṣṇava tradition yet adapted rituals unique to his *paramparā* (teacher-disciple transmission) so that they would relate to Ardhanārīśvara specifically. Ranjita put us in touch, and he has since invited me to learn the Ardhanārīśvara Pūjā protocol under his guidance. This has yet to happen and will be the focus of a planned future project. However, given our correspondences thus far, I can say that the Ardhanārīśvara Pūjā interlaces with, and modifies, established Durgā Pūjā proceedings. It does, in fact, include special offerings for the male and female halves; for example, Durgā is offered java fruit and a lotus while Śiva is given *bilvapatra* (leaves from a wood apple tree) and a *mālā* (garland) of Calotropis flowers (see Figure 8). Furthermore, the priest described this Ardhanārīśvara Pūjā as including *mantras* that have been altered to, in his words, reflect a spirit of inclusivity and the recognition of diverse gender identities.

Figure 7: Ranjita doing *pūjā*.

On our last day at Garima Greh (Vijayā Daśamī), another important ritual took place, one that I inadvertently initiated. Aurélie and I had been genuinely enjoying the company of our hosts at the shelter, and I feel confident suggesting the feeling was mutual. Outside of some "*paṇḍāl*-hopping" jaunts, we spent the festival alongside them, sharing in meals, nighttime dancing, and plentiful laughter. Perhaps it was this camaraderie, the *hijṛā* overlap I encountered

(e.g., a large image of the *hijṛā* tutelary Bahucharā Mātā adorned a room of Garima Greh next to one of Ardhanārīśvara), or both that spurred me to pose the question I did. Nonetheless, as we were about to depart, I asked the trans priestess who had been conducting much of the festival *pūjās* if she would bless my upcoming marriage.[71]

Figure 8: A *mālā* of Calotropis flowers for Śiva and a lotus for Durgā.

The priestess and Ranjita whispered something to each other and then hurriedly sequestered Aurélie and me into separate rooms. Before long, a resident brought me a *kurtā* (loose collarless shirt) to change into and told me Aurélie had been given a *sārī*. At this point, it became clear what was transpiring; rather than bless our upcoming marriage, they were ensuring we wed! What followed was a beautiful wedding ceremony before the *paṇḍāl* Ardhanārīśvara, attended by the petal-tossing transmen and transwomen of the shelter. The marital surprises did not stop there, though. A week or so later (while in Meghalaya), I received a message from *The Times of India* requesting an interview with me for what would be a frontpage story. I surmised that they caught wind of my presence at Durgā Pūjā and wanted to speak about my research in general, but when I spoke with one of their journalists, the impromptu wedding, apparently the first of its kind, was the primary focus. Soon thereafter, the story ran (see Figure 9). In it, Ranjita, who was also interviewed, seized the moment and said, "By doing away with the traditional role of the Brahmin male priest, we are overcoming a symbol of patriarchy and celebrating the pure union of two souls," while an activist apparently

[71] The reason I cite *hijṛā* overlap is because *hijṛās* are known to bestow blessings at weddings and births (see Chapter 3).

in attendance offered the following description: "a heterosexual couple being married before a trans god by a transwoman is a powerful message of inclusivity."[72] The whole event and its coverage served as exclamation points to a memorable time in Kolkata. Yet for as positive and pioneering as this episode may have been, Ranjita would find herself in the middle of another story, one coloured by quite contrary qualities.

Canadian researchers get hitched in city trans shelter, with rituals by transwoman

Aheli.Banerjee@timesgroup.com

Kolkata: A Canadian couple—she a social worker and he an expert in a gender-fluid Hindu deity — recently tied the knot in Kolkata, in a manner designed to send a rather powerful message: the venue was a shelter for transgender persons, with the very traditional Hindu rituals being presided over by a transwoman. Aura Frenette and her fiancé, Philip Lagacé, now travelling through Shillong, have been conducting an academic trip to eastern India to research the transgender culture and history of the subcontinent.

The couple were visiting Kolkata during Durga Puja when, during a visit to Garima Greh, a shelter for transgendered people in Mukundapur, they decided to get married on Dashami, the last day of Durga Puja. Frenette, an MA in social work with a decade of experience visiting women's shelters, and Lagacé, a PhD scholar on Ardhanarishwar, a half-male half-female Hindu deity, were drawn to the Ardhanarishwar Puja conducted at the shelter, presided over by transwoman and trans activist Ranjita Sinha.

"Interestingly, in many narratives, the deity is portrayed as largely heteronormative, depicting the male and female deities as separate figures," said Lagacé. "A puja celebrating the deity as a trans idol is arguably less common. While we were here, we wanted Ardhanarishwar to bless our union before we got officially married in Canada," he added. Lagacé added that he had heard about Sinha about five years ago in the course of his research. So, there could be nothing more apt than Sinha performing their traditional Hindu rituals.

▶'Inclusivity message', P 3

Figure 9: Ranjita and the newlyweds.[73]

Post-Pūjā Updates

The energy surrounding the 2022 *paṇḍāl* was palpable. Friends of the shelter came by continuously, news reporters dropped in, the Australian consulate-general visited, and the *āhuti* of marginalized groups from the broader community again took place. Yet it was the shelter residents who buzzed with the most pronounced excitement. One proudly told me, as Ranjita had, that the Ardhanārīśvara idol set to remain at the shelter would serve as mother and father to the residents without parents, and another resident, who told me that trans people are forms of Ardhanārīśvara themselves, said that their *paṇḍāl* would show anyone who recognizes Ardhanārīśvara as divine that trans people are worthy of respect. There was great joy permeating the festival days, a sense of togetherness and a thrill felt for creating this celebration. However, there would be a shift in tone after I left.

[72] These quotes come from screenshots of the article that were sent to me by its author. For an abridged version that remains publicly available, see Aheli Banerjee. "Canadian researchers get hitched in Kolkata trans shelter, with rituals by transwoman," *The Times of India*, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kolkata/canadian-researchers-get-hitched-in-city-trans-shelter-with-rituals-by-transwoman/articleshow/94905227.cms (accessed December 2024). Note that, at least pertaining to myself, there are misquotations.

[73] This image is of a screenshot sent to me by Aheli Banerjee, author of the article linked in the preceding footnote.

Shortly after Vijayā Daśamī, I departed Kolkata. When Durgā Pūjā was still at its height, Ranjita hinted a few times that she was compartmentalizing some issues in order to be present and enjoy the festival. Following my departure, though, she sent me an enlightening message indicating that she and some shelter residents had gathered near the residence of Mamata Banerjee (the West Bengal chief minister) to protest an act they felt was transphobic; the trans shelter had been de-listed from receiving a large government grant that would have helped fund their Durgā Pūjā efforts, something they had received the year prior. With images of Ardhanārīśvara in tow, they congregated but were broken up by police in a clash that turned physical, a reminder, Ranjita told me, that there is work yet to be done (see Figure 10).[74]

Figure 10: Protesting with images of Ardhanārīśvara.[75]

Not all the Ardhanārīśvara-related updates Ranjita sent after Durgā Pūjā were of this nature; while Figure 10 captures an image of the deity being utilized remonstratively in the context of an agitation, Ranjita shared another photo in relation to a more pleasant event. A few months later, in January 2023, Ranjita, on behalf of Gokhale Road Bandhan, received a "Helping Hands Organization Award" at the National Transgender Awards ceremony in New Delhi. The trophies presented featured a golden Ardhanārīśvara atop a plaque-bearing base (see Figure 11). In sending along a picture of her award, Ranjita relayed both her own

[74] For their part, officials cited "technical reasons" in explaining why funding was not allocated. For an article covering the story, see Bishwanath Gosh, "Police prevent protest in Kolkata by transgender people miffed over not getting Durga Puja grant," *The Hindu*, https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/kolkata/police-prevent-protest-in-kolkata-by-transgender-people-miffed-over-not-getting-durga-puja-grant/article66001495.ece (accessed December 2024).

[75] This photo was sent to me by Ranjita, but I found an identical one used in the following article: Md Asghar Khan, "Jharkhand Still Awaits A Transgender Welfare Board," *Outlook India*, https://www.outlookindia.com/national/jharkhand-still-awaits-a-transgender-welfare-board-news-315495 (accessed March 2025).

accomplishment and the fact that Ardhanārīśvara is involved in celebrating transgender people at the national level in India.

As the 2023 Durgā Pūjā approached – a year which would again foreground Ardhanārīśvara – Ranjita informed me that documentary filmmakers would join Garima Greh to record shots of their unique festival offering for a work entitled "Ardhanariswar." According to an article about this upcoming documentary (as of March 2025 it has not been released), "Ardhanariswar" shall focus on the "struggles, resilience, and aspirations" of transgender individuals and will be shown in film festivals worldwide.[76] Importantly, this will also ensure that the Ardhanārīśvara-transgender connection is one encountered beyond the Kolkata contexts focused on in this chapter. Finally, I will say that there appears no end in sight for this connection within Kolkata either; Ardhanārīśvara graced the Garima Greh *paṇḍāl* of 2024, too, and Ranjita intends for this to continue.

Figure 11: Trophy of Ardhanārīśvara.[77]

Female Primacy and the Proverbial Rainbow

The hybridization of Ardhanārīśvara and Durgā iconographies in the cases examined in this chapter – and the ways that the resulting compound figure has been understood and utilized by those facilitating its inclusion(s) – carries significant implications. For one thing, it

[76] Sarbani Battacharya, "Documentary focusing on the rights of transgender people to start its shoot during durga puja," *Millenium Post*, https://www.millenniumpost.in/bengal/documentary-focusing-on-rights-of-transgender-people-to-start-its-shoot-during-puja-536182?infinitescroll=1 (accessed March 2024).

[77] This photo was also sent by Ranjita. Note the two arms on the male half and one female breast on the other.

challenges the predominant scholarly assertion that Ardhanārīśvara must be understood as a form of the male god Śiva and that the female half accordingly occupies the inferior left positioning. In fact, the left and right halves of Ardhanārīśvara were not articulated as subordinate or otherwise in the Durgā Pūjā celebrations I have described. The female half remained on the left, yet primacy, if to anyone, was afforded to Durgā; Ardhanārīśvara was described as a form of the Goddess both by a member of the PGT (Bhanu Naskar) as well as by Ranjita. Of course, this is to be expected. After all, the central *mūrti* of any Pūjā *paṇḍāl* will be viewed as Durgā no matter her visual reimagining. Yet my impression, informed particularly by my discussions with Ranjita, is that Ardhanārīśvara did not simply inspire an aesthetic; Ardhanārīśvara was presented as an actual form of the Goddess with the same conviction that others frame the deity as a form of Śiva. This discrepancy between perceiving Ardhanārīśvara as primarily Śiva and viewing it as primarily (or at least equally) the Goddess is quite telling. Those advocating for the former, most pointedly by Doniger, have largely considered Ardhanārīśvara within the confines of linguistic and/or textual traditions. However, those who have emphasized Ardhanārīśvara as the Goddess within the Durgā Pūjā festivals under consideration do not present as particularly beholden to such domains.

Although Ardhanārīśvara was intriguingly framed as a form of the Goddess, its Śiva portion also played an important role. After all, without this male half, Garima Greh residents could not consider Ardhanārīśvara both mother and father to their shelter. In fact, it is precisely for containing masculine and feminine features that the trans-identifying people involved with the Durgā Pūjā initiatives in question felt a special bond with the deity. Interestingly, no textual works – mythological, poetic, or philosophical – nor derivative thought were cited in positing such connection. Rather, the Ardhanārīśvara image alone was pointed to and taken as proof of a deity blurring gender and sexual binaries and transcending straight and cisgender frameworks. In this connection, and in sharp contrast to scholarship indicating that the iconography of Ardhanārīśvara reflects androcentric sensibilities, the deity was felt to suitably serve as a marker for radical inclusivity and positioned to challenge antithetical forces.

This purposing of Ardhanārīśvara is not without precedent; Hindu deities have long factored into sociopolitical agendas. For example, the Rāṣṭrīya Svayamsēvaka Saṅgha (RSS), a right-wing political organization, has utilized images of Rāma, hero of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, in their Hindu nationalist discourse since the organization was named in 1927.[78] Their usage has seen Rāma transform "from a serene, tender, eternally forgiving, androgynous, and unmuscled god [to a] muscular and angry icon."[79] Fashioned in this way, Rāma appears able to protect against potential antagonists. As such, Hindu nationalist propaganda includes "posters and stickers [that often depict] Rama towering over a Hindu temple and defending it against Muslim

[78] Chandrima Chakraborty, *Masculinity, Asceticism, Hinduism: Past and Present Imaginings of India* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2011), 198.

[79] Chakraborty, *Masculinity, Asceticism, Hinduism*, 199. Here the author cites Anuradha Kapur for noting this transformation.

aggressors."[80] The terrifying goddess Kālī was similarly employed by Bengali nationalists in their fight against colonial oppression. Urban states, "Surely the most powerful religious symbol employed by the revolutionaries . . . was the goddess Śakti – power or strength – [in] above all, her most violent and frightening form as Kālī."[81] Thus, Kālī became "a powerful weapon of the colonized . . . in the service of anti-colonial revolution . . . precisely because she represented threat and terror to the colonial imagination."[82] Ardhanārīśvara has become analogously combative; in addition to opposing Mahiṣa for being fused onto Durgā in her annual festivities, the deity has been forwarded against other perceived oppressors, a cluster of regimes that have left many marginalized in their wake. In relation to the populations Ardhanārīśvara has been made to defend and empower, I will examine the deity as an agent for denouncing these systems of ostracization (i.e., cisnormativity, patriarchy, heteronormativity, and hierarchal schemas associated with Hinduism) in what follows.

In the media, the term "transgender" was largely emphasized in relation to each iteration of Durgā Pūjā discussed in this chapter (those of the PGT and those led by Ranjita). Indeed, Ranjita spoke of Ardhanārīśvara in her Pūjās as "symbolic of man and woman in the same body," which she explicitly connected to the experiences of trans people. Yet recall that Anindya problematized this singular association. Instead, she envisioned their debut Ardhanārīśvara-starring Pūjā as one welcoming "any and every imagined gender nonconforming, questioning, nonbinary [community]." She even clarified that the PGT *paṇḍāl* was meant no more a "trans space" than it was a *kothi* space, *durani* space, or *launda* space. Similarly, Ranjita had Ardhanārīśvara as the centerpiece in Pūjās celebrating not only transmen and transwomen, but sex-workers, acid attack victims, the HIV infected, homeless girls, and LGBT peoples in general, too. Therefore, although the transgender term has no doubt been emphasized, Ardhanārīśvara has also served as a marker akin to the pride flag.[83] Just as this rainbowed flag has been adopted and adapted to better reflect specified populations, Ardhanārīśvara – in addition to the LGBT populations commonly associated with the pride flag – was also used to signal support for varied demographics present in India (including the *hijṛā* as

[80] Chakraborty, *Masculinity, Asceticism, Hinduism*, 199. Recall that the thought of reinstating a Rāma temple, believed to have been replaced by a mosque under Mughal rule, in Ayodhya was a rallying point in Hindutva campaigns before its eventual establishment. In effect, Muslims have been framed as an Other to Hindus of the Indian subcontinent.

[81] Hugh Urban, "India's Darkest Heart," in *Encountering Kālī: In the margins, at the Center, in the West* (Berkley: University of California Press, 2003), 184.

[82] Urban, "India's Darkest Heart," 171.

[83] The pride flag – a symbol of LGBT+ identity, diversity, and solidarity – was created by Gilbert Baker for the San Francisco Gay Freedom Day Parade in 1978. Whereas Pride flags now normally have six stripes (red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and violet), the original included two extra stripes (pink and turquoise); the latter two were discontinued for practical reasons (the pink and turquoise fabrics were expensive and difficult to procure). See Amy Langston, "The Intersectionality of Flags, Religion, and the Gay Pride Movement," *Flag Research Quarterly* 5, no. 12 (May 2017): 1-3.

well as the above-named) and those persecuted due to their perceived gender and/or sexuality within this context (i.e., the HIV infected, acid attack victims, sex-workers, and homeless girls).[84]

These inclusive sentiments were paired with activist spirit. The cases in question saw cisnormativity continuously challenged through raising transgender issues and voices; images of Ardhanārīśvara were even brought into protests decrying acts deemed transphobic. Anindya and Ranjita both spoke of attempting to counter patriarchy with their Pūjās, as well. The PGT sought out China Pal (a rare woman artisan from the Kumartuli district) to construct the initial Ardhanārīśvara *pratimā*, Ranjita shone light on the mistreatment of women during the novenary nights of her Pūjās, while each of the Pūjās discussed had transwomen established in planning and participatory roles usually occupied by men. Heteronormativity was also challenged, most obviously in 2018 when Ranjita selected Ardhanārīśvara to commemorate the decriminalization of "gay sex" in India earlier that year. Despite taking part in a festival widely regarded as Hindu, both Anindya and Ranjita also distanced their initiatives from aspects of Hindu religiosity; Anindya critiqued caste structures in the press, and Ranjita sought to eschew Brahminical conventions by having trans folk involved in key aspects of the Pūjā (including *mūrti* construction, the preparation of *bhog*, and the conduction of priestly rites). Moreover, Anindya and Ranjita expressed wishing to avoid any air of exclusivism that an undue Hindu framing may bring. In fact, Anindya and the PGT discontinued their involvement with Durgā Pūjā to avoid having their engagement conflated with support for Hindu-centered politics. For her part, Ranjita was sure to state that she introduced Ardhanārīśvara as a marker for all marginalized peoples, for those of any religious affiliation and for the non-religious alike. Thus, just as the rainbow flag flies in both pride and protest, Ardhanārīśvara was made emblematic of initiatives that both embraced diversity and objected to systems deemed oppressive and/or exclusionary.

The Transgender Connection

While Ardhanārīśvara was framed as encouraging broad inclusivity, the specific foregrounding of an Ardhanārīśvara-transgender connection cannot be ignored. Although Anindya intentionally stopped short of describing Ardhanārīśvara a "trans deity," she framed the figure multiple times as a "leitmotif for the inclusion of trans people;" Ranjita described self-identifying trans folk as resonating with Ardhanārīśvara for seeing themselves in the deity (and vice versa); an idol of Ardhanārīśvara was placed in a *paṇḍāl* coloured after the transgender flag; and another was fixed permanently within a Kolkata trans shelter. The association is no accident either. By specifically connecting the "transgender" term, one with global currency, to Ardhanārīśvara, a deity linked to the Hindu majority of India, the historically

[84] For example, there is the gynephilia flag (for persons sexually attracted to women or femininity regardless of their gender identity), the asexual flag (for persons who feel little or no sexual attraction to anyone of any gender identity), and the gender fluid flag (for persons whose gender identity may change day to day and who are not constrained by stereotypical expectations of male or female behaviour); each of these flags play off the initial pride flag in general design, yet they differ in the numbers and/or colours of their horizontal stripes. See Langston, "The Intersectionality of Flags, Religion, and the Gay Pride Movement," 4.

marginalized people in question attempt to sway public opinion towards recognizing their validity.

In no uncertain terms, Ranjita, for example, described having trans people publicly declare and demonstrate devotion (*bhakti*) to Ardhanārīśvara as benefiting their aim of empowering the downtrodden. Accordingly, she and her co-facilitators ensured that their Ardhanārīśvara-oriented *bhakti* was not only a personal and private affair; all ritual activity involving the deity throughout the 2022 Durgā Pūjā was livestreamed and posted on social media, and news reporters were actively invited to cover the proceedings. If related reports are any indication, their efforts to link trans folk with Ardhanārīśvara are gaining traction.[85] Notably, notwithstanding its use as a "loose marker," there are concerns that emphasizing the term "transgender" collapses disparate forms of gender and sexual variance under this nominal banner (see Chapter 3). Nonetheless, it is increasingly utilized in efforts to secure upward social mobility for those ostracized by virtue of their gender and/or sexuality.

Below, I will place the unique association(s) between the transgender category and Ardhanārīśvara in conversation with the scholarship of Urban. Through doing so, I aim to shed light on how conceptualizations of both "transgender" and Ardhanārīśvara are dynamically constituted and taking on new connotations. To begin this discussion, I will briefly present the insights of Urban. In the paragraphs that follow, I will outline my sense of how these insights relate to understandings of Ardhanārīśvara and ongoing formulations of gender and sexual variance within India.

In his work on Tantra, Urban draws upon notions of the "dialectical image" and the "cross-cultural play of 'mimesis.'"[86] Urban states that Tantra, as a dialectical category, "is a complex, shifting fusion of both Western and Indian discourse."[87] Beyond a commixture of independent streams of thought, he describes "the dialectical image of Tantra" as one wherein mimesis is at play.[88] He suggests that "Indian intellectuals have consistently redefined

---

[85] For example, the following news articles connect Ardhanārīśvara to trans folk in relation to Ranjita-led Durgā Pūjā celebrations: Sreevasta Vembar, "Transgender community celebrates Durga puja with special Ardhanarishvara idol in Kolkata," *The Tatva*, https://thetatva.in/art-culture/transgender-community-celebrates-durga-puja-with-special-ardhanarishvara-idol-in-kolkata/7959/ (accessed December 2024); IN Bureau, "Transgenders celebrate Durga Puja in Kolkata worshipping Ardhanarishvara idol," *India Narrative*, https://www.indianarrative.com/culture-news/transgenders-celebrate-durga-puja-in-kolkata-worshipping-ardhanarishvara-idol-26454.html (accessed December 2024); and IANS, "Maa Durga worshipped as Ardhanariswara by Kolkata transgenders," *Hindu Post*, https://hindupost.in/dharma-religion/maa-durga-worshipped-as-ardhanariswara-by-kolkata-transgenders/ (accessed December 2024).

[86] Hugh Urban, *Tantra: Sex, Secrecy, and Power in the Study of Religion* (California: University of California Press, 2003), 15. Earlier (see Chapter 2) I problematized treating 'Tantra' as a reified proper known, and I recognize that its presentation here may appear to contradict this problematization, yet the term appears as it does so to reflect how Urban used it. Urban draws upon notions of the "dialectical image" and the "cross-cultural play of 'mimesis'" as forwarded by Michael Taussig, who had himself adapted insights regarding these concepts from Walter Benjamin.

[87] Urban, *Tantra: Sex, Secrecy, and Power in the Study of Religion*, 15.

[88] Urban, *Tantra: Sex, Secrecy, and Power in the Study of Religion*, 16-17.

themselves in the face of [their] encounter with the West [through] adapting Western categories and constructions."[89] In part, this mimetic quality – the ability to grasp, digest, mirror, and (mis)represent alterity – has informed Indian defenses and definitions of Tantra in the presence of (oftentimes skewed) foreign understandings and projections that have also influenced conceptualizations of the term.[90] Accordingly, Urban frames the construction of Tantra as "neither a simple indigenous fact nor the mere product of Western projection and fantasy: it is the complex result of . . . mutual misrepresentation and mirroring at work between both Western and Eastern imaginations."[91] Given the findings of my research, I contend that similar dynamics to those outlined above have influenced shifting understandings of what constitutes "transgender" and characterizes Ardhanārīśvara.

Just as Urban outlines how "Indian intellectuals have . . . redefined themselves in . . . adapting Western categories and constructions" in relation to Tantra, one also sees mimetic faculties adopting, digesting, and uniquely reflecting the exogenous "transgender" category in India.[92] As with those transgender movements that have sought legitimation through identifying the "transgender native" of various cultures and time periods (see Chapter 3), this chapter has highlighted how Indian populations have comparably mined their own traditions in, for example, identifying deities and South Asian categories of gender and sexual variance connectible to the "transgender" term. No doubt, such strategic associations have burgeoned alongside aims of countermanding persistent marginalization. The result is a term infused with a fluctuating *masala* of dialectic sensibilities; in addition to maintaining exogenous connotations of the term, "transgender" takes on unique flavours in India. After all, there are many contexts worldwide in which trans-identifying people are not associated (and do not identify) with deities. Yet Ardhanārīśvara is increasingly at play in such dynamics within the country. Importantly, by extension, this renders the deity a dialectical figure, too.

Indeed, in being connected to the "transgender" category, we are witnessing a new dialectical phase in the history of Ardhanārīśvara. Although Ardhanārīśvara may have been associated with "third gender" forebearers, its affiliation with the "transgender" term has only emerged relatively recently. Bakshi, in an article on Ardhanārīśvara within the 2018 Durgā Pūjā, described the figure as "a divine image of androgyny [that] has transited through a changing realm of significations, whereby its fluidity and ambivalence as regards to gender and sexuality emerged as a powerful symbol which could be subscribed to in order to legitimize *tritiya prakriti* or 'third gender' [people] in India."[93] Given the findings of this chapter, I must qualify that Ardhanārīśvara is also (or actually) being principally framed in relation to the

[89] Urban, *Tantra: Sex, Secrecy, and Power in the Study of Religion*, 15. Urban presents this assertion as one originally presented by Halbfass.

[90] Urban, *Tantra: Sex, Secrecy, and Power in the Study of Religion*, 17.

[91] Urban, *Tantra: Sex, Secrecy, and Power in the Study of Religion*, 16.

[92] Urban, *Tantra: Sex, Secrecy, and Power in the Study of Religion*, 15.

[93] Kaustav Bakshi and Arnab Adak, "Androgynous Divinity: Celebrating Transsexuality in the Kolkata Durga Puja," *In Plainspeak*, https://www.tarshi.net/inplainspeak/ardhanarishwara-celebrating-transsexuality-in-the-kolkata-durga-puja/ (accessed May 2021).

"transgender" classifier. Thus, Ardhanārīśvara is a dialectical image associated with discourses both exogenous and endogenous to the Indian subcontinent. For evidence, one needs only to look at images of the deity at the Durgā Pūjā within its pink, white, and blue display.

Conclusion

Ardhanārīśvara has emerged as a notable fixture in the Durgā Pūjā celebrations of Kolkata; this chapter examined its place within the festival over eight years (from 2015-2022) and also spoke of subsequent and planned future usage. In analyzing Ardhanārīśvara within this context, I have shown that the figure has been utilized in inventive ways: as a marker calling for (and celebrating) the inclusion of those marginalized for their sexual orientation and/or gender identity; as an activistic emblem counteracting regimes deemed oppressive to these demographics; as a parental figure for related peoples whose families have abandoned them; and as a rallying point for the reconsideration of gender norms, roles, and identities. Importantly, these observations came to light through engaging situated events and interacting with actual voices. Thus, my research has moved away from the theoretical, hypothetical, and incidental mentions of Ardhanārīśvara as relevant to "third gender" peoples found in previous scholarship.

Within ethnographic studies, those identifying as *hijṛā* constitute the "third gender" group chiefly cited as having a special bond with the deity. Yet in this chapter on Ardhanārīśvara at the Durgā Pūjā, one sees "transgender," an increasingly global term, come to the fore (alongside trans-identifying people). It is true that *hijṛās* are now subsumed under the "transgender" umbrella within Indian legal contexts and that my interviewees sometimes used "transgender" as a "loose marker" so as to englobe South Asian designations within the framework of term. Nonetheless, it is notable that the term "transgender" is associated with Ardhanārīśvara at all given that this association can only date as far back as the transgender term itself, which is a relatively recent phenomenon in the Indian subcontinent, particularly when compared to the long-standing presence of Ardhanārīśvara. The present chapter also shows how the deity is connected to features of global transgender discourse (e.g., the transgender flag). In addition to reflecting a development in the history of Ardhanārīśvara, this link also indicates that the figure is factoring into unique and ongoing formulations of the "transgender" category within India.

This chapter touched on the fact that Ardhanārīśvara is also linked to people affiliated with "third gender" categorization outside of the Durgā Pūjā celebrations of Kolkata (e.g., the New Delhi-hosted National Transgender Awards modeled their prizes on the figure). The following chapter will further – and more substantially – demonstrate that Ardhanārīśvara is tied to related populations in additional contexts. Specifically, it will analyze the place of the deity within the Kinnar Akhāḍā.

Chapter 5
Saffron Seals: Analyzing Ardhanārīśvara within the Kinnar Akhāḍā

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the place of Ardhanārīśvara within the Kinnar Akhāḍā, a religious order predominantly comprised of "third gender" membership that has named the deity their patron god. Through analyzing Ardhanārīśvara within this context, the figure emerges as one whose connection to Hindu religiosity is underscored as these "third gender" individuals attempt to better their place in society. In this connection, Ardhanārīśvara factors into identity formation in that the members of the order frame the deity as mirroring and validating their gender and/or sexual variance. Importantly, this involves linking the deity to the term "*kinnar*," a "third gender" designator foregrounded for its Hindu ties. Throughout this chapter, I place Ardhanārīśvara in conversation with Kinnar Akhāḍā aims – foremost their opposition to androcentrism – and themes associated with the order, including asceticism, eroticism, and nationalism. While my findings indicate that the Kinnar Akhāḍā assumes principles and tactics that deviate from those characterizing the Durgā Pūjā initiatives examined in the previous chapter, I nonetheless conclude that the order similarly mobilizes Ardhanārīśvara as a recognizable and reputable deity in their strategic pursuit of upward social mobility.

I first encountered the name Laxmi Narayan Tripathi when researching the NALSA v. Union of India proceedings; she served as a petitioner in the case, helping to successfully secure the legal recognition of a "third gender" in India. My next significant encounters with her name occurred during my interviews with Anindya and Ranjita as we discussed their Durgā Pūjā installations (see Chapter 4). While Ranjita spoke supportively of Laxmi, Anindya was more critical. Particularly, she expressed suspicions that the Kinnar Akhāḍā, the religious order headed by Laxmi, may encourage a "Hinduizing of the *hijṛā* identity" in line with a broader Islamic erasure transpiring in India. After Anindya expressed her reservations, she recommended that I investigate the Kinnar Akhāḍā more fully myself. In heeding her advice, I unexpectedly came across images and mentions of Ardhanārīśvara connected to the order. To better understand this Ardhanārīśvara connection, and excited by its potential relevance to the current project, I scoured social media in the hopes of speaking to a member of the Kinnar Akhāḍā. Eventually, I came in contact with someone affiliated with Kineer Services (a "Laxmi Narayan Tripathi initiative" largely aimed at securing employment for sexual minorities) who also serves as an assistant to Laxmi, and they agreed to put me in touch with her after I described my research on Ardhanārīśvara.[1]

[1] See Kineer Services, "Homepage," *Kineer Services*, http://www.kineerservices.com/ (accessed June 2022). Note that the website is now only accessible in its archived form. See: https://web.archive.org/web/20221001111132/http://kineerservices.com/Default.aspx (accessed March 2025).

Lining up an interview with Laxmi was no easy task, given that securing a mutually feasible timeslot to meet had to occur through her assistant. As our appointments seemed to be perpetually rescheduled, I wondered whether an interview would ever take place. However, in July of 2021, I finally met the self-described "flamboyant rainbow" over Zoom during the COVID-19 lockdown.[2] Laxmi, who appeared both gregarious and fierce, confidently spoke to my questions on the Kinnar Akhāḍā, Ardhanārīśvara, and a host of related topics. She also extended an offer to meet with her in person, something that I took her up on in November the following year. Fruitfully, this resulted in my introduction to Bhavani Ma (another Kinnar Akhāḍā member) and her Ardhanārīśvara temple. This chapter draws from my initial semi-structured interview with Laxmi, media reports, scholarly works, and 2022 field encounters as I analyze the place of Ardhanārīśvara within the Kinnar Akhāḍā.[3] In order to sufficiently contextualize Ardhanārīśvara-specific content, I will first situate the Kinnar Akhāḍā within the greater *akhāḍā* system and delineate events germane to its development.

The Akhāḍā System

Much has been ascribed to Ādi Śaṅkarācārya, the 8th and/or 9th-century South Indian sage: *stotras* (hymns of praise), *bhāṣyas* (works of commentary), and, of course, the promulgation of Advaita Vedānta.[4] Yet he is associated not only with scripture but with the sword, as well. It is alleged that Śaṅkara established four *maṭhas* (monastic centers) in the four cardinal regions of the Indian subcontinent which, in turn, became religious and administrative centers for the Daśanāmi (indicating ten names) *saṃnyāsī saṃpradāya* (renunciate tradition).[5] Appropriately, initiates within the Daśanāmi fold have been customarily granted a name combined with one of ten words (Giri, Purī, Bhāratī, Vana, Araṇya, Parvata, Sāgara, Tīrtha, Āśrama, or Saraswatī).[6] Even contemporary *saṃnyāsīs* affiliated with the Daśanāmi tradition insist that this tenfold grouping owes itself to the time and mind of Śaṅkara.[7] However, Pinch notes that the earliest known textual mentions of such *saṃnyāsī* investiture occurs circa 1600

[2] For this self-description see Alasdair Pal, "From pariah to demi-god: transgender leader a star at Kumbh," *Reuters*, https://www.reuters.com/article/india-religion-kumbh-transgender-idINKCN1PE04J (accessed June 2022).

[3] My communication with Laxmi occurred in English, spoken by her fluently.

[4] Advaita Vedānta is a radically nondual philosophy in that the innermost Self (Ātman) of everyone is equated with the Absolute (Brahman), itself beyond attribution. Moreover, Brahman alone is understood as ultimately real; the phenomenal world is framed as a superimposition owing to the sway of Māyā (a term holding connotations of illusoriness that Śaṅkara equated with ignorance). For a more thorough exposition of this philosophy see Hillary Rodrigues, *Introducing Hinduism* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 250-251. It should be noted that many works ascribed to Śaṅkara are likely apocryphal in that he was probably not the author. See Robert Lewis Gross, *The Sādhus of India: A Study of Hindu Asceticism* (New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 1992), 53.

[5] Gross, *The Sādhus of India*, 53.

[6] These names are presented as found on Gross, *The Sādhus of India*, 54; here Gross asserts that the names suggest "various idealized states of spiritual attainment." For the assertion that these words are suffixed onto the names of initiates, see Jadunath Sarkar, "The Ten Orders or Dasnamis," in *A History of the Dasnami Naga Sannyasis*, ed. Ananda Bhattacharyya (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers & Distributors, 2018), 125.

[7] William Pinch, *Warrior Ascetics and Indian Empires* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 37.

CE.[8] The Daśanāmi was also divided into *śastradhārī* (scripture-bearer) and *astradhārī* (weapon-bearer) sectors, groupings again attributed to Śaṅkara.[9] Members of the latter included Nāgā (i.e., naked) *saṃnyāsīs*, militant ascetics organized to protect Daśanāmi institutions from outsider attacks.[10] These Nāgā *saṃnyāsīs* were organized into regiments, each known as an *akhāḍā* (a term also denoting "gymnasium" or "wrestling ground"), serving as primary identifier for armed *saṃnyāsīs* (names of the ten suborders cut across *akhāḍā* organization).[11] The earliest of these militant ascetics were of Śaiva orientation, but Vaiṣṇava and Sikh-affiliated *akhāḍās* would also emerge. Today, the Akhila Bhāratīya Ākhāḍā Pariṣada (ABAP) serves as the governing body meant to oversee the activities of recognized *akhāḍās*.[12] Until recently, ABAP-acknowledged *akhāḍās* totaled 13 (seven of Śaiva Daśanāmi connection, three of Vaiṣṇava orientation, and another three of Sikh affiliation).[13] However, in recent years this number was put into question with the advent of the Kinnar Akhāḍā.

Laxmi Narayan Tripathi and the Kinnar Akhāḍā

Laxmi Narayan Tripathi was the eldest child born to an orthodox Brahmin family in Thane, Maharashtra.[14] According to her book, *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi*, Laxmi was identified as male at birth but "came to the conclusion that [she] wasn't a boy" during primary school.[15] During this time, she also experienced abuse and isolation. However, her self-professed flamboyance eventually leant itself well to successes as a drag queen, dance teacher, and model-coordinator.[16] Yet these endeavors only allowed for what she felt were temporary, and ultimately unsatisfactory, feminine indulgences; instead, she yearned to "to drape [herself] in a sari and wear skirts every single day."[17] This inclination, in part, led Laxmi to become initiated as a *hijṛā* in 1998 within a ceremony that saw her receive two customary green *sāṛīs*.[18] From

[8] Pinch, *Warrior Ascetics and Indian Empires*, 37.

[9] Gross, *The Sādhus of India*, 62.

[10] Gross, *The Sādhus of India*, 62. However, that these ascetics armed themselves in response to Muslim aggression (as forwarded here by Gross, for example) has been put into question. See. Pinch, *Warrior Ascetics and Indian Empires*, 34.

[11] Information on *akhāḍā* organization from Gross, *The Sādhus of India*, 66-67. The descriptions of "*akhāḍā*" from James Lochtefeld, *The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Hinduism Vol. 1* (New York: Rosen Publishing Group, 2002), 23-24.

[12] Ananda Bhattacharyya, Introduction to *A History of Dasnami Naga Sannyasis*, ed. Ananda Bhattacharyya (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers & Distributors, 2018), 31. The reader may note a discrepancy in diacritics here. The ABAP includes an additional "ā" in its spelling of *ākhāḍā*. I have encountered various renderings of the word, including "*ākhāḍā*," "*ākhāḍa*," and "*akhāḍā*;" evidently, I have opted for the latter unless relaying the word as presented elsewhere.

[13] Bhattacharyya, Introduction to *A History of Dasnami Naga Sannyasis* 13.

[14] Her growing up in Thane and being the eldest child is mentioned in Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 1-2. She describes her family as one with an orthodox Brahmin background in Laxmi Narayan Tripathi and Pooja Pande, *Red Lipstick: The Men in My Life* (Haryana: Penguin Random House India, 2016), 18.

[15] Tripathi, *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi*, 22.

[16] Tripathi, *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi*; see chapters 3-5.

[17] Tripathi, *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi*, 33.

[18] Tripathi, *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi*, 42.

here, Laxmi would go on to become chairperson of the Dai Welfare Society (an NGO concerned with *hijṛā* wellbeing); star in *Between the Lines: India's Third Gender* (an award-winning documentary film on the lives of *hijṛās*); serve as a plenary presenter at the 16th World AIDS conference in Toronto; compete as a celebrity contestant on the fifth season of Bigg Boss (an Indian reality television show); be interviewed by Salman Rushdie for his chapter in *AIDS Sutra*; and serve as petitioner in the ground-breaking NALSA v. Union of India case.[19] However, her crowning achievement thus far may have been her appointment as *ācārya mahāmaṇḍaleśvara* (the highest position) of the Kinnar Akhāḍā.

The Kinnar Akhāḍā, which Laxmi described to me as "the first transgender religious convent," was founded on the 13th of October in 2015, the year after the Indian government officially recognized the ability for people to identify as a "third gender." In *Red Lipstick*, Laxmi recounts how Rishi Ajaydas, a "spiritual guru" who had "written a book on hijras," invited her to Ujjain; she describes "[the] idea for the kinnar akhara [as having] its proper birth then."[20] The date of the Kinnar Akhāḍā founding was auspicious in that it coincided with the beginning of the 2015 Navarātri festivities, and Laxmi explained to me that it was established so as to "reclaim a lost position" within Hinduism.[21] To that end, Laxmi described *kinnars* as a "traditional transgender community" that have historically been "known as demigods." However, despite her own description of the Kinnar Akhāḍā as a transgender order (and widespread news reports offering similar descriptions), Laxmi clarified that admission into their fold may occur irrespective of gender or sexual orientation.[22] Nonetheless, the evident emphasis on "*kinnars*" had me curious about the term itself.

Lochtefeld describes the *kinnara* (from which "*kinnar*" derives) as mythical creatures having features of both humans and horses, and he suggests that the term is synonymous with

---

[19] For the Dai Welfare Society reference, see Tripathi, *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi*, 62; for the *Between the Lines* reference, see page 70; for the plenary presenter and *AIDS Sutra* references, see the photo insert caption.; for the Bigg Boss reference, see page 125. For the relevant *AIDS Sutra* chapter, see Salman Rushdie, "The Half-Woman God," in *AIDS Sutra*, ed. Negar Akhavi (New York: Anchor Books, 2008), 109-117.

[20] Tripathi and Pande, *Red Lipstick*, 119. The book Laxmi attributes to Rishi Ajaydas is *Tratirya Prakriti Kinnar*. However, I have been unable to track down the book myself. Interestingly, Arpita Phukan Biswas provides an alternative account in which public figure Acharya Jitendra Anand "approached [Laxmi] with the idea of initiating an akhada for kinnars" in Benares while she was there for the last rites of her father. For this account, see Arpita Phukan Biswas, "The Iconography of Hindu(ized) Hijras: Idioms of hijra representation in Northern India," in *Gender, Sexuality, Decolonization: South Asia in the World Perspective*, ed. Ahonaa Roy (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2021), 84-85.

[21] Although Laxmi more often used "Hinduism" with me (and did so in the context above), she used "*sanātana dharma*" (translated along the lines of "eternal truth," "eternal way," and/or "eternal order") on a few occasions; *sanātana dharma* is sometimes preferred for being perceived as a traditional endonym in contrast to "Hinduism," which is viewed as an exonym. For a discussion of this term, see Gavin Flood, *An introduction to Hinduism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 11-12 and 254-255.

[22] For an example of such news reports, see Ankita Singh, "In a First, Transgender 'Akhada' Participates in Mahakumbh Rituals at Haridwar," *The Logical Indian*, https://thelogicalindian.com/inclusivity/transgenders-participate-in-mahakumbh-rituals-27221 (accessed June 2022).

kiṃpuruṣa.[23] Alternatively, *kinnara* are described as part human, part bird and as having both male and female varieties (i.e., *kinnarī*).[24] When I asked about any connection to such figures, Laxmi simply told me that "the *kinnars* are known as half female and half male." Interestingly, scholars note that the terms *kinnara* and *kiṃpuruṣa* put into question the personhood (or perhaps manhood, more specifically) of the beings they designate; Lochtefeld translates *kinnara* as "what man?" as does Wilhelm for *kiṃpuruṣa*.[25] Perhaps "*kinnar*" was taken up precisely for this interrogative connotation, in a rhetorical sense, as a means of recognizing and embracing a perceived divergence from masculinity (i.e., being "half female"). Although Laxmi did not confirm this etymological development, the term is evidently being used as a "third gender" identifier, nonetheless. She did, however, provide an explanation for the genesis of *kinnars* in general. According to Laxmi, Brahmā (the creator god), whom she described as being "without any gender," looked into a *kamaṇḍalu* (water vessel), and the resulting reflection yielded the *kinnars*.[26] Laxmi went on to say that Brahmā "did not know what to do [with] the *kinnars*, so he gave [them] to Śiva."[27] In turn, she explained that the *kinnars* became prominent *gaṇas* (attendants) of the latter god.

For Laxmi, this divine beginning affirms the demigod status of contemporary *kinnars*. Evidently, this origin story features gods associated with Hinduism which prompted me to ask if the Kinnar Akhāḍā is specifically Hindu in its orientation. Laxmi emphatically replied in the affirmative, stating, "Of course . . . *kinnar* is the word of Hinduism." Scholars often present "*kinnar*" and "*hijṛā*" as synonymous.[28] I felt Laxmi, too, had used the terms rather interchangeably, so I asked if *kinnars* differed from *hijṛās* given the Islamic leanings of the latter and the Hindu nature she explicitly granted the former. Laxmi briefly acknowledged that *hijṛā* culture includes Islamic elements and then explained that *kinnars* and *hijṛās* are "[essentially] the same" but said, "In the end, when I want to reclaim my position, *kinnars* are demigods in the Hindu religion." For her part, Bevilacqua contends that "[a] link between the kinnar demigod and the third gender is not present in textual sources, so the claim made by

---

[23] Lochtefeld, *The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Hinduism Vol. 1*, 367.

[24] See Laxshmi Rose Greaves, "The Enigma of the Centauress and Her Lover: Investigating a Fifth-century Terracotta Panel from Ahichhatrā," in *Framing Intellectual and Lived Spaced in Early South Asia*, eds. Elizabeth A. Cecil and Lucas den Boer (Germany: De Gruyter, 2020), 13-14.

[25] Lochtefeld, *The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Hinduism Vol. 1*, 367; Amara Das Wilhelm, *Tritiya-Prakriti: People of the Third Sex* (Philadelphia: Xlibris Corporation, 2003), 133.

[26] This episode is presented in Swami Venkatesananda, *The Concise Srimad Bhagavatam* (New York: SUNY Press, 2010), 58. For mention of a possible variant in which the *kinnara* are born of the shadow of Brahmā, see Shiva Chandra Bajpai, *Kinnaur in the Himalayas: Mythology to Modernity* (Michigan: Concept Publishing Company, 1981), 46.

[27] In *Red Lipstick*, Laxmi suggests Brahmā rejected the *kinnars* and that Śiva embraced all outcasts under him. See Tripathi amd Pande, *Red Lipstick*, 44.

[28] For example, see Konduru Delliswararao and Chongneikim Hangsing, "Socio-Cultural Exclusion of Trans-genders in India," *International Journal of Social Sciences and Management* 5, no. 1 (January 2018): 10. Here the authors describe "Kinnar [as a] regional variation of Hijras." For another example, see Kamala Kanta Show, "Human Rights Perspectives of the Third Gender in India," *The Rights* 1, no. 2 (December 2015): 1. This author also frames "*kinnar*" as a regional term tantamount to "*hijṛā*."

contemporary kinnars to be demigods can be interpreted as [a] way to recall a supposed mythological past to obtain sociopolitical empowerment, and to rehabilitate a distinct Indian/Hindu transgender identity." [29] In my opinion, it is uncertain whether Laxmi has mindfully repurposed the term, but she clearly indicates that identifying as *kinnar*, which she frames as Hindu, is a viable strategy for bringing about conditions experienced by "third gender" forebearers during a time she implies they were respected, if not revered, in associated religiosity.

Figure 12: The Kinnar Akhāḍā *tilaka*.[30]

As *ācārya mahāmaṇḍaleśvara*, a position she proudly described as secured through being "elected by 10,000 community members," Laxmi also selected Hindu-affiliated identifiers for the Kinnar Akhāḍā. She told me that their *akhāḍā* needed to have a text (the *Śiva Purāṇa* was chosen), a weapon (a sword inspired by that of Bahucharā Mātā was adopted), and a *rudrākṣa* (beaded garland particularly associated with Śiva); a "three-faced" *rudrākṣa* was selected, which Laxmi described as representing both the Trimūrti and the three genders (she listed "male, female, and the third gender" in this connection).[31] Moreover, she described their *akhāḍā tilaka* (bodily marking often adorning the forehead) as uniquely representing "Śiva, Śakti, and Śrī;" Laxmi was also quick to say that this *tilaka* is registered and trademarked (see Figure 12).[32] I was made further aware of the evidently Śaiva emphasis by Bevilacqua who, in a recent article, observes that the Kinnar Akhāḍā has adopted "*jai śrī mahākāl*" ("glory to the lord

[29] Daniela Bevilacqua, "From the Margins to Demigod: The Establishment of the Kinnar Akhara in India," *Asian Ethnology* 81, no. 1 & 2 (2022): 60.

[30] Photo taken from Kinnar Akhāḍā Facebook page. See Kinnar Akhāḍā, "Photos," *Facebook*, https://www.facebook.com/kinnarakhara/ (accessed December 2024).

[31] *Rudrākṣa* beads are made of dried drupe stones. The natural longitudinal lines formed on their surfaces create spatial intervals between them known as "faces;" differing face counts are ascribed unique symbolic relevance. See James Lochtefeld, *The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Hinduism Vol. 2* (New York: Rosen Publishing Group, 2002), 576.

[32] She told me that the horizontal saffron lines on her forehead represented Śiva, the large central red dot represented Śakti, and that the red line rising up from this dot represented Śrī (a term that can either refer to a title of respect or an epithet of Lakṣmī (goddess of prosperity and abundance). Although Laxmi did not elaborate on the selection of her *tilaka* features, it is likely uncoincidental that three aspects were identified given she connected three genders to their "three-faced" *rudrākṣa*.

Mahākāl") as their greeting; Mahākāl is an epithet of Śiva.[33] Given the foregoing, one may understandably conclude that the Kinnar Akhāḍā is firmly established. However, in actuality, recognition of the Kinnar Akhāḍā has been hotly contested.

ABAP Pushback and the Kumbha Melā of 2016

When Laxmi declared the formation of the Kinnar Akhāḍā in 2015, it was opposed by Narendra Giri, then-president of ABAP. *The Times of India* reported him saying, "We respect the 'kinnars' (eunuchs) as they are in our traditions. They are welcome if they want to join an existing akhara, but if they want a separate akhara for themselves, it is not acceptable . . . There is a rich tradition of akharas and their making in the country which dates back to the times of Adi Shankracharya. It's not possible for a new entity to be admitted to the system."[34] The same article presented Laxmi as retorting, "My akhara was established on October 13, 2015 and we don't want any recognition from anyone . . . Religion is not the legacy of anybody as Adi Shankracharya had established just four [*maṭhas*] which gave birth to 13 akharas."[35] Here Laxmi appears to suggest that there is no need to limit the number of *akhāḍās* at 13, and certainly she comes across as undeterred by the ABAP pushback. Indeed, she would ensure that her Kinnar Akhāḍā was present in Ujjain for the 2016 Kumbha Melā, a festival famed for its incredible size and for the processions and encampments of *akhāḍās*.

The origin of the Kumbha Melā is traced back to a battle between the *devas* (i.e., the gods) and their adversaries, the *asuras* (antigods). Using the mythical Mount Mandāra as a churning stick and the serpent Vāsuki as a rope to tug and rotate the former, the *devas* and *asuras* churned the ocean of milk in which they were situated. This churning gave way to a variety of treasures, including a *kumbha* (water vessel) containing *amṛta* (the nectar of immortality). The gods and the *asuras* clashed over its possession, but eventually the *devas* emerged victorious and carried the *kumbha* off to the heavens.[36] However, four drops of *amṛta* fell in the process, and four locations in contemporary India mark these spots: Nasik, Ujjain, Hardwar, and Prayagraj (officially renamed from Allahabad in 2018). The Kumbha Melā cycles between these four places; the most important Kumbha Melā occurs every 12 years in Prayagraj, corresponding with the 12-year orbit of Jupiter (as well as with the 12 divine days it took for Viṣṇu to bring the *amṛta* to the heavens in some versions of the above narrative).[37]

---

[33] Daniela Bevilacqua, "From the Margins to Demigod," 64.

[34] See Times News Network, "Akhara Parishad not to admit Kinnar Akhara," *The Times of India,* https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/allahabad/akhara-parishad-not-to-admit-kinnar-akhara/articleshow/55675491.cms (accessed April 2022).

[35] Times News Network, "Akhara Parishad not to admit Kinnar Akhara," *The Times of India,* https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/allahabad/akhara-parishad-not-to-admit-kinnar-akhara/articleshow/55675491.cms (accessed April 2022).

[36] This narratuve is as described in Diana Eck, *India: A Sacred Geography* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2012), 155.

[37] Sondra Hausner, *Wandering with Sadhus: Ascetics in the Hindu Himalayas* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2007), 133. Note that Kumbha Melā celebrations may be subcategorized. For example, the 2019 festival was more specifically an Ardh (half) Kumbha Melā for happening between the major Kumbha Melās of Prayagraj.

Kumbha Melā festivals emphasize ritual dips in the respective river(s) of each location (the Ganges of Hardwar, the Shipra of Ujjain, the Godavari of Nasik, and the confluence of the Ganges, Yamuna, and the subterranean Sarasvati at Prayagraj); the waters of the hosting locale become *amṛta* during the Kumbha Melā, and those who bathe within them are said to be cleansed of their misdeeds and are thus freed from any would-be consequences.[38] Millions upon millions undertake pilgrimage to the Kumbha Melā(s) for this liberatory opportunity. However, the bulk of attendees must wait for the *śāhī snāns* (royal baths) of the a*khāḍās* to take place before taking the purifying plunge themselves.

Each *akhāḍā* is afforded their own timeslot to undertake the *śāhī snān*, helping to avoid conflictual encounters between rival regiments.[39] After all, there is a long history of rivalry between these militant ascetic groups, including the bloody battle between the Nirañjanī and Jūnā orders in 1998 at the Hardwar Kumbha Melā over precedence in bathing sequence.[40] Tensions between *akhāḍās* persist in relation to the *śāhī snān*; for although Laxmi steadfastly ensured that the Kinnar Akhāḍā established a camp at the Ujjain Kumbha Melā of 2016, they were excluded from official *śāhī snān* scheduling for lack of ABAP recognition.[41] Yet the Kinnar Akhāḍā had advocates within the *akhāḍā* system, too; Hari Giri Maharaj, member of the Jūnā Akhāḍā, threatened to resign from his post as general secretary of ABAP if the Kinnar Akhāḍā remained sidelined.[42] Commensurate with these sentiments, he and the Jūnā Akhāḍā saw that the Kinnar Akhāḍā would enjoy their first *śāhī snān* in a subsequent Kumbha Melā.

The Big Splash of 2019

In 2019, it was reported that the Kinnar Akhāḍā had "for the first time . . . fully participated in the Kumbh Mela festival by taking the [*śāhī snān*]."[43] Interestingly, there was no change of heart on the part of ABAP; recognition of the Kinnar Akhāḍā as an independent, fourteenth *akhāḍā* remained denied. Yet the Kinnar Akhāḍā undertook the royal bath and was even permitted to enter Prayagraj in the *peshwai*, a royal procession of *akhāḍās* marking the

[38] The point about purification is from Hausner, *Wandering with Sadhus*, 133. The river names and talk of turning into *amṛta* is drawn from Eck, *India: A Sacred Geography*, 155.

[39] Hausner, *Wandering with Sadhus*, 137.

[40] Hausner, *Wandering with Sadhus*, 85.

[41] Several reports attested to this exclusion. For example, see Shailvee Sharda, "From Haj pilgrim to leader of the Kinnar Akhara at Kumbh," *The Times of India*, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/allahabad/the-haji-who-led-kinnars-at-kumbh-shahi-snan/articleshow/67650171.cms (accessed June 2022); Devdutt Pattanaik, "How a new akhara of transgendered people stole the spotlight at the Ujjain Kumbh," *Devdutt*, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/allahabad/the-haji-who-led-kinnars-at-kumbh-shahi-snan/articleshow/67650171.cms / (accessed June 2022); and Apoorvm6, "Inside Kinnar Akhada," *Students' Beat*, https://thestudentsbeat.wordpress.com/2017/09/14/inside-kinnar-akhada/ (accessed June 2022).

[42] Sandeep Rawat, "Akhada Parishad divided over inclusion of 'Kinnar Akhada,'" *Hindustan Times*, https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/akhada-parishad-divided-over-inclusion-of-kinnar-akhada/story-soaupMdHzuOnsTIspFeBZO.html (accessed June 2022).

[43] Ina Goel, "India's Third Gender Rises Again," *Sapiens*, https://www.sapiens.org/biology/hijra-india-third-gender/ (accessed June 2022). Again, note that this was more specifically an Ardh Kumbha Melā.

start of the festival.[44] The internet abounds with pictures of this inaugural cavalcade, including images of colourfully decorated vehicles transporting Kinnar Akhāḍā members and of Laxmi triumphantly brandishing a sword while astride a camel. This participation in the *peshwai* and *śāhī snān* occurred due to an alliance forged with the Jūnā Akhāḍā, the largest of the *akhāḍā* orders; the Jūnā Akhāḍā, whose chief members have outspokenly advocated for the Kinnar Akhāḍā, formally invited the Kinnar Akhāḍā to join them in these ritual undertakings.

Figure 13: Ardhanārīśvara atop the Kinnar Akhāḍā camp entrance.[45]

In fact, the Jūnā Akhāḍā officially took the Kinnar Akhāḍā into their fold. Hari Giri Maharaj of the Jūnā Akhāḍā is reported as saying, "Representatives of [the] Kinnar Akhara have vowed to and signed a written agreement that they will follow the tradition, customs, norms and the rituals of Juna Akhara, after which they were inducted into our Akhara."[46] However, Laxmi emphasizes the distinctiveness of the Kinnar Akhāḍā, nonetheless. "We are with the Jūnā Akhāḍā but we are a separate entity," she clarified to the press.[47] This distinctness is evident in pictures of the Kinnar Akhāḍā encampment from the 2019 Kumbha Melā, including those of its entranceway which contained the words "*kinnar*" and "*akhāḍā*" (in *devanāgarī* script) on either

[44] For a report indicating their participation in the *peshwai*, see Khabar Lahariya, "How Kumbh's Kinnar Akhada Is Changing Attitudes," *The Wire*, https://thewire.in/lgbtqia/how-kumbhs-kinnar-akhada-is-changing-attitudes (accessed June 2022).

[45] Photo from Rajiv Mani, "Allahabad: Kinnar akhara to participate in Magh mela," *The Times of India*, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/allahabad/allahabad-kinnar-akhara-to-participate-in-magh-mela/articleshow/72918800.cms (accessed May 2024).

[46] See Sandeep Rawat, "Third gender seers inducted into Juna Akhara at Kumbh," *Hindustan Times*, https://www.hindustantimes.com/dehradun/third-gender-seers-inducted-into-juna-akhara-at-kumbh/story-t4hCBFdcrpmQqxOimK1rsK.html (accessed June 2022).

[47] She can be heard saying this via the following link: *The Pulse India*, "Kinnar Akhara takes part in the Shahi Snan of Maha Kumbh," *YouTube* (video), 2:00, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NDiGO-nL85Y (accessed June 2022).

side of an image of Ardhanārīśvara that was fixed centrally atop the pedestrian passage (see Figure 13).

Ardhanārīśvara in the Kinnar Akhāḍā

In addition to images of this gateway, I saw pictures online of Ardhanārīśvara within the Kinnar Akhāḍā camp itself. Specifically, one of Laxmi displaying a *sāṛī* featuring an embroidered Ardhanārīśvara (while an Ardhanārīśvara sculpture stood in the background) caught my eye (See Figure 14). This only seemed natural, for I knew that Ardhanārīśvara was relevant to Laxmi, having read her books. In *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi*, she writes, "The hijras are devotees of Lord Shiva in his avatar as Ardhanarishwara, where he combines the male and female elements of Shiva and Parvati;" in *Red Lipstick*, she frames Ardhanārīśvara as a figure that lends credence to the validity of *hijṛā* identity.[48] Ardhanārīśvara is even referenced on the Kineer Services website; it reads: "One of the many forms of Shiva, a principal Hindu deity, involves him merging with his wife, Parvati, to become the androgynous Ardhanari, who holds a special significance to many in the Hijra community."[49] Yet neither these photos nor mentions of Ardhanārīśvara reveal just how central Ardhanārīśvara is to the Kinnar Akhāḍā.

Figure 14: Laxmi displaying a *sāṛī* featuring Ardhanārīśvara.[50]

In my interview with her, when Laxmi described *kinnars* as becoming prominent *gaṇas* of Śiva in the story of their origin, she also associated their "half female and half male" nature with Śiva as Ardhanārīśvara. Emphasizing this connection between the *kinnars* and

[48] Tripathi, *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi*, 178; Tripathi and Pande, *Red Lipstick*, 6-7.

[49] Kineer Services, "Homepage," *Kineer Services*, http://www.kineerservices.com/ (accessed June 2022). Again, the website is now accessible in its archived form. See: https://web.archive.org/web/20221001111132/http://kineerservices.com/Default.aspx (accessed March 2025).

[50] Photo from Ina Goel, "India's Third Gender Rises Again," *Sapiens*, https://www.sapiens.org/biology/hijra-india-third-gender/ (accessed June 2022).

Ardhanārīśvara, Laxmi said, "That is why in our convent the main god is Ardhanārīśvara." Similarly, each of the Daśanāmi *akhāḍās* recognize tutelary deities (the Nirañjanī Akhāḍā worships Kārttikeya, members of the Jūnā Akhāḍā revere Dattātreya and Bhairava, etc.).[51] In addition to the aforementioned *akhāḍā* identifiers, Laxmi, as *ācārya mahāmaṇḍaleśvara*, was responsible for selecting the patron deities of her order. Alongside Ardhanārīśvara, she also recognized Bahucharā Mātā as a tutelary goddess; readers may recall that this figure is widely venerated by *hijṛās*. With respect to Ardhanārīśvara, she said, "I chose . . . according to my conscience [regarding] what was right. So, I chose Ardhanārīśvara because I thoroughly believe [Ardhanārīśvara] is the supreme and is the representation of the entire [cosmos]." She also stated that Śiva without Śakti is nothing but a *śava* (corpse); this is an expression I had heard many times before, one that has been variously interpreted as indicating the necessity, interdependence, and/or ultimate oneness of masculine and feminine principles. Laxmi told me that for her this expression (and thus Ardhanārīśvara) suggests "a beautiful gender equality." Presumably, this "gender equality" refers to *all* gender identities – not only male and female, but all possibilities outside and in between to whatever measure. In this connection, Laxmi referenced the Bhṛṅgī narrative (see Chapter 2) in which Śiva and Pārvatī merge as Ardhanārīśvara in an attempt to secure their joint circumambulation, highlighting how their coalescence shows "Śakti and Śiva both are in one" and again linked this notion to the nature of *kinnars* within her *akhāḍā*. "For us, Ardhanārīśvara is of [great] importance," she pointedly concluded.

Given this emphasis on Ardhanārīśvara, I asked Laxmi whether the Kinnar Akhāḍā engaged in any worship of the figure. She again replied in the affirmative, saying, "We have *mantras* and *ślokas* of Ardhanārīśvara, [and] the *ārtī* of Ardhanārīśvara."[52] When pressed for more details, Laxmi said that the *Ardhanārīśvara Stotra* of Ādi Śaṅkarācārya is recited while a *mūrti* of Ardhanārīśvara receives *ārtī*; this occurs every morning and evening within their Kumbha Melā camps, she elaborated. Bevilacqua also notes that Laxmi enjoys doing *śṛṅgār*, describing this as the practice of "cleaning and decorating temple deities" (while recognizing other meanings of the term).[53] When I asked Laxmi about *śṛṅgār*, she instead spoke of beautifying oneself for the divine through makeup and wardrobe and gave Bahucharā Mātā and Ardhanārīśvara as examples of deities she has in mind when doing so. Additionally, I brought up an image I saw online of a book dust jacket featuring Ardhanārīśvara. Laxmi explained that this picture is of the proposed cover for their upcoming *Kinnar Purāṇa*; she described this forthcoming offering as a collection of "trans stories" from scripture (the Purāṇas and Upaniṣads were specifically named as sources) being assembled by the Kinnar Akhāḍā. Evidently, given the cover image, narratives involving Ardhanārīśvara are planned for inclusion, though Laxmi did not say which ones (See Figure 15).

---

[51] Gross, *The Sādhus of India*, 148-149.

[52] *Ārtī* refers to the devotional act of waving a flame before that which is being venerated.

[53] Bevilacqua, "From the Margins to Demigod," 64. Her discussion of its multiple meanings is found on this page, too.

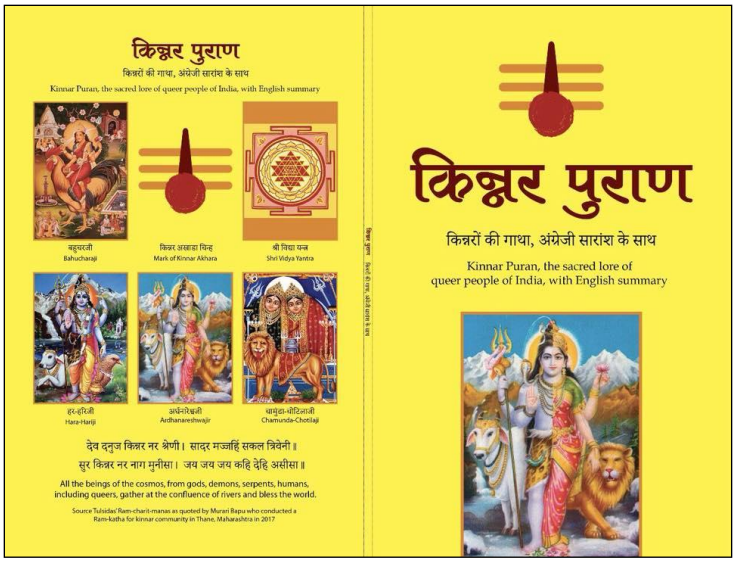

Figure 15: Proposed cover of the *Kinnar Purāṇa*.[54]

I also asked whether there was any noteworthy activity involving Ardhanārīśvara in Ujjain because I had read that the Kinnar Akhāḍā occupied permanent premises there. "We had [an] ashram when we were associated with one swami but because of his non-ethical behaviour . . . we moved out from [those] premises," Laxmi clarified.[55] However, she excitedly described the presence of Ardhanārīśvara at the Śaiva Mahakaleshwar temple of Ujjain, stating that "even the [temple] *liṅgaṃ* is decorated as Ardhanārīśvara" (See Figure 16).[56] She then fondly recalled the establishment of the Kinnar Akhāḍā in Ujjain and their first Kumbha Melā there as well. In fact, this Kumbha Melā debut also included images of Ardhanārīśvara. For instance, one festivalgoer recounted how "a DJ played Bollywood numbers . . . [while] a large image of Lord Shiva as Ardhanarishvara, his avatar which combines the masculine with the feminine, watched over the proceedings" in the Kinnar Akhāḍā camp.[57] Although this attendee was, to my knowledge, not a Kinnar Akhāḍā member, they perhaps insightfully frame Ardhanārīśvara as an aspect of Śiva within this context. Though never explicitly saying so to me, I suspect that Laxmi may herself see Ardhanārīśvara as a form of Śiva (rather than primarily or equally the Goddess); in *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi*, she describes Ardhanārīśvara as an *avātara* (incarnation) of Śiva, she integrated Śaiva markers into the Kinnar Akhāḍā (e.g., the *Śiva Purāṇa*

[54] Picture taken from the Kinnar Akhāḍā Facebook page. See Kinnar Akhāḍā, "Photos," *Facebook*, https://www.facebook.com/kinnarakhara/posts/coming-soon-/2197891577113208/ (accessed December 2024).

[55] In fact, Laxmi said that her order has no primary location. The Kinnar Akhāḍā instead gathers for key occasions, including festivals such as the Kumbha Melā(s) discussed in this chapter. However, she did state that some permanent properties are in development and that high-ranking members of the order have already established their own temples associated with the *akhāḍā*.

[56] Here, I believe Laxmi is referring to *bhasma ārtī*, a ritual proceeding undertaken at the Mahakaleshwar temple, which, in part, involves creating a face on the main *liṅgaṃ*; sometimes an Ardhanārīśvara face is made.

[57] See Kripa Krishnan, "Holy Encounters of the Third Kind," *Live News Daily*, https://qrius.com/holy-encounters-of-the-third-kind/ (accessed June 2022).

is its official text), and she has declared her personal devotion towards Mahākāl.[58] At any rate, the Mahākāl and Ujjain connections are intriguing. Śiva as Mahākāl (i.e., Mahākāleśvara, the "great lord of time") is the presiding deity of the Ujjain Mahakaleshwar temple, and Bevilacqua contends that the Kinnar Akhāḍā greeting ("*jai śrī mahākāl*") is meant to express connection to this god and place.[59] Moreover, the Mahakaleshwar temple of Ujjain marks one of the *śākti pīṭhas*, "seats" where the dismembered body parts of the goddess Satī are said to have fallen; the Mahakaleshwar temple marks the landing spot of her upper lip.[60] However, this is not the only *śākti pīṭha* in constellation with the Kinnar Akhāḍā and Ardhanārīśvara.

Figure 16: Ujjain *liṅga* with Ardhanārīśvara face.[61]

A Tantric Temple

Bhavani Ma is a Kinnar Akhāḍā *mahāmaṇḍaleśvara* (a step below Laxmi in the hierarchy of the order) known for her connections to tantric traditions. Bevilacqua notes that Bhavani Ma

[58] For talk of this declaration and her general Śaiva leanings, see Bevilacqua, "From the Margins to Demigod," 64.

[59] Bevilacqua, "From the Margins to Demigod," 64.

[60] Description of this spot marking where her upper lip fell from Bevilacqua, "From the Margins to Demigod," 64-65. An overall approximation of the Satī narrative in question, as popularly understood, is as follows: Dakṣa, father of Satī, forbade her marriage to Śiva. Moreover, he held an elaborate *yajña* (sacrifice) and did not invite them. Despite this, Satī attended. At the *yajña*, Dakṣa explicitly insulted Śiva. Distraught by the activity of her father, Satī immolated herself. Śiva became inconsolable after the death of Satī, placed her corpse on his shoulder, and destructively marched through the cosmos. To end the calamity, Viṣṇu appeared and shattered the corpse with his discuss. Her various body parts scattered, and the locations where they landed are known as *śākti pīṭhas*. See D.C. Sircar, *The Śākti Pīṭhas* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1973), 5-7 and Nihar Manjan Mishra, *Kamakhya: A Socio-Cultural Study* (Delhi: D.K. Printworld Ltd., 2004), 26-27. Insightfully, Bevilacqua notes that the Ujjain Mahākāl temple, for being a *śākti pīṭha*, has both male and female powers, a fact *kinnars* may resonate with. See Bevilacqua, "From the Margins to Demigod," 65.

[61] Picture from Dainik Bhaskar Group, "Bhasma Aarti Darshan of Mahakal on Wednesday," *Dainik Bhaskar*, https://www.bhaskar.com/local/mp/ujjain/news/charming-makeup-in-the-form-of-ardhanarishvara-129384551.html (accessed April 2024).

is associated with an *aghorī guru* and highlights her participation in the 2019 Ambuvācī Melā, a festival centering on the menstruation of goddess Kāmākhyā at her namesake temple on the Nilācal Hill of Guwahati, Assam.[62] This temple marks an important *śākti pīṭha*; the fallen *yoni* (female genitalia) of Satī lies within its innermost chamber in the form of a vulva-shaped fissure.[63] For three days of Ambuvācī, the temple is closed while this *yoni* is understood to menstruate. White acknowledges that Indian traditions have widely viewed sexual fluids, particularly menses, as dangerously polluting and that such substances have accordingly been incorporated into tantric rites.[64] That the Kāmākhyā temple and Ambuvācī Melā have tantric associations is thus unsurprising. Bevilacqua frames Bhavani Ma as purposefully involving herself with Ambuvācī (even leading a Kinnar Akhāḍā procession at it) given these tantric ties, stating she successfully "established a strong connection between the Kinnar Akhara and this renowned *tāntrik* place where the festival occurs."[65] During my 2022 in-person meeting with Laxmi in Delhi, she contrasted her own Brahminical orthodox background with the tantric path of Bhavani Ma to illustrate that her order has presence in varied Hindu contexts. Importantly, Laxmi also disclosed that Bhavani Ma had created an Ardhanārīśvara temple on the outskirts of Delhi. After learning that Bhavani Ma would be leaving for elsewhere in India the following day, I hurried to her temple early that next morning to catch her beforehand.

Figure 17: The Śrī Ardhanārīśvara Mahākālī Mandir (side view and front view).

[62] Bevilacqua, "From the Margins to Demigod," 65. Note that *aghorīs* are Śaiva ascetics associated with antinomian tantric practices.

[63] Kali Prasad Goswami, *Kamakhya Temple: Past and Present* (Delhi: A.P.H. Publishing Corporation, 1998), 25.

[64] David Gordon White, *Kiss of the Yoginī: "Tantric Sex" in its South Asian Contexts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 67.

[65] Bevilacqua, "From the Margins to Demigod," 65.

There was no mistaking the temple as my driver progressed down its street; the repurposed residence complex was red, black, and towering (See Figure 17). Above its front doorway, a sign identifies the structure as the Śrī Ardhanārīśvara Mahākālī Mandir. My initial thought was that the red and black colouring – and inclusion of Kālī within the placename – emits an intentional tantric flare.[66] This idea is supported by another sign on a wall near the entranceway; it marks the location as a Kinnar Akhāḍā site and affiliates it with the Jūnā Akhāḍā while describing Bhavani Ma as both a *mahāmaṇḍaleśvara* of the Kinnar Akhāḍā and a tantric practitioner associated with the *śākti pīṭha* of Kāmākhyā. Moreover, inside the ground floor of her temple, walls showcase pictures of Bhavani Ma with dreadlocks dangling down her chest, one of her posing in front of the Kāmākhyā temple, and another of her with a large garland of human skulls around her neck; these, too, offer tantric imagery.[67] After being led past these pictures and up a flight of stairs by one of her disciples, I met with Bhavani Ma (see Figure 18).

Figure 18: Bhavani Ma and I.

My time with the *mahāmaṇḍaleśvara* was brief given her impending flight. Her disciples (and in-temple residents) also had to hurry off to bless a newborn (the job of *kinnars*, I was

[66] Red is, for example, a dominant aesthetic at the Kāmākhyā temple during its Ambuvācī Melā (which Bhavani Ma attended), one clearly pointing to an overarching theme of blood in the festival (i.e., the menstrual flow of Kāmākhyā and the bloody animal sacrifices that follow her menstruation which reinvigorate and mobilize her powers). The extreme, tantric *aghorī* (with whom Bhavani Ma is affiliated) are associated with black clothing. Perhaps, then, the paint choice pays homage to these connections. The (often) terrifying goddess Kālī, too, is regularly framed as tantric. For example, see David R. Kinsley, "Kālī," in *Encountering Kālī*: *In the Margins, at the Center, in the West*, eds. Rachel Fell McDermott and Jefferey J. Kripal (Berkley: University of California Press, 2003), 28-34.

[67] Dreadlocks, associated with tantric asceticism (though not exclusively), contrast their wearers from householder life, and human skulls are part and parcel of the transgressive imagery and practices characterizing some tantric traditions.

told).[68] However, there was time enough for a short visit. Much of our talk consisted of Bhavani Ma echoing the above; she pridefully described herself as tantric and recalled establishing a Kinnar Akhāḍā camp at Kāmākhyā. When told that I had attended Ambuvācī three times myself, she seemed impressed, offered me some hashish, and opened up further. At this time, I asked about the name of her temple in which we sat. She confirmed that Kālī reflected the tantric nature of the temple, and she described Ardhanārīśvara (as Laxmi had) as official god of the Kinnar Akhāḍā. Following our visit, she had one disciple take me back to the first floor where both deities are stationed. If entering through the first-floor front door, a terrific *mūrti* of Kālī stands at the back of the room on an area of flooring raised higher than the rest. Before her is Ardhanārīśvara in the form of a *mukhaliṅga* (i.e., a *liṅga* with a face) that was specially commissioned to bear half the face of Śiva and half the face of Pārvatī. These facial halves were accentuated by forehead markings during my visit; white was smeared across the male side and red across the female (see Figure 19).[69] This presentation of Ardhanārīśvara via a *mukhaliṅga* may further indicate the Śaiva orientation of the Kinnar Akhāḍā, given that the *liṅga* is a marker of Śiva (and perhaps it is a nod to the *liṅga* of the aforementioned Mahakaleshwar temple of Ujjain).

Figure 19: Ardhanārīśvara within the Śrī Ardhanārīśvara Mahākālī Mandir.

[68] The ability to bless newborns is widely attributed to *hijṛās* in India. In fact, Bevilacqua provides other examples of *kinnars* offering these blessings and identifies the practice as a carryover from *hijṛā* life. See Bevilacqua, "From the Margins to Demigod," 66.

[69] For a discussion on the significance of red and white in relation to gender and sexuality, see Chapter 6 of this dissertation.

Kumbha Melā camps belonging to the Kinnar Akhāḍā have featured images of Ardhanārīśvara, the deity graces the proposed cover of their planned *Kinnar Purāṇa*, and a temple connected with the order in question explicitly foregrounds the figure. These facts alone could lead one to presume Ardhanārīśvara enjoys an elevated position within the *akhāḍā*. This presumption would be correct, of course; after all, the composite deity was chosen to serve as "main god" of the Kinnar Akhāḍā. The following two sections will analyze the implications of this selection.

Ardhanārīśvara and Akhāḍā Androcentrism

There is no doubt that the Kinnar Akhāḍā challenges long-standing androcentric norms common to Hindu ascetic traditions. Ascetics are regularly framed as those who undertake *saṃṇyāsa* (renunciation) and their lifestyle is contrasted with that of a householder. Rather than engaging in a life of marriage, family, domestic duties, and material pursuits, they often live itinerantly and/or on the peripheries of society with the aim of cultivating detachment in service of the loftier goal of *mokṣa* (liberation).[70] Though *saṃṇyāsa* is not an exclusively male endeavour, it is predominantly men who renounce, and for all the social conventions renunciates may eschew, androcentrism remains within ascetic orders, including those of the *akhāḍā* system.[71]

Though few traditional textual sources explicitly forbid nonmale (i.e., female) renunciation, they often dissuade it and/or frame renunciation primarily in relation to men.[72] In this connection, Khandelwal observes that ascetic initiation ceremonies emphasizing the abandonment of Vedic ritual "[reveal] that the archetypal renouncer . . . is [clearly] a high-caste male since only they were qualified to perform the ritual in the first place."[73] This male-centeredness found its way into the ABAP-recognized *akhāḍās*; Hausner, for example, suggests that the Nirañjanī Akhāḍā has (at least in the past) preferred initiating "twice-born" (and thus male) individuals.[74] Such exclusivism has understandably aggravated the excluded. Prefiguring the Kinnar Akhāḍā, Trikal Bhavanta, herself a *sādhvī* (female holy person), led a group of

[70] However, this detachment is sometimes overstated and/or misconstrued. For example, Khandelwal highlights how renouncers may adhere to social distinctions and feel a sense of social responsibility, contrasting with the totally uninvolved portrayal sometimes posited. See, Meena Khandelwal, *Women in Ochre Robes: Gendering Hindu Renunciation* (New York: SUNY Press, 2004), 34-35. Furthermore, Hausner notes that renouncers may live in "an alternative social community," antithetical to notions of completely withdrawn isolation. See Hausner, *Wandering with Sadhus*, 2.

[71] For a discussion on the predominance of male ascetics, see Khandelwal, *Women in Ochre Robes*, 5-9.

[72] Daniela Bevilacqua, "Are women entitled to become ascetics?," *International Journal for Afro-Asiatic Studies*, no. 21 (2017): 53-54. The texts Bevilacqua presents as forbidding female asceticism are the *Smṛticandrikā*, *Arthaśāstra*, and *Strīdharmapaddhati*.

[73] Khandelwal, *Women in Ochre Robes*, 25.

[74] Hausner, *Wandering with Sadhus*, 39. I say "at least in the past" given that Hausner wrote this work in 2007, and Nirañjanī Akhāḍā practices and preferences may have since changed. As noted in Chapter 2 of this dissertation, to be "twice-born" (*dvijāti*) is to have undergone a rite of passage that initiates a "second birth;" traditionally, this possibility has been reserved for male members of Brahmin, Kṣatriyaḥ, and Vaiśya social classes. See Rodrigues, *Introducing Hinduism*, 78-80.

roughly 50 female ascetics and declared the formation of a new women-only *akhāḍā* during the Māgh Melā of 2014.[75] According to Bevilacqua, this was done to "raise [women's] pride and place in the religious hierarchy" and simultaneously counteract their "subjugated position in a system run by men."[76] However, the women-only *akhāḍā*, known as Pari Akhāḍā, endured the same response the Kinnar Akhāḍā would; ABAP denied their recognition. Instead, ABAP advised that they join female ascetic quarters already established by the Jūnā Akhāḍā for the festivities.[77]

The Pari Akhāḍā is not alone in combatting patriarchy and championing recognition of the feminine; the Kinnar Akhāḍā does, too. "Religion has been made patriarchal. The [ABAP] is a male-dominated, patriarchal body. They (ABAP) didn't even accept the Dashnami Panchayati Majiwada . . . expecting them to accept trans persons is far-fetched," Laxmi lamented to *The Times of India*.[78] Contrastingly, in another media interview, she commended the Jūnā Akhāḍā for, unlike the ABAP, "[having] enough manhood to accept femininity and walk with it."[79] This comment was referring to the support that the Jūnā Akhāḍā offered the Kinnar Akhāḍā in securing their *śāhī snān* participation and clearly emphasizes the presence of femininity within her fold. The femininity Laxmi mentions may reference Kinnar Akhāḍā members identifying as

---

[75] Bevilacqua, "Are women entitled to become ascetics?," 74. The Māgh Melā is an annual festival held in Prayagraj (at the confluence of Ganges, Yamuna, and the subterranean Sarasvati rivers); thus, this festival coincides with (and, in fact, becomes) the Kumbha Melās of this location every 12 years. See Eck, *India: A Sacred Geography*, 152-155.

[76] Bevilacqua, "Are women entitled to become ascetics?,"74. Although Trikal Bhavanta may correctly suggest female subjugation, it should be noted (as Bevilacqua does) that the place of women within the *akhāḍā* system has been noticeably changing over the past couple of decades. For instance, Bevilacqua states that "[in] 2001, during the Mahā Kumbh Melā in Haridwar, female *saṃnyāsinīs* were standing on the chariot of the Mahā Nirvāṇī Akhāṛā, and there was even one chariot with a woman sitting on the throne;" this woman "was Gītā Bhārtī, the first woman to be elected as Mahā Maṇḍaleśwarī of the Nirvāṇī Ākhāṛa." See page 74. Nonetheless, these prominent appointments do not necessarily reflect general membership. In this connection, Hausner writes that "a number of *mahā-maṇḍaleśvaras* are women – even when the *akhāṛās* they lead are all-male institutions. Two leaders of the exclusive Nirañjanī Akhāṛā – whose membership is entirely high-caste men – are women, [for example]." See Hausner, *Wandering with Sadhus*, 82.

[77] Dhirendra Jha, "At Kumbh Mela, VHP joins male-dominated akharas in denying demands of women ascetics," *Scroll.in*, https://scroll.in/article/744570/at-kumbh-mela-vhp-joins-male-dominated-akharas-in-denying-demands-of-women-ascetics (accessed June 2022). Already by 2016, it seems any momentum the Pari Akhāḍā gained largely began to fizzle out. See Devdutt Pattanaik, "How a new akhara of transgendered people stole the spotlight at the Ujjain Kumbh," *Devdutt*, https://devdutt.com/articles/how-a-new-akhara-of-transgendered-people-stole-the-spotlight-at-the-ujjain-kumbh/ (accessed June 2022).

[78] Ishita Mishra, "Kinnars find acceptance in vedas and that is enough," *The Times of India*, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/dehradun/akhada-parishad-is-male-dominated-and-patriarchal-dont-expect-it-to-recognize-kinnar-akhada/articleshow/81472983.cms (accessed June 2022). Bevilacqua describes the Dashnami Panchayati Majiwada as "the female section created inside the Juna Akhara to collect their female *saṃnyāsinī*s." See Bevilacqua, "From the Margins to Demigod, 76.

[79] Soumya Shankar, "Hindu monastic order is reclaiming transgender people's status in Indian society," *Religion News Service*, https://religionnews.com/2019/02/20/hindu-monastic-order-is-reclaiming-transgender-peoples-status-in-indian-society/ (accessed June 2022). It is worth noting that the Jūnā Akhāḍā initiates members of all castes and is the only *akhāḍā* to traditionally initiate women. For talk of Jūnā Akhāḍā and caste, see Hausner, *Wandering with Sadhus*, 39; for mention of them initiating women, see page 24.

fully female, those recognizing a measure of femininity (i.e., *kinnars* identifying as a balance of male and female), or both. Nonetheless, the Pari Akhāḍā and Kinnar Akhāḍā both evidently challenge conceptions of the archetypal *akhāṛā* member as male.[80]

In selecting Ardhanārīśvara as its "main god," the Kinnar Akhāḍā correspondingly ensures that both the masculine and feminine are in view, which I believe serves to reflect their advocation for *akhāṛā* inclusivity while certainly attesting to its own membership. After all, the Kinnar Akhāḍā permits men, women, and "third gender" individuals into its order, all of whom may be easily read unto the Ardhanārīśvara form. At the very least, Laxmi explicitly linked Ardhanārīśvara to the "half female and half male" nature of her *akhāṛā kinnars*, foregrounding this chosen deity so as to mirror and validate these nonmale members. Yet beyond challenging male dominance, the Kinnar Akhāḍā has posed challenges to *akhāṛā* conventions in other ways, too, particularly with respect to chastity.

The Braided Asceticism and Eroticism of Ardhanārīśvara

A *saṃnyāsī* is generally expected to live as a *brahmacārin*, a term that can mean "one who is celibate."[81] Like their primogenitor Śaṅkara, himself a celibate ascetic from childhood on, *saṃnyāsīs* of the Daśanāmi-yielded *akhāḍās*, including the Jūnā Akhāḍā (under whose tutelage the Kinnar Akhāḍā exists), emphasize *brahmacārin* ideals.[82] The celibacy in question is undertaken in service of *mokṣa*; for to eradicate desire (*kāma*) is to no longer issue volitional action (*karma*), nor bear its consequences, and thus no longer perpetuate the suffering of cyclic existence (*saṃsāra*). Yet this *brahmacārin* chastity is linked to another concept, too: *tapas*. *Tapas* refers to a special heat (variously described as "inner," "magical", or "sacred") and the processes and practices that produce it.[83] Importantly, methods of *tapas* production include austerities involving chastity.[84] When cultivated, this sacred heat may generate an array of results, from the favour of deities (e.g., in several narratives, it is by her undertaking of *tapas* that Pārvatī is granted union with Śiva as Ardhanārīśvara) to physical and psychic abilities that "transcend worldly norms and limits."[85]

---

[80] The Pari Akhāḍā movement seems to have gained less traction (or at least less publicity) than that of the Kinnar Akhāḍā. I asked Laxmi about the Pari Akhāḍā, and she described it as unsuccessful for lacking numbers, resources, and organization. Moreover, she said that the Pari Akhāḍā was not so necessary given Jūnā Akhāḍā already has a place for women within their fold.

[81] This quote is from Flood, *An introduction to Hinduism*, 63. Note that *brahmacārin* can also refer to one in the celibate student stage of life within the fourfold *āśrama* system; in this context, *āśramas* refer to life stages. See pages 62-65.

[82] For mention of Śaṅkara as a celibate ascetic from childhood, see Gross, *The Sādhus of India*, 52. For the presumed celibacy of Daśanāmi-affiliated lineages, see Hausner, *Wandering with Sadhus*, 76.

[83] For descriptions of "magical" and "sacred," see Reddy, *With Respect to Sex*, 85; for "inner," see Flood, *An introduction to Hinduism*, 63.

[84] Reddy, *With Respect to Sex*, 85.

[85] For discussion of Pārvatī undertaking *tapas*, see Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman*, 141-142. The quote is from Adheesh A. Sathaye, *Crossing the Lines of Caste: Viśvāmitra and the Construction of Brahmin Power in Hindu Mythology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 62.

To date, many (if not most) members of the Kinnar Akhāḍā entered the order having identified (and been initiated) as *hijṛās*. Thus, it is worth presenting some similarities between ascetics and *hijṛās* that went acknowledged even prior to the formation of the Kinnar Akhāḍā. For example, according to Reddy, *hijṛās* are known to "explicitly reiterate their ascetic identity" and draw connections between themselves and *saṃnyāsīs*.[86] After all, *hijṛās* are also known to renounce ties with their natal homes and seek alms.[87] Moreover, Reddy quotes one of her *hijṛā* informants as saying, "We are like sannyasis . . . Real Hijras . . . have no mental or physical desire . . . This is what is important."[88] In this connection, Reddy connects the asexuality brought about by *hijṛā nirvāṇ* operations (see Chapter 3) to *tapas* and the powers it can bring.[89] She notes that *tapas* may give way to (pro)generative abilities (e.g., there are cosmogonic myths wherein *tapas* aids Prajāpati in creating the world) and links this to the *nirvāṇ* procedure, which is understood to eliminate sexual desire and imbue *hijṛās* with dominion over matters of (in)fertility.[90]

Given its status as tutelary deity of the Kinnar Akhāḍā, I contemplated Ardhanārīśvara as emblematic of *hijṛā* asexuality and the related *brahmacārin* ethos so pervasive in the *akhāḍā* system.[91] When coalesced as Ardhanārīśvara, Doniger recognizes that "Śiva's and Pārvatī's being permanently fused together means that they are in the one form guaranteed to prevent sexual activity;" their extreme togetherness actually precludes sensuality.[92] She also suggests that this conjoined state "may symbolize satiation without desire."[93] Taken together, Ardhanārīśvara could be interpreted as an image of sexlessness (in terms of sexual activity) and desirelessness, and thus concomitant with *hijṛā* asexuality and the *brahmacārin* celibacy characteristic of *akhāḍā* members more broadly. However, Laxmi put this connection into question by denying sexual abnegation within the Kinnar Akhāḍā. "We are not celibate. We are

[86] The quotation is from Reddy, *With Respect to Sex*, 89.

[87] *Hijṛās* renouncing natal ties in a manner similar to *saṃnyāsīs* is suggested on Reddy, *With Respect to Sex*, 150; discussion of *hijṛā* alms seeking in relation similar *saṃnyāsī* practices is found on 89.

[88] Reddy, *With Respect to Sex*, 89.

[89] The link between *tapas* and the *nirvāṇ* operation begins on Reddy, *With Respect to Sex*, 96. It may also be noted that some *saṃnyāsīs* undertake a procedure somewhat akin to the *nirvāṇ*; these *saṃnyāsīs* intentional break their penile tissues to ensure celibacy. This connection is alluded to by Bevilacqua. See Bevilacqua, "From the Margins to Demigod," 61.

[90] For a discussion of the *nirvāṇ* ritual in relation to (in)fertility, see Reddy, *With Respect to Sex*, 56-57; for an additional analysis of these themes, see Boisvert, "Cultivating a female body," 7-8. The Prajāpati myth mentioned above is summarized in Reddy, *With Respect to Sex*, 86.

[91] This *brahmacārin* ideal as it pertains to the *akhāḍās* is discussed in Hausner, *Wandering with Sadhus*, 86.

[92] Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 319.

[93] Doniger O'Flaherty, *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts*, 319.

demigods, not saints. We have our own rules," she said in a media interview.[94] Scholarship, too, notes that the Kinnar Akhāḍā does not enforce celibacy prescriptions.[95]

In addition to the personal promiscuity Laxmi has proudly declared (she even describes herself as the "epitome of sluthood"), it is true that "third gender" peoples, including *kāndra hijṛās*, sometimes engage in sex work.[96] On the one hand, it appears that such sexual activity would be at odds with asceticism; scholars, such as Reddy, identify this "potential opposition between *tapas* and *kama* or asceticism/renunciation and desire/eroticism."[97] However, Reddy also goes on to problematize this opposition, noting cases in which *tapas* "provides the ascetic or renouncer with great sexual power."[98] Interestingly, Saria braids both ascetic and erotic strands in suggesting a unique *hijṛā* asceticism, describing sexually active *hijṛās* as "ascetic not only in their abdication of semen, ever, but also in the way they absorb and consume the semen of others."[99] Yet Bevilacqua shies away from positing that the Kinnar Akhāḍā enjoys a unique asceticism by virtue of accepting sexual activeness in its members. Instead, she suggests that the Kinnar Akhāḍā is simply selective in the features of asceticism they wish to adopt; the sexual activeness in question is a result of filtering out aspects of asceticism rather than reflecting a distinctive form.[100]

Nonetheless, the Kinnar Akhāḍā does contain both ascetic and erotic features within its fold. Similarly, Śiva, "the erotic ascetic," reconciles apparently oppositional qualities within himself; he is both an ascetic yogi and erotic lover.[101] Ardhanārīśvara exhibits this paradoxical nature of Śiva in synthesizing otherwise binary masculine and feminine aspects into a singular form.[102] Moreover, in addition to the connotations of desirelessness and sexlessness mentioned earlier, Ardhanārīśvara is also interpreted as a symbol of sensuality. As such, Ardhanārīśvara seems a suitable deity for the Kinnar Akhāḍā, reflecting both the ascetic and erotic aspects of the innovative order. However, despite all the laudable trailblazing of the Kinnar Ākhāḍā, in terms of its revamping of *akhāḍā* conventions and general challenges to patriarchy, it has also been derided.

---

[94] Alasdair Pal, "From pariah to demigod: transgender leader a star at massive Indian festival," *Reuters*, https://www.reuters.com/article/world/from-pariah-to-demi-god-transgender-leader-a-star-at-kumbh-idUSKCN1PE04I/ (accessed June 2022).

[95] For example, see Bevilacqua, "From the Margins to Demigod," 67.

[96] See Tripathi and Pande, *Red Lipstick*, 169.

[97] Reddy, *With Respect to Sex*, 86. Notably, Reddy posits an analogy between the tension betwixt *tapas* and *kāma* and that of *badhāi* and *kāndra hijṛās*. See page 91.

[98] Reddy, *With Respect to Sex*, 86.

[99] Vaibhav Saria, *Hijras, Brothers, Lovers: Surviving Sex and Poverty in Rural India* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2021), 103.

[100] Bevilacqua, "From the Margins to Demigod," 67.

[101] This understanding of Śiva is well documented. For example, see Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *Śiva: the Erotic Ascetic* (United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 1981).

[102] Flood, for example, connects Ardhanārīśvara to the ambiguity and paradoxes of Śiva. See Flood, *An introduction to Hinduism*, 150-151.

Questioning Laxmi and Rāma

The ever-outspoken and ever-controversial Laxmi created quite a stir when she declared that militant *kinnars* should rise up and eradicate Pakistan. Her comments were published in a September 2016 daily and made in response to an alleged strike by Pakistan along the India-Pakistan border.[103] Unsurprisingly, her rhetoric has been taken to reify the othering of Muslims (the state religion of Pakistan is Islam) in relation to a Hindu India and therefore reflect Hindutva conceptualizations of the nation. Of course, India also contains an enormous Islamic population, and tensions between Muslims and Hindus sometimes occur within the Indian borders as well. Infamously, the Babri Masjid Mosque of Ayodhya was destroyed for purportedly resting on a site commemorating the birthplace of the god Rāma; members of the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), a Hindutva-affiliated organization, were among those responsible.[104] Laxmi has not been silent on this issue either; on behalf of the Kinnar Akhāḍā, she vocally supported constructing a Rāma temple at the contested site despite associated communal tensions.[105] In 2024, the Rāma temple was controversially inaugurated. Given this occurred significantly after our interviews, I did not speak with Laxmi about the event. However, news reports indicate that a Kinnar Akhāḍā *mahāmaṇḍaleśvara* attended the invite-only inauguration in support of the occasion.[106]

In speaking with me, Laxmi distanced her comments on the Rāma temple construction from any political agenda. "Whatever comments I made, it is only because of [my] sentiments [for] Rām since my history goes way back to Rāma. Even in this age, my community members, whether it is the *hijṛās* or whether it is the *kinnars*, we always say . . . we are from the era of Rām," she explained. "[Rāma] had affection for the trans community. Even in his childhood there were transgender people who cared for him. His nanny was trans, the person who fed him, and all of his governesses were trans," Laxmi elaborated.[107] According to Bevilacqua, as evidence for a Rāma-*kinnar* connection, Laxmi also points to a passage from the 16th-century *Rāmcaritmānas* in which Tulsidās (author of this Rāma-centered text) uses the term "*kinnar*"

---

[103] Sayan Bhattacharya, "The Transgender Nation and its Margins: The Many Lives of the Law," *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal* 20 (2019), 4-5.

[104] Chandrima Chakraborty, *Masculinity, Asceticism, Hinduism*: Past and Present Imaginings of India (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2011), 170-171.

[105] Bhattacharya, "The Transgender Nation and its Margins," 14.

[106] For example, see Times News Network, "Ram temple: Kinnar Akhara Member Attends Ram Temple Consecrated Ceremony in Ayodhya," *The Times of India*, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/allahabad/kinnar-akhara-member-attends-ram-temple-consecration-ceremony-in-ayodhya/articleshow/106972925.cms (accessed May 2024).

[107] With respect to these caretakers, Laxmi states specifically that "in [the] Ramcharitmanas . . . 'Sakhi' and 'Mai' took care of Lord Rama [in] childhood." See her interview in Rajiv Nayan Chaturvedi, "Our Aim is the Regain the Lost Space of Transgender Community in Hindu Religion: Laxmi Narayan Tripathi," *Outlook*, https://www.outlookindia.com/culture-society/eunuchs-have-sacred-place-in-sanatan-dharma-we-are-fighting-to-regain-it-says-trans-activist-laxmi-narayan-tripathi-news-192284 (accessed July 2022). This is something she had also shared with me. The *Rāmacaritamānas* Laxmi references is an epic poem written by Tulsidās in the Awadhi vernacular. The *Rāmacaritamānas* is often considered a poetic retelling of the *Rāmāyaṇa* of Vālmīki, though it contains elements not found in the latter.

when listing classes of beings who went to the confluence of the Ganges, Yamuna, and Sarasvati rivers.[108] Yet it was the blessings Rāma conferred in certain recollections of a *Rāmāyaṇa* episode that seems to have primarily forged a strong, ongoing connection between the god and "third gender" populations.[109]

When Rāma, his wife Sītā, and his brother Lakṣmaṇa, set off for what would be a 14-year exile, they were followed by adoring subjects to the banks of a river at the outskirts of a forest. Rāma turned to the people and instructed the men and women to go back to the city whence they came and to return to their duties there. When Rāma finally embarked on his own return to Ayodhya, he found a group gathered at the spot where he attempted to turn the congregation back. These people remained due to a loophole in the above decree; they were neither men nor women and thus not ordered to leave. Rāma, impressed by their steadfast devotion, blessed them.[110] Some *hijṛās* cite this event as yielding their ability to confer blessings (and curses) of their own.[111] Laxmi, who told me that *kinnars* are no different from *hijṛās* in having this ability, also attributes the capability to this Rāma-given blessing. In recalling the episode, she emphatically stated, "Our connection with Rām cannot be removed; it is culturally and religiously embedded." Moreover, Rāma is understood to have told these "third gender" forebearers that they would come to rule in the Kali Yuga (our present age).[112] Though Laxmi did not comment on this specifically, it would seem she is hellbent on fulfilling this prophecy given her emboldening of related marginalized communities and personal ascension to positions of great influence. At any rate, she has clearly framed her support of the aforementioned Rāma temple construction in relation to favourable connections between "third gender" peoples and the god.

Her actual intentions have been put into question, however. In fact, this leader of "the first transgender religious convent" has met fierce criticisms lodged by others under the "third gender" umbrella. As with her call to rally militant *kinnars* against Pakistan, her stance on the Rāma temple has been taken to incite strife between Hindus and Muslims. Indeed, Laxmi has

---

[108] Bevilacqua, "From the Margins to Demigod," 59. Bevilacqua recognizes that Laxmi takes the mention of "*kinnar*" as evidence for "third gender" presence. However, in her attached footnote, Bevilacqua indicates her suspicions that Tulsidās instead meant mythical beings (likely those I identified earlier when discussing the etymology of "*kinnar*").

[109] I use the term "recollections" here because, as Bockrath notes, "many, if not most translations of Valmiki's Ramayana do not contain this reference." See Joseph Bockrath, "Bhartia Hijro Ka Dharma: The Code of India's Hijra," *Legal Studies Forum* 27, no. 1 (2003): 86.

[110] This retelling taken from Vinay Lal, "Not This, Not That: The Hijras of India and the Cultural Politics of Sexuality," *Social Context* 17, no. 4 (Winter 199): 123. Although stating that Nanda also presents the episode in this way (see Nanda, *Neither Man nor Woman*, 23), Lal concedes (in the attached endnote) that she has found no trace of this narrative in the *Rāmāyaṇa* of either Tulsidās or Vālmīki; it could instead be part and parcel of one of the many oral *Rāmāyaṇa traditions present in India.*

[111] See Sarah Newport, "Writing Otherness: Uses of History and Mythology in Constructing Literary Representations of India's Hijras," PhD diss. (University of Manchester, 2018), 51.

[112] This claim is noted by several scholars. For example, see Reddy, *With Respect to Sex*, 223. Also see Vaibhav Saria, *Hijras, Lovers, Brothers: Surviving Sex and Poverty in Rural India* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2021), 136.

been accused of exhibiting a toxic Hindu favouritism in general, which is particularly significant given that *hijṛā* life has traditionally incorporated both Hindu and Islamic elements.

Accusations of Saffronization

In 2018, a statement condemning the Kinnar Akhāḍā for its stance on the Rāma temple construction was collectively issued and signed by many transgender, intersex, and gender nonconforming individuals, 20 LGBTQIA+ groups, a number of allied organizations, and nearly 150 individual allies in India.[113] Anindya Hajra and the Pratyay Gender Trust (whose Durgā Pūjā initiatives were examined in the previous chapter) were among the signees. The statement itself contained forcefully pointed language. "[We] find the statements by the Kinnar Akhara appalling and dangerous," it reads. It goes on to frame the stance of Laxmi as one that "negates the politics of communal harmony that is espoused by Hijras and Kinnars, who have historically maintained a syncretic faith of belonging to both Hinduism and Islam. Laxmi Narayan Tripathi's position idealises a mythical past . . . and supports the right-wing politics of communal hatred in the guise of 'we were always accepted.'" Evidently, this excerpt from the statement suggests that in advocating for the Rāma temple construction, the Kinnar Akhāḍā takes a divisively Hindu-centered stance at the expense of any alternative (i.e., Islamic) framings. The excerpt also suggests that the idea of "third gender" populations being traditionally embraced within Hindu history is a strategic romanticization; this embrace has been repeatedly underscored by Laxmi in the press, and the joint statement calls into question her intentions for doing so. "It should be noted that while Tripathi's position ostensibly seeks harmony between the realms of faith and gender/sexuality, in actuality, it is aligned with Hindutva and derives explicit inspiration from Nazi ideology," the statement reads.[114] It then outlines its concerns that her stance will "deepen existing hierarchies of trans persons in dangerous ways, especially alienating minority-religious and atheist [peoples]" and accuses "such attempts to seek legitimization of the third gender along religious lines [as] nothing less than gross competitive politics." In conclusion, the document states, "This collective will resist the saffronisation of trans and intersex spaces. We unequivocally condemn such communal sentiments and continue to rest our faith in the Constitutional principle of the separation of state and religion."

The concept of saffronization mentioned above deserves some unpacking. Given the preceding, it is clear that saffronization does not solely mean the literal colouring of something to saffron (though this act of colouring is sometimes involved). The colour itself is particularly

[113] For the full statement, see Trans, Gender Nonconforming, and Intersex Collectives, "Trans, Gender Nonconforming & Intersex Collectives Strongly Condemn Kinnar Akhara's Support for Ram Temple at Ayodhya, India," *Sampoorna*, https://sampoornaindiablog.wordpress.com/2018/11/24/trans-gender-nonconforming-intersex-collectives-strongly-condemn-kinnar-akharas-support-for-ram-temple-at-ayodhya-india/?fbclid=IwAR0h_InJV3cQpAPeU5VC9Z6m6fPqABextqWK3RK0a4wnBjTXNFwGKPyy6wI (accessed July 2022). Note that all quotations in this paragraph are drawn from the same issued statement.

[114] Presumably, this accusation of drawing "inspiration from Nazi ideology" is levelled due to a perceived similarity between the nationalism of Hitler and that of Hindutva (which, of course, the joint statement above suggests the Kinnar Akhāḍā supports).

associated with Hinduism to the extent that Hindutva enterprises, namely the RSS, pay homage to the *bhagwā dhwaj* (saffron flag).[115] As such, saffronization could be described as the Hinduization of some phenomenon and/or the foregrounding of Hindu markers in order to express Hindutva allyship. In this connection, one may hear of the abstract "saffronization of education" or "safforinzation of diplomacy" and/or encounter actual saffron markers.[116] Providing an illuminating example of the latter, Elison highlights how mass-market images depicting Sai Baba of Shirdi, a figure revered by both Hindus and Muslims, undergo purposeful pigmentation. Images of Sai Baba are typically modelled after a small number of historical photographs, though often deviate from the source material; Elison observes that "the white kerchief donned by the saint in a style typical of a Muslim mendicant has in many contemporary renditions been given a Hindu-coded saffron [colour]."[117] This foregrounding of Hinduism to the extent that Islam undergoes erasure is at the crux of criticisms Laxmi has received regarding her stance on the Rāma temple as well as matters beyond it.

Saria highlights how "hijra activists have recovered from Hindu mythology another word to refer to themselves: *kinnar*."[118] On the one hand, Saria describes this as an attempt to counteract disparaging uses of the term "*hijṛā*." However, the author also notes that this "political project of renaming" has been interpreted suspiciously as "an alibi to absorb hijras within ascendant right-wing Hindu nationalism."[119] As noted in the preceding chapter, similar reservations were expressed by Anindya. To reiterate, she associated Laxmi with "a very deliberate and political foregrounding of the term '*kinnar*'" and linked this to "the whole process of erasing of the Islamic past." Indeed, scholarship notes that the Kinnar Akhāḍā has primarily filtered in only Hindu (rather than Islamic) aspects of *hijṛā* life in shaping its identity.[120] Photos even circulate of Laxmi in saffron garb while displaying the *abhaya mudrā* as a Hindu holy person might (see Figure 20). Given the foregoing, I decided to ask Laxmi about her purported political affiliations.

In response, Laxmi said, "I am friends with all the parties . . . The problem with people [is that] they call me right-wing, left-wing, all wings; I don't understand. Because as an activist . . . I had to work with every political leader. I have to work with the entire bureaucracy to bring [about] change. Of course, I am *acārya mahāmaṇḍaleśvara*; I am the high priestess in the Hindu

[115] For a history of saffron in the Indian political context, including the production of an official shade, see Sadan Jha, "Challenges in the History of Colours: the case of saffron," *Indian Economic & Social History Review* 51, no. 2 (2014).

[116] For an article on the "saffronization of education," see Hiren Gohain, "On Saffronisation of Education," *Economis and Political Weekly* 37, no. 46 (November 2002); for an article on the "saffronization of diplomacy," see Kira Huju, "Saffronizing diplomacy: the Indian Foreign Service under Hindu nationalist rule," *International Affairs* 98, no. 2 (March 2022).

[117] William Elison, *The Neighborhood of Gods: The Sacred and the Visible at the Margins of Mumbai* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 99.

[118] Saria, *Hijras, Lovers, Brothers,* 4.

[119] Saria, *Hijras, Lovers, Brothers*, 4.

[120] Bevilacqua, "From the Margins to Demigod," 64.

[order]. It doesn't mean we are politically affiliated. In my *akhāḍā*, some people are in Congress, some people are in BJP, some people are in the Aam Aadmi Party . . . so, in my *akhāḍā* there are many people that are [variously] politically affiliated. [However,] as [the] Laxmi Narayan party, as the high priestess of the Kinnar Akhāḍā, I am a non-political figure, and I shall remain so."

Figure 20: Laxmi in saffron.[121]

It should be noted that Laxmi and the Kinnar Akhāḍā are not without sympathizers. For instance, Goel criticizes detractors of the Kinnar Akhāḍā for conflating its entire membership with the beliefs and aspirations of Laxmi.[122] Moreover, Bevilacqua, who acknowledges their evocation of Hinduism, nonetheless suggests that "the eradication of Islam does not seem to be a main priority of the [Kinnar Akhāḍā];" she notes, for example, that members of the Kinnar Akhāḍā interchangeably refer to themselves as *kinnars* and *hijṛās* rather than forbidding identification with the latter term.[123] In fact, Bhavani Ma, who was born into the heavily-ostracised Vālmīki caste, converted to Islam when she became a *hijṛā* and still publicly declares herself a *ḥajjī* (one who has completed a pilgrimage to Mecca) despite now serving as *mahāmaṇḍaleśvara* within the Kinnar Akhāḍā.[124] All things considered, Bevilacqua contends that it would be premature to accuse the Kinnar Akhāḍā of being a saffronizing presence. Instead, she describes the *akhāḍā* as employing a form of "religious feminism" for reinterpreting and foregrounding Hindu symbols in service of challenging patriarchy (e.g.,

[121] Picture found in an online search. See Kinnar Akhāḍā, "Photos," *Facebook*, https://www.facebook.com/kinnarakhara/albums/2197317747170591/ (accessed December 2024). It is one I have also seen Laxmi use as a profile picture on her personal social media.

[122] Ina Goel, "Queer Politics of Representation: Ram Mandir and Kinnar Akhada Controversy," *Economic & Political Weekly* 55, no. 4 (2020). Note that no page numbers were present within the article.

[123] Bevilacqua, "From the Margins to Demigod," 70.

[124] Bevilacqua, "From the Margins to Demigod," 69.

pointing to Hindu deities and narratives in a way that validates "third gender" populations).[125] These statements from Bevilacqua would likely be appreciated by Laxmi given that she frames her support of all things Rāma, as well as her foregrounding of the "*kinnar*" designator, as having nothing to with Hindutva as such and everything to do with reinstating former glories gleanable from Hindu history. Even so, some of her comments and undertakings evidently echo those of her Hindutva-affiliated compatriots.

A Saffron Ardhanārīśvara

Although Laxmi denies any affiliation with Hindutva politics, she has at turns analogously foregrounded Hinduism while vilifying Islam. Along with the aim of reclaiming a "lost position" within Hinduism, she told me, "The main [reason] we established the Kinnar Akhāḍā . . . is because there was so much of extremism of Islam in the *hijṛā* culture, and there was a lot of peer pressure on Hindu children [to turn] into Muslims." This suggests that the Kinnar Akhāḍā provides a markedly Hindu alternative to the Islamically-influenced *hijṛā* way of life. Rishi Ajaydas, a close associate of the Kinnar Akhāḍā in its formative days in Ujjain, expressed as much in an interview. "Islam is the dominating religion among transgenders, though a majority of them are Hindus when they join the community. It's a kind of homecoming [to join the *akhāḍā*] because by wearing saffron robes they have embraced Hinduism,'' he said.[126] This quote, which intriguingly presents entering the Kinnar Akhāḍā as a Hindu homecoming for many, had me wonder about the process of non-Hindus becoming members. I had read that one must take on a Hindu name upon entry into the *akhāḍā* and asked Laxmi about this specifically. She said that renaming was "not a hard and fast rule" for all members. However, Laxmi did say that those wishing to have a prominent rank, such as *mahāmaṇḍaleśvara*, do undergo a renaming "because it is a Hindu cultural position." Laxmi told me that the doors to her *akhāḍā* are open to everyone and even said some founding members were Muslim, though at least a portion of these individuals have indeed undergone a name change themselves.[127] Even if well-intentioned, the above sentiments, so clearly involving the sidelining of Islam, would no doubt fuel the fiery criticisms that allege Laxmi is saffronizing "third gender" spaces. Yet, intriguingly, there is arguably even further fodder.

Given that saffronization often involves foregrounding Hindu markers, suggesting that a Hindu deity can be saffronized may seem illogical. However, there are cases in which these

---

[125] Bevilacqua, "From the Margins to Demigod," 72.

[126] Milin Ghatwai, "At Simhastha Kumbh, Kinnar Akhara becomes a huge draw," *The Indian Express*, https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/at-simhastha-kumbh-kinnar-akhara-becomes-a-huge-draw-2775463/ (accessed July 2022).

[127] For mention of name changing, see Ishita Mishra, "'Kinnars find acceptance in vedas and that is enough,'" *The Times of India*, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/dehradun/akhada-parishad-is-male-dominated-and-patriarchal-dont-expect-it-to-recognize-kinnar-akhada/articleshow/81472983.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst (accessed July 2022). In addition, see Shailvee Sharda, "From Haj pilgrim to leader of the Kinnar Akhara at Kumbh," *The Times of India*, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/allahabad/the-haji-who-led-kinnars-at-kumbh-shahi-snan/articleshow/67650171.cms (accessed July 2022).

divine figures factor into the earthly discourses of their adherents and have their connection to Hinduism underscored in significant ways. The previous chapter noted how images of Rāma have been used (and transformed) by the RSS in its Hindutva campaigns. In fact, this connection to Rāma has been central since its inception. Hedgewar, founder of the RSS, chose Vijayā Daśamī (marking the victory of Rāma over Rāvaṇa) as the day of its inauguration, official naming of the RSS coincided with the birthday of Rāma, and their saffron flag is supposed to resemble one connected to the god.[128] Similarly, the VHP, another Hindutva outfit, formed a "youth wing," the Bajrang Dal, which Lutgendorf loosely translates as "the army of Hanuman."[129] Its members also display saffron in the form of worn scarves and have placed Hanumān, the "monkey god" and great devotee of Rāma, on the Bajrang Dal logo.[130] These organizations have clearly instrumentalized the gods in question as rallying points within their Hindutva initiatives. Laxmi denies allegiance to Hindutva politics, but those wary of her words might wonder whether the Kinnar Akhāḍā has similarly saffronized another deity: Ardhanārīśvara.

Just as Rāma is printed on saffron flags flown by the RSS and Hanumān is found on the Bajrang Dal emblem, Ardhanārīśvara is fixed on the official seal of the Kinnar Akhāḍā. The seal itself showcases some compelling iconographic features. At first glance it appears as though typical Śaiva iconography occupies the right half (the crescent moon, trident, and loincloth of tiger fur all appear on this side). However, all four hands (both sides have two arms), including those on the right half, are decidedly effeminate; they include long slender fingers and fingernails. The most visible hand comes from the raised, posterior arm of Śiva; it is bent at the wrist with its digits dramatically extending, each in offset fashion and quite possibly reflecting a perceived "third gender" gesture. The left half of Ardhanārīśvara features normative Pārvatī iconography apart from one curious inclusion (excluding the fact that the hands may be uniquely "third gender" ones): a muted saffron flag standing upright, parallel to the figure, and waving proudly outwards. This Ardhanārīśvara stands in front of, and is framed within, an ornate archway, while the entire image is enclosed within a circular border. I have encountered two versions of this image. One presents everything described as gilded in saffron; only the line work of the image is presented in maroon. The other version looks almost like a negative of the first; the described image (other than the saffron flag, which remains just that) undergoes maroon colouring while the line work is white (see Figure 21). Both versions feature saffron backgrounds, and both include a differently hued saffron banner running across the bottom of the seal featuring "Kinnar Akhāḍā" in *devanāgarī* script.

---

[128] Tapan Basu, Pradip Datta, Sumit Sarkar, Tanika Sarkar, and Sambuddha Sen, *Khaki Shorts and Saffron Flags: A Critique of the Hindu Right* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 1993), 12-13.

[129] Philip Lutgendorf, *Hanuman's Tale: The Messages of a Divine Monkey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 367.

[130] Information on the presence of saffron from Lutgendorf, *Hanuman's Tale*, 367. To view the logo, see the following link: Bajran Dal, "Profile Pictures, *Facebook*, https://www.facebook.com/BajrangDalOrg/?profile_tab_item_selected=reels&_rdr (accessed December 2024).

Figure 21: Ardhanārīśvara on the Kinnar Akhāḍā seal.

This saffron emphasis, particularly the presence of the saffron flag (a known Hindutva marker), certainly invites comparisons with the aforementioned Hindutva organizations. Like the RSS and Bajrang Dal, the Kinnar Akhāḍā has outspokenly supported the highly controversial Ayodhya Rāma temple construction. Thus, not only is Ardhanārīśvara the tutelary deity of an expressly Hindu order but also an organization at least echoing Hindutva ideals vis-à-vis the Rāma temple matter. Accordingly, one may reasonably infer that the Kinnar Akhāḍā instrumentalizes the figure as the RSS does Rāma and the Bajrang Dal does Hanumān and determine that Ardhanārīśvara imagery is being pigmented a political saffron. However, there are differences in the presentation and operationalization of these deities. Rāma and Hanumān have been muscularized in Hindutva imagery, reflecting related calls for Hindu men to build up apparently manly qualities (e.g., strength and discipline) within themselves in service of securing a Hindu hegemony in India.[131] Contrastingly, Ardhanārīśvara, if anything, undergoes emasculation, given that the typically male arms of its right half are presented effeminately. Yet rather than appealing to men à la Rāma and Hanumān, the Kinnar Akhāḍā forwards Ardhanārīśvara as evidence for the Hindu sanctioning of "third gender" life so as to honour and embolden associated populations. Moreover, any alignment with nationalist sentiments by the Kinnar Akhāḍā appears more representative of strategies aimed at realizing their desired empowerment than subscription to a political ideology. Thus, it feels safest to describe the saffron of their seal as signalling a greener pasture, beckoning those marginalized for their gender and/or sexuality to ally with this Hindu order to achieve better social standing. For her

[131] Dibyesh Anand, "Anxious Sexualities: Masculinity, Nationalism and Violence," *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 9, no. 2 (May 2007): 261. Here, the author solely mentions Rāma but the Bajrang Dal logo, too, contains a hulking Hanumān.

part, Laxmi claimed no hand in creating the seal when we spoke of it in Delhi. Instead, she described selecting it out of multiple options presented to her. When asked about the saffron flag in its design, she simply replied, "Beautiful, isn't it?" with a cryptic smile that reminded me of her resistance to political affiliation while relaying, I felt, her awareness of the connotations.

Fulfilling Promises

Earlier in this chapter, I highlighted recollections of a *Rāmāyaṇa* episode in which "third gender" forebearers were told by Rāma that they would come to rule our present age. Reddy, in a 2005 publication, suggested then that the promised time was perhaps at hand; in support, she described the significant strides made by *hijṛās* to better their place in public perception alongside their individual and collective accomplishments.[132] My research has demonstrated that this trajectory has only continued within Indian "third gender" populations more broadly. Certainly, those forerunners to whom Rāma spoke would need to look no further than the rise of the Kinnar Akhāḍā to cement belief in his word. However, the visibility and command acquired by Laxmi and her *akhāḍā* owes something to the promise of Ardhanārīśvara, too.

In Chapter 2, I presented the work of Ashton who situates Ardhanārīśvara within nondual Pratyabhijñā philosophy. To recapitulate, he argues that the absolute, pervasive consciousness that the Pratyabhijñā system recognizes imbues all manifestations, including all expressions of gender and sexuality, with divinity. Therefore, he suggests that the Ardhanārīśvara image, when viewed through a Pratyabhijñā lens, "signifies the totality that lies not just behind *but among* all possible dualities."[133] Through my analysis of the Kinnar Akhāḍā, I have demonstrated that Ardhanārīśvara is indeed referenced and purposed as a model affirming the value of those identifying between or beyond any binarism with respect to gender and/or sexuality. Yet the evidence I have presented of situated examples wherein Ardhanārīśvara is positively linked with "third gender" folks is at odds with other scholars, including Zwilling and Sweet, who note a stark discrepancy between "the androgyne as a divine or mythic figure" and "human embodiments of sexual and gender atypicality;" they suggest that the former sees veneration and the latter derision.[134] While there are surely ample examples supporting this sentiment, my work indicates that there are nowadays instances where the gap between human and divine realms has been shrinking (even to the point of *kinnars* claiming demigod status) as discourses correlating Ardhanārīśvara with "third gender" peoples have gained traction. As per Ashton, it would appear that nondual thought, in conjunction with the Ardhanārīśvara image, held a latent message and promise of inclusivity

[132] Reddy, *With Respect to Sex*, 223.

[133] Geoff Ashton, "Divine Androgyny and the Play of Self-Recognition: Revisiting Some Issues in Gender Theory through an Unorthodox Interpretation of Ardhanārīśvara," in *The Bloomsbury Research Handbook of Indian Philosophy and Gender*, ed. Veena R. Howard (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 185.

[134] See Leonard Zwilling and Michael Sweet, "The Evolution of Third-Sex Constructs in Ancient India: A Study in Ambiguity," in *Invented Identities: The Interplay of Gender, Religion and Politics in India*, eds. J. Leslie and M. McGee (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 120.

that is now playing out in the social sphere as the marginalized become increasingly mainstreamed through, for example, growing Kinnar Akhāḍā ascendancy.

This is not to say that nondual philosophy was explicitly emphasized in framing Ardhanārīśvara as a legitimizer of gender and/or sexual variance in the contexts considered in this chapter. Rather, to this end the form of Ardhanārīśvara seems primarily pointed to and interpreted as proof of a deity not beholden to gender and sexual binaries. In this connection, *kinnars* are simply and empoweringly connected to Ardhanārīśvara for being likewise "half female and half male." Of course, the term "*kinnar*" is important here, too. As with Ardhanārīśvara, this "third gender" designator is foregrounded given its association with Hindu religiosity, and it is strategically paired with the deity in efforts to appeal to the predominantly Hindu Indian public in service of uplifting long-oppressed peoples so that life may increasingly resemble what Rāma allegedly foretold.

Conclusion

In examining Ardhanārīśvara within the Kinnar Akhāḍā, I have recognized unique applications and framings of the figure. The *akhāḍā*, itself situated within a sphere of renunciate orders, extensively utilizes images of the deity. Thus, Ardhanārīśvara has become noticeably visible in related contexts, including the Kumbha Melā camps and Śrī Ardhanārīśvara Mahākālī Mandir discussed in this chapter. This use of Ardhanārīśvara imagery reflects its selection as principal deity of the Kinnar Akhāḍā. Importantly, the figure also reflects and effectuates their principal aims: counteracting questionable *akhāḍā* (and, more broadly, societal) norms and providing a Hindu space for "third gender" peoples as an alternative to *hijṛā* circles containing Islamic features.

Laxmi Narayan Tripathi selected Ardhanārīśvara as tutelary deity of the Kinnar Akhāḍā for mirroring the "half female and half male" nature of its *kinnar* members. Of course, one can see in Ardhanārīśvara the male-identifying and female-identifying members permitted within the order, too. Inclusion of "third gender" and female individuals decidedly contrasts with the androcentrism prevalent throughout the *akhāḍā* system. Thus, in the present chapter, I observed that Ardhanārīśvara jointly emblemizes Kinnar Akhāḍā membership and their general opposition to patriarchy. Additionally, I delineated how Ardhanārīśvara serves as an image of both asceticism and eroticism, reflective of the Kinnar Akhāḍā in that these seemingly contrasting orientations are present within the order in contradistinction to the ideal of *brahmacārin* celibacy recognized by the *akhāḍā* system more broadly.

This chapter demonstrates that a bond with Ardhanārīśvara exists not only for self-identifying *hijṛās*, but for the *kinnar*-identifying, too. Importantly, as patron deity of the Kinnar Akhāḍā, Ardhanārīśvara has become linked to this increasingly adopted "*kinnar*" designation. The implications are significant. For one, Ardhanārīśvara has factored into the reclamation (or repurposing) of "*kinnar*" as a word signalling gender and/or sexual variance, given that the deity is framed as reflecting and legitimizing *kinnars* in this respect. Moreover, Ardhanārīśvara

is now associated with an organization accused of saffronizing “third gender” identities and spaces for, in part, foregrounding the Hindu-affiliated term (i.e., *kinnar*). Although Laxmi has dismissed any connection to Hindutva politics in this regard, her alignment with certain Hindutva positions and predominant incorporation of Hindu (rather than Islamic) aspects of *hijṛā* life in shaping Kinnar Akhāḍā identity has left her detractors unconvinced. Nevertheless, the *akhāḍā* aims to facilitate upward social mobility for “third gender” populations through its growing place within the Hindu world. Part and parcel of this project, Ardhanārīśvara is presented as a Hindu figure who validates *kinnars* and others of “third gender” ilk.

Interestingly, Kinnar Akhāḍā framings of Ardhanārīśvara notably contrast with those present in the Durgā Pūjā festivities highlighted in the previous chapter. The Kinnar Akhāḍā presents itself and Ardhanārīśvara as expressly Hindu whereas Anindya and Ranjita distanced their Durgā Pūjā efforts involving Ardhanārīśvara from any strictly Hindu framing. In fact, Anindya and her co-facilitators even discontinued their use of Ardhanārīśvara for fear of being pegged as Hindutva subscribers. Moreover, the Durgā Pūjā contexts in question largely saw Ardhanārīśvara described as a form of the Goddess while Laxmi leans towards presenting Ardhanārīśvara as a form of Śiva in line with her generally Śaiva orientation. These differences do not preclude the presence of significant similarities, however. Although there are clearly different strategies at play within them, both sets of contexts (those of the Durgā Pūjā and those of the Kinnar Akhāḍā) see the bifurcated nature of Ardhanārīśvara emphasized and linked to “third gender” populations in attempts to rectify their marginalized status.

Following my examination of Ardhanārīśvara in the Durgā Pūjā festivals of Kolkata, this chapter thoroughly analyzed the figure as situated within the Kinnar Akhāḍā. The following chapter of this dissertation will engage Ardhanārīśvara within one final set of contexts: the Ardhanārīśvara temple of Tiruchengode and associated localities.

Chapter 6
Red and White Stripes: Ardhanārīśvara in Tiruchengode and Associated Sites

Introduction

This chapter analyzes Ardhanārīśvara in and around its temple at Tiruchengode, Tamil Nadu, the largest site dedicated to the deity in India, and within linked localities (chiefly Tiruvannamalai). In this connection, I examine local conceptualizations and utilizations of Ardhanārīśvara in relation to its iconographic expressions, sacred narratives, and ritual life. This serves to paint a picture of the figure within lived religiosity. Importantly, the findings yielded by this study meaningfully contrast with those presented in the last two chapters; within Tiruchengode, Ardhanārīśvara is not primarily characterized as connected to people whose identities oppose fixed gender and/or sexual binaries. Throughout the course of this chapter, I demonstrate that the composite deity is instead popularly framed as an image of husband and wife and/or mother and father in perfection. Moreover, playing off the idea that the marital and parental statuses of Śiva and Pārvatī are reflected in its form, Ardhanārīśvara is innovatively engaged by devotees who believe the figure can alleviate concerns regarding heterosexual relations and associated family life. Yet although the deity is emphasized in relation to different populations and aims than those examined in the preceding chapters, I conclude that there is also overlap with the Durgā Pūjā and Kinnar Akhāḍā contexts previously considered in that Ardhanārīśvara is likewise pragmatically engaged in hopes of securing more desirable social circumstances.

I first visited the Ardhanārīśvara temple of Tiruchengode in 2014 while undertaking research for my MA thesis. My engagement with this location may have stopped there had I not encountered the work of Clark-Decès in *The Encounter Never Ends: A Return to the Field of Tamil Rituals*. In this book, she speaks of the merit in reconsidering and/or expanding on previous research while succinctly concluding that "there is always something more to say."[1] Inspired, I decided to revisit some matters I had hoped to one day address in Tiruchengode – festivals within the city and its unique ties to Tiruvannamalai being but two examples – and began (re)considering this site in relation to the dissertation at hand. Indeed, Tiruchengode and its Ardhanārīśvara temple offered intriguing potential in terms of the current project. The previous two chapters demonstrated that Ardhanārīśvara has taken on new meanings and applications within recent "third gender" affairs, and I wondered how these insights might juxtapose with the present-day understandings and operations of Ardhanārīśvara at and surrounding its long-established Tiruchengode temple. Accordingly, in November and December of 2022, I undertook fieldwork in Tiruchengode once again.

[1] Isabelle Clark-Decès, *The Encounter Never Ends: A Return to the Field of Tamil Rituals* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007). In fact, the words quoted here serve as both the title and parting insight of her final chapter which begins on page 103.

Whereas Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 largely drew upon formal interviews conducted with key players involved in the contexts considered, this chapter draws on organic interactions had with a range of interlocutors – devotees, temple priests, locals, pilgrims, unwed individuals, married couples, cisgender and transgender people – encountered during my time in Tiruchengode. While this city is the primary place of interest herein, its connections to Tiruvannamalai are such that I often discuss them in tandem, and, in fact, both were visited as part of my 2022 fieldwork. Related observations, information gleaned from my interlocutors, and research involving pertinent academic and popular sources inform the ensuing pages. To a lesser extent, I also look to my experiences during a short 2018 stay in Tiruvannamalai and my 2014 research in Tiruchengode.

Tiruchengode and Tiruvannamalai

Tiruchengode is a city in the Namakkal District of Tamil Nadu, the southernmost state of India. According to the last Indian census (which remains 2011 at the time of this writing due to the COVID-19 pandemic-induced postponement of the planned 2021 census), the city of Tiruchengode boasts a population of roughly 100,000 people.[2] Based on the fact that this marks an 11% increase from the 2001 census (and my own perception of city growth relative to my 2014 visit), I suspect that the Tiruchengode population reflected continued steady growth beyond its 2011 numbers as of my 2022 fieldwork.[3] The 2011 census also concluded that the vast majority of Tiruchengode residents identify as Hindu, a statistic that I believe still holds true.[4]

In this connection, Tiruchengode has notably been labeled a "temple city," and even a "monocentric temple town," for having its Kailāsanāthar temple – a Śaiva site – considered the "most integrated urban element."[5] According to Trouillet, the "temple city" marker may be applied to those locales containing a temple that has impactfully shaped the growth and morphological structure of a city.[6] Yet he clarifies that "the temples of such towns rarely

[2] This statistic may be found, for example, on the Tiruchengode Municipality website. See Tiruchengode Municipality, "Municipality at a Glance," *Tiruchengode Municipality*, https://www.tnurbantree.tn.gov.in/thiruchengode/ (accessed May 2023).

[3] For mention of this 11% increase, see Bhuvaneswari Raman, "Patterns and Practices of Spatial Transformation in Non-Metros: The Case of Tiruchengode," *Economic and Political Weekly* 49, no. 22 (May 2014): 46.

[4] For a table detailing the religious demographics of locations within Tamil Nadu, see Ministry of Home Affairs, "Census Tables," *Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner*, https://censusindia.gov.in/census.website/data/census-tables (accessed May 2023).

[5] Tiruchengode is described as a "temple city" in Pierre-Yves Trouillet, "Hindu Temples and Development of Localities in Tamil Nadu (South India)," in *Subaltern Urbanization in India: An Introduction to the Dynamics of Ordinary Towns*, eds. Eric Denis and Marie-Hélène Zérah (New Delhi: Springer India, 2017), 7. Description of Tiruchengode as a "monocentric temple town" from N. Lakshmi Thilagam and Uttam Kumar Banerjee, "The morphological characteristics of medieval temple towns of Tamil Nadu," *Environment and Planning B: Planning and Design* 43, no. 1 (2016): 26. The other phrase quoted is from page 31.

[6] See Trouillet, "Hindu Temples and Development of Localities in Tamil Nadu (South India)," 7.

structure their whole socio-economic orientation today."[7] Tiruchengode, for example, is widely known for its borewell industry.[8] Nonetheless, Trouillet rightly recognizes that the largest concentration of retail shops and trading activities cluster around the Kailāsanāthar temple.[9] However, it would be reaching to posit that this site is critical to local identity or that it "provides the locality with its singularity and gives it a symbolic importance . . . creating a certain centrality," something Trouillet suggests is oftentimes the case for sites of this sort.[10] Tiruchengode is, after all, also home to (and more widely known for) the largest, most elaborate temple complex in India to have Ardhanārīśvara as its presiding deity. Appropriately, the *rājagopuram* (royal monumental entranceway) of this site overlooks the city from the Nāgagiri Hill of its southeastern limits. The Ardhanārīśvara temple at Tiruchengode is linked to another "temple city" as well, though: Tiruvannamalai.[11]

The city of Tiruvannamalai is a popular Śaiva pilgrimage hub located in the Tiruvannamalai District of present-day Tamil Nadu.[12] It is famously home to the expansive Aruṇāchaleśvara (alternatively, the Aṇṇāmalaiyār) temple complex, situated at the base of the Aruṇāchala Hill on its eastern side.[13] Though the temple complex is no doubt important, the hill itself marks where Śiva appeared as a *jyotirliṅga*, a "column of sheer light or fire."[14] In fact, Eck states that the *liṅga* of the Aruṇāchaleśvara temple *garbhagṛha* is "a representative of the natural *jyotirlinga*, which is the mountain itself."[15] In this connection, Shulman highlights that devotees understand the present Aruṇāchala Hill to be the petrified remnant of this revelatory pillar of fire.[16] The fiery connotations of the site are further emphasized by its place among the *pañcabhūta mahāliṅgas*, "the five great *lingas* of the five elements."[17] Each of these *liṅgas* is

[7] Trouillet, "Hindu Temples and Development of Localities in Tamil Nadu (South India)," 7.

[8] For an analysis of the borewell industry in Tiruchengode, see Yann Philippe Tastevin, "From Ox-Carts to Borewell Rigs: Maintenance, Manufacture and Innovation in Tiruchengode," in *Subaltern Urbanization in India: An Introduction to the Dynamics of Ordinary Towns*, eds. Eric Denis and Marie-Hélène Zérah (New Delhi: Springer India, 2017).

[9] Trouillet, "Hindu Temples and Development of Localities in Tamil Nadu (South India)," 8.

[10] Trouillet, "Hindu Temples and Development of Localities in Tamil Nadu (South India)," 7. By "sites of this sort" I mean those that render its surrounding municipality a "temple city" in the mind of Trouillet.

[11] Tiruvannamalai is also recognized as a "temple city" by Trouillet; see Trouillet, "Hindu Temples and Development of Localities in Tamil Nadu (South India)," 7.

[12] I have noticed a few recent publications erroneously describe Tiruvannamalai as being in the North Arcot District. However, this switched as of 1989. Its change is mentioned, for example, in A. Sakthivel, "Sri Arunachaleswarar Temple: A Historical Study," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 70 (2009-2012): 951.

[13] The location is described as such in Thilagam and Banerjee, "The morphological characteristics of medieval temple towns of Tamil Nadu," 10.

[14] Diana Eck, *India: A Sacred Geography* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2012), 191.

[15] Eck, *India: A Sacred Geography*, 255.

[16] David Dean Shulman, *Tamil Temple Myths: Sacrifice and Divine Marriage in the South Indian Śaiva Tradition* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980), 42. Here, Shulman also presents a well-known story accounting for why Śiva appeared as this radiant column. In it, Viṣṇu and Brahmā argue over which of them is superior. Śiva appears as an endless, fiery *liṅga* and Viṣṇu and Brahmā, as a means of winning their debate, compete to see who can reach its limit. In the end, neither Viṣṇu and Brahmā can do so, implying that Śiva is limitless and ultimately greatest among them.

[17] Eck, *India: A Sacred Geography*, 253.

associated with one of the five elements – earth, water, fire, air, and ether – and housed in a *pañcabhūta sthalam* (i.e., a temple tied to this fivefold grouping); among them, the Aruṇāchaleśvara temple accounts for the *liṅga* of fire.[18] In addition, this site is connected to Tiruchengode.

Shulman writes that the mountain (i.e., the Nāgagiri Hill) of Tiruchengode is considered the mountain (i.e., the Aruṇāchala Hill) of Tiruvannamalai, albeit present under a different name.[19] He also notes that both hills are identified with Mount Meru (the center of the Universe in Hindu cosmology) or fragments of it.[20] The official website of the Tiruchengode Ardhanārīśvara temple also connects these locations; it describes a battle between deities that led to the splitting of Mount Meru; one shard landed in Tiruvannamalai and another in Tiruchengode, accounting for the Aruṇāchala Hill and the Nāgagiri Hill, respectively.[21] Interestingly, Tiruchengode and Tiruvannamalai are connected by more than sacred topography. For example, Hiltebeitel states: "Pārvatī's estrangement from Śiva in the Tiruvannamalai myth – her playfully ignorant mistake of covering Śiva's eyes with her hands and plunging the worlds into darkness – is also linked at Tiruchengode . . . with the myth of the goddess's penance to reclaim Śiva's left side."[22]

In the summer of 2018, I was in Tamil Nadu when this Hiltebeitel quote came to mind. Intrigued that he linked its lore to Tiruchengode, I altered my travel course to include a brief stop in Tiruvannamalai. As I approached its massive Aruṇāchaleśvara temple complex, I was surprised to notice a significant presence of images incorporating Ardhanārīśvara for sale; they present the deity as central and foregrounded before the silvery *rājagopuram* of the temple compound, behind which sits the Aruṇāchala Hill (see Figure 22). It was made evident by these pictures that, as with Tiruchengode, Ardhanārīśvara holds special meaning in Tiruvannamalai.

---

[18] Shulman, *Tamil Temple Myths,* 82. Here Shulman informs the reader of all the place-element pairings: he states that "the five constituent elements – earth, air (or wind), fire, water, and "ether" (*ākāśa*) – have been distributed over a set of five shrines . . . Kāñci, Kāḷatti, Tiruvaṇṇāmalai, Tiruvāṉaikkā, and Citamparam, respectively."

[19] Shulman, *Tamil Temple Myths*, 42.

[20] Shulman, *Tamil Temple Myths*, 42.

[21] The deities in question are Vāyu and Ādi Śeṣa, and the story of their battle will be examined in a coming section. Interestingly, the website also mentions a third shard of Meru landing in Sri Lanka, though does not specify where. Note the website (one I accessed frequently before) was down at the time of my fieldwork and of this writing. However, its domain name still appears on a sign near the gate at which visitors travelling to the Tiruchengode Ardhanārīśvara temple by vehicle must pay. I inquired about my inability to access the webpage and was told payments were not made to keep the site alive (but that it would be reinstated soon). In the meantime, I have continued to access the site through its archived form. One may do the same through the following link: https://web.archive.org/web/20200117154458/http://arthanareeswarar.com/English/. The reader may assume hereafter that I have accessed the temple website in this manner from May 2023 onwards.

[22] Alf Hiltebeitel, *The Cult of Draupadī Vol. 1*: Mythologies: From Gingee to Kurukṣetra. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1991), 447. Note that Hiltebeitel cites Adiceam in presenting this connection; it appears he cites her for having presented the Tiruchengode variant in question. See Adiceam, "Les images de Śiva dans l'Inde du Sud, VI. Ardhanārīśvara," *Arts Asiatique* 17 (1968): 145-146.

However, the degree to which this is true for the latter would only become clear some years later as I read the *Aruṇācalapurāṇam* and returned to the city.

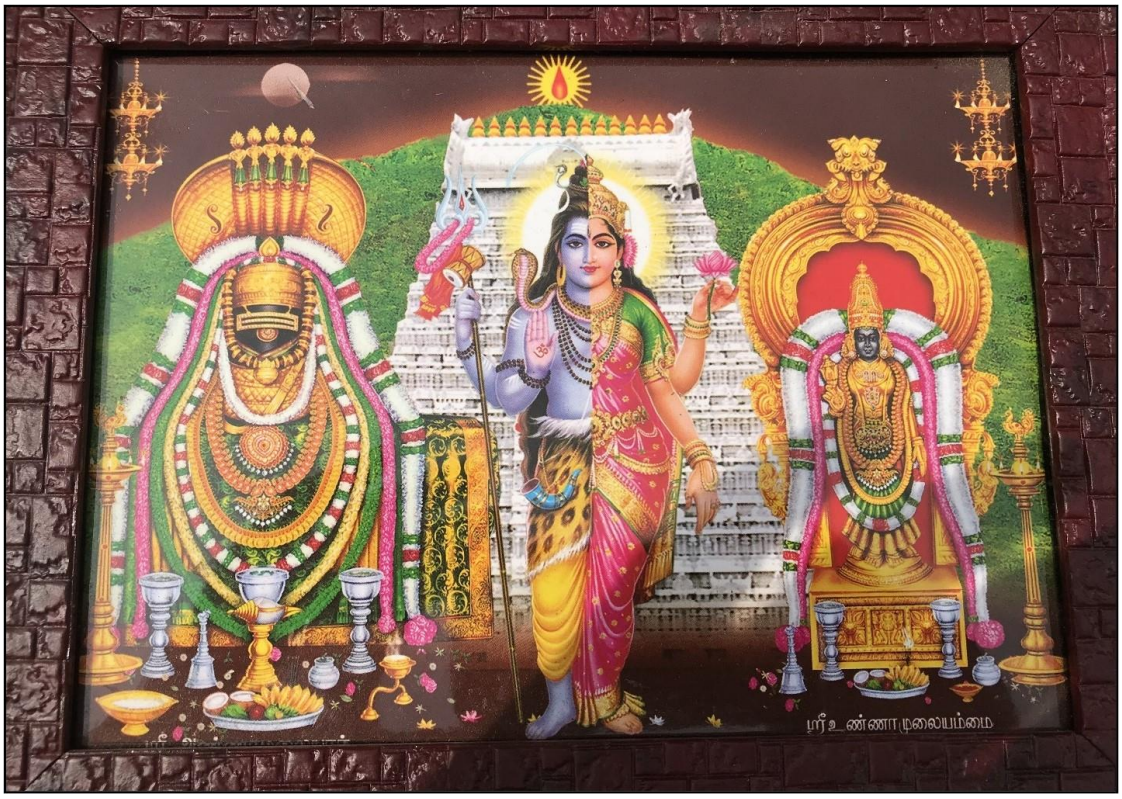

Figure 22: Ardhanārīśvara before the *rājagopuram* of the Aruṇāchaleśvara temple.

Ardhanārīśvara and the Aruṇācalapurāṇam

The *Aruṇācalapurāṇam* is the *sthalapurāṇa* of Tiruvannamalai. *Sthalapurāṇas* are "ancient stories of a sacred site" and draw together the traditions and legends relating to a particular shrine and its surrounding environment.[23] This may include information on its geographical location and features, its temples and festivals, associated figures, and the purported benefits of visiting it.[24] In the introduction to his translation of the *Aruṇācalapurāṇam*, Robert Butler attributes the original work to Ellapa Navalar, a 17th-century poet said to have received initiation into a Śaiva *maṭha*, the Dharmapura Ātīnam.[25] Butler writes that Ellapa Navalar cites the *Śiva Purāṇa* and *Liṅga Purāṇa* as sources inspiring his composition and adds that the "Aruṇācala Māhātmya" section of the *Skanda Purāṇa* is "an obvious source for the majority of [*Aruṇācalapurāṇam*] material."[26] He also explains that two major themes interweave throughout the text. First, is the greatness of Aruṇācala (the famous

[23] The quote is from Shulman, *Tamil Temple Myths*, 4.

[24] My descriptions of *sthalapurāṇas* draw from Shulman, *Tamil Temple Myths*, 4 and Robert Butler, Introduction to *Sri Arunachala Puranam* by Saiva Ellapa Navalar, trans. Robert Butler (Tiruvannamalai: Sri Ramanasramam, 2015), xiv.

[25] See Butler, Introduction to *Sri Arunachala Puranam*, xiv.

[26] Butler, Introduction to *Sri Arunachala Puranam*, xv-xvi.

hill of Tiruvannamalai) as evidenced by its initial manifestation as a pillar of fire. Second, is the story of how Pārvatī and Śiva came to unite "indissolubly" as Ardhanārīśvara.[27] The latter episode is of particular interest and will be summarized below.

After Pārvatī naïvely "committed the fault of [playfully] covering Śiva's eyes and momentarily plunging the world in darkness," she remorsefully left for Kanchipuram and was instructed there by Śiva to travel to Aruṇāchala and undertake *tapas* in a forest hut.[28] While there, "[the] gods . . . complained to her of the mischief caused by the demon Mahiṣa."[29] In turn, Pārvatī angrily commanded Durgā to destroy Mahiṣa in battle; Durgā eventually beheaded Mahiṣa and trampled his cranium underfoot.[30] Durgā then noticed a crystal *liṅga* at the sliced throat of Mahiṣa, grabbed hold of it, and brought it to goddess Pārvatī; when Pārvatī received the *liṅga*, it became stuck to her hand.[31] She commanded Durgā to strike the Aruṇācala mountain which then gushed with water; Pārvatī bathed in these waters for a month, serving to "expiate the evil of killing a devotee of Śiva" (i.e., Mahiṣa).[32] Upon absolution, the *liṅga* dropped from her hand. Then, after Pārvatī circumambulated Aruṇācala, Śiva appeared, granted her request to embody his left half, and made a pronouncement that the *Aruṇācalapurāṇam* presents as follows:[33]

> "Manifesting as female and male, we have thus divided the beings of this world. I became the lingam, and you the pedestal just below it. But what you think of as 'I' and 'You' are not in reality two. Coexisting like the tree and its inner core, We dwell as one." (397)
>
> You gave up your body entirely for Us and took birth on the Himalaya mountain. It is only just that We should confer upon you one half of Our own body. Maiden, may you dwell as the left half of Ourself!" Thus, in grace did He embrace Her with his fair arms, as merging together, they became one. (398)

Today this event remains enshrined within the local landscape. In November of 2022, I visited an Ardhanārīśvara temple in Tiruvannamalai marking the very spot that Pārvatī entered the left side of Śiva. A stone staircase found at the end of a narrow, unassuming street leads to the temple which sits atop a modest hill, known as Pavaḷa Kuṉṟu or "Coral Hill," to the north of

---

[27] These two themes identified on Butler, Introduction to *Sri Arunachala Puranam*, xiii.

[28] The quote is from Hiltebeitel, *The Cult of Draupadī Vol. 1*, 380.

[29] Shulman, *Tamil Temple* Myths, 179.

[30] This battle is presented in Saiva Ellapa Navalar, *Sri Arunachala Puranam*, trans. Robert Butler, 108-11. Butler, in notes presented on 117, describes that Durgā is addressed as Vintai; Hiltebeitel does the same. See Hiltebeitel, *The Cult of Draupadī Vol. 1*, 380.

[31] See Saiva Ellapa Navalar, *Sri Arunachala Puranam*, trans. Robert Butler, 111. Here Butler simply writes "(that symbol of) the Lord" while Shulman (see Shulman, *Tamil Temple Myths*, 179) and Hiltebeitel (see Hiltebeitel, *The Cult of Draupadī Vol. 1*, 381) render this as *liṅga* and specify its crystal nature (a detail they attribute to a work of commentary).

[32] Shulman, *Tamil Temple Myths*, 179.

[33] These verses taken from Saiva Ellapa Navalar, *Sri Arunachala Puranam*, trans. Robert Butler, 115.

the Aruṇāchaleśvara temple (see Figure 23). The site is associated with Śrī Ramana Maharshi who there briefly resided and imparted a lesson to his mother on the wisdom of silence and surrender in 1898.[34] On a wall of the pillared temple porchway, there is a sign that reiterates this instruction and attributes a recent (2016) renovation of the temple to the Tiruvannamalai-based Sri Ramanasramam (i.e., an ashram linked to the above sage). The sign also affirms this as the spot Pārvatī was absorbed into Śiva as a result of her austerities (see Figure 24). The exterior of the temple still looked freshly painted on my visit; the walls present a uniform grey while its more ornate features, including the *vimāna*, are a pale yellow.[35] Inside the temple, positioned under the *vimāna*, is its *garbhagṛha* housing an Ardhanārīśvara *mūrti*, an anthropomorphic icon with a white, male garment over its right side and a red, female garment draped over its left.

Figure 23: Temple for Ardhanārīśvara in Tiruvannamalai.

In reading the *Aruṇācalapurāṇam* and visiting this Ardhanārīśvara temple, it became clear why so many images of the deity were being sold in shops around the Aruṇāchaleśvara temple; the consummation of Ardhanārīśvara (and concurrent revelation of divine nonduality) is understood to have occurred within the borders of present-day Tiruvannamalai. However, in a variant of the above narrative, Tiruvannamalai is a stopover and not the final destination at which Śiva and Pārvatī fused; that honour belongs to Tiruchengode.

[34] Śrī Ramana Maharshi was an Indian *guru* particularly linked to Tiruvannamalai and its Aruṇācala Hill. For details on his life, see Arvind Sharma, *Ramana Maharshi: The Sage of Arunachala* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2006).

[35] *Vimāna* refers to the pyramidal architectural structure present over temple *garbhagṛhas*. For a description, see Fredrick Bunce, *A Dictionary of Buddhist and Hindu Iconography: Objectives, Devices, Concepts, Rites, and Related Items* (New Delhi: D.K. Printworld, 1997), 337.

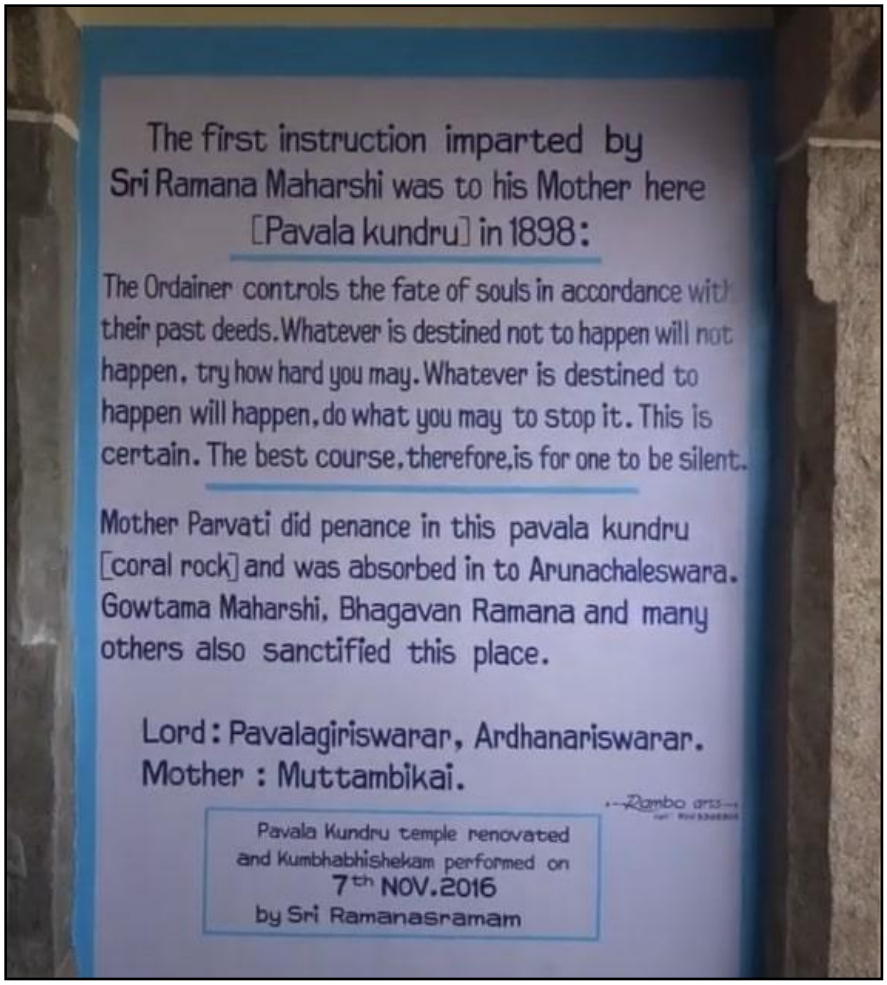

Figure 24: Sign stating where Śiva and Pārvatī became Ardhanārīśvara.

A Tiruchengode Variant

Hiltebeitel was correct to point out that aspects of the above Tiruvannamalai episode are present in Tiruchengode lore, namely the unwitting incitation of universal darkness by Pārvatī and, following a subsequent penance, her merger with Śiva.[36] However, he does not elaborate the Tiruchengode rendition beyond highlighting the presence of these happenings. The following will delineate the narrative in question, drawing from the Tiruchengode Ardhanārīśvara temple website, conversations I had with local devotees in and around their hallowed hilltop compound, and a Tiruchengode *sthalapurāṇa* as cited by Adiceam.[37]

The story goes that Murukaṉ, son of Śiva and Pārvatī, was unable to obtain a divine fruit from his parents.[38] Frustrated, he left their Mount Kailāsa home and headed to South India. The

[36] See Hiltebeitel, *The Cult of Draupadī Vol. 1*, 447.

[37] See Adiceam, "Les images de Śiva dans l'Inde du Sud, VI. Ardhanārīśvara," 145-146. In a footnote on 145 she identifies the *sthalapurāṇa*. I was unable to locate such a *sthalapurāṇa* myself in Tiruchengode.

[38] Although not confirmed, I imagine this reflects the incorporation of a variation of the *jñāna paḻam* (fruit of wisdom) narrative. In it, Murukaṉ and his brother Gaṇeśa are made to compete for the "fruit of wisdom" by

departure of their son distressed Pārvatī greatly. To improve her spirits, Śiva took Pārvatī to a garden. There, as in the Tiruvannamalai myth, she playfully covered the eyes of Śiva and plunged the cosmos into darkness. During the interval of darkness, the *ṛṣis* (sages) were unable to perform their rituals adequately; when his eyes reopened, they pleaded with Śiva to ensure such a blackout never repeated. Addressing the issue, Pārvatī suggested that she and Śiva coalesce into a single form, believing this to be a precautionary measure. Śiva agreed but instructed her to first undertake penances. Her austerities began on a Himālaya mountain peak, continued in Kashi (i.e. Varanasi), then in Kanchipuram. As with the Tiruvannamalai legend, Śiva appeared to Pārvatī in Kanchipuram and instructed her to proceed to Tiruvannamalai. However, in this version, Śiva appeared again in Tiruvannamalai and informed Pārvatī that the runaway Murukaṉ was staying in Tiruchengode; she was told to reunite with their son and continue her penance there. After travelling from Tiruvannamalai to Tiruchengode, Pārvatī resumed her austerities on a lotus floating in a pond atop the Nāgagiri Hill. Śiva was pleased and rewarded Pārvatī with his left side, prompting the gods and *ṛṣis* to gather and celebrate their singular divine form.[39] The foregoing narrative effectively situates the origin of Ardhanārīśvara within Tiruchengode. Importantly, an Ardhanārīśvara-Tiruchengode connection is also made present on the local Nāgagiri Hill for bearing an impressive Ardhanārīśvara temple.

The Nāgagiri Hill and Its Ardhanārīśvara Temple

The Hindu traditions of Tamil Nadu demonstrate a propensity towards localizing myths; local temples and connected environs are tied to narratives depicting their extraordinary formation or discovery.[40] It is common for a specific site to be framed as superior to others, be associated with numerous benefits gained by worshipping there, and/or be tied to boons considered uniquely available in that place.[41] Moreover, such sites are often described as the center of the Universe, locus of creation, and/or the single spot where salvation is offered.[42] Tiruchengode boasts a narrative detailing the origin of its Nāgagiri Hill that reflects a number of these themes. The following again draws from the Ardhanārīśvara temple website and numerous conversations had with local devotees.

It is said that a group of sages prompted Vāyu, the Vedic god of winds, and Ādi Śeṣa, the multi-headed cosmic serpent, to fight in order to prove who was more powerful.[43] During the battle, Ādi Śeṣa braced Mount Meru by covering it with the snaky hoods of its multiple heads.

---

their father Śiva who challenges them to thrice circle the world. Murukaṉ interprets the instructions literally and sets off on this time-consuming feat. Meanwhile, Gaṇeśa circles his parents, Śiva and Pārvatī, and is awarded the fruit. Feeling duped, Murukaṉ ran away to what is now Palani, Tamil Nadu where his parents eventually consoled him.

[39] A version of this Tiruchengode variant is presented in Adiceam, "Les images de Śiva dans l'Inde du Sud, VI. Ardhanārīśvara," 145-146.

[40] Shulman, *Tamil Temple Myths,* 17.

[41] Shulman, *Tamil Temple Myths*, 17.

[42] Shulman, *Tamil Temple Myths*, 18

[43] Acknowledgement of this myth series involving Vāyu and Ādi Śeṣa is found in Rachel Storm, *Indian Mythology: Legends of India, Tibet, and Sri Lanka* (New Delhi: Anness Publishing, 2006), 84-85.

In turn, Vāyu tried to force Ādi Śeṣa off by creating an enormous amount of air pressure. However, the attempt was futile, provoking Vāyu to withhold all breathable air from the atmosphere. The *devas* and sages began to suffer and begged Ādi Śeṣa to pacify Vāyu by letting go of Mount Meru, yet Ādi Śeṣa remained fixed. Finally, Vāyu applied so much force that the top of Mount Meru was split apart. The heads of Ādi Śeṣa, each clinging to a portion of Meru, were cast off into different places. Tiruchengode is considered one of the locations, with its Nāgagiri Hill accounting for a piece of Meru.[44] Thus, Tiruchengode and its Ardhanārīśvara temple demonstrate ties to Mount Meru, center of the Universe, given their connection to Nāgagiri.

Figure 25: Ādi Śeṣa on the Nāgagiri hillside.

The imposing Nāgagiri Hill stands towards the southeastern limits of the city.[45] The ambitious may scale much of it by taking around 1200 steps that zigzag up the hillside, though *maṇḍapas* providing shade and respite are interspersed throughout for those who traverse in this manner.[46] Along one stretch of stairs, there is a 60-foot carving of the snakelike Ādi Śeṣa,

[44] In fact, the reddish colouring of the Nāgagiri hill is said to be caused by the blood of this battle. Again, the other locations accounting for the Meru fragments are understood to be in Tiruvannamalai and Sri Lanka.

[45] The temple itself is reportedly situated 650 feet above the city, and there remains significantly more to climb of the hill from this point.

[46] The temple website lists the exact count of steps at 1206. *Maṇḍapas* are hall-like structures. The hillside *maṇḍapas* in question serve as pavilions whose roofs are supported by pillars (and in some cases walls, as well);

reinforcing the Nāgagiri Hill moniker while commemorating its origin story (see Figure 25).[47] The serpentine emphasis does not stop there. A priest I met while climbing the hillside steps said that worshipping upon the Nāgagiri Hill helps people eradicate the ill effects of *nāgadoṣa*, which one accrues due to the astrological influence of Ketu (depicted as a headless serpent) and/or Rāhu (depicted as a bodyless serpent head).[48] Though the sinuous carving is worth taking in, some wish to ascend Nāgagiri via a method that bypasses it. A vehicle road may also be taken, and packed buses transporting devotees from the city center do so many times daily. The crammed buses and frequency of transport reflect interest in the major highlight of Nāgagiri: the Ardhanārīśvara temple compound (see Figure 26) to which the hillside staircase and vehicle road lead.

Figure 26: Aerial, street, and zoomed-in views of the Ardhanārīśvara temple complex.[49]

What is commonly referred to as the Ardhanārīśvara temple of Tiruchengode may be more accurately thought of as a complex or compound (see Figure 27) – and a Śaiva one at that. The name Śiva is twice hung on the outer walls of the temple complex in giant Tamil script, and the ancillary figures within the compound further emphasize the god. Featured depictions of two other Śaiva forms may be found along the north wall of the grounds. If one traverses eastward down this wall after entering via the *rājagopuram*, there is a depiction of Bhairava; if

---

they are always at least semi-open in that a minimum of one side remains agape. For a description of *maṇḍapas*, see Bunce, *A Dictionary of Buddhist and Hindu Iconography*, 175.

[47] Nāgagiri translates to "snake mountain," and the carving of Ādi Śeṣa is no doubt a nod to his fight with Vāyu.

[48] Ketu and Rāhu refer to descending and ascending lunar nodes, respectively; they are two of nine celestial bodies, collectively known as the *navagraha*, considered to influence human life as per *jyotiṣa* (a system of Hindu astrology).

[49] The rightmost of these merged images comes from the temple Wikipedia page. See Wikipedia, s.v., "Ardhanareeswarar Temple," *Wikipedia Foundation*, last modified 15 September 2024, 18:20, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ardhanareeswarar_Temple (accessed March 2025).

one were to go westward after entry, Naṭarāja can be seen. Near Naṭarāja there is small shrine containing a *liṅga* composed of 1008 smaller *liṅgas*. Along the inside of the southern complex wall are small statues of the Nyānmārs, 63 Tamil poet-saints renowned for their Śaiva devotion. The inner western wall boasts a fivefold grouping of *liṅgas*, representing the *pañcabhūta*, and an icon of Gaṇeśa, son to Śiva. Another of his sons, Murukaṉ, occupies a prominent place within the compound. In fact, there is a common wall shared between the structure containing his east-facing *garbhagṛha* and that which contains the west-facing *garbhagṛha of* Ardhanārīśvara.[50] These *garbhagṛhas* are marked with *vimānas* as is the one for Viṣṇu found in a separate construction within the complex. Interestingly, in this context, Viṣṇu is considered brother to Pārvatī and is therefore included in the Śiva family fold as his brother-in-law. In line with the commonly held view that Ardhanārīśvara is a form of Śiva, an installation of his bull *vāhana* is positioned facing the main Ardhanārīśvara shrine.[51] However, it is this Ardhanārīśvara form, comprised of both Śiva and Pārvatī, that is certainly emphasized. In fact, despite the impressive structure housing Murukaṉ, Ardhanārīśvara is popularly regarded as presiding deity of the overall complex, which is commonly referred to as the Ardhanārīśvara temple. Accordingly, the bulk of pictures sold outside its walls are of this composite figure, and there are several archways present over the Nāgagiri hillside stairway and motorable road that are ornamented with Ardhanārīśvara sculptures.

It is unclear how long Ardhanārīśvara has been associated with the location. The priests and devotees I encountered on Nāgagiri provided myriad dates for the Ardhanārīśvara temple, ranging from a few hundred years back to time immemorial. The earliest explicit epigraphic reference to Ardhanārīśvara at the site is a 1522 CE inscription on a *maṇḍapa* within the temple complex; it mentions festival observances in the *caṉṉati* (shrine) of Ardhanārīśvara.[52] For his part, Manoj, a researcher of temples in the region, suggests that the Ardhanārīśvara *mūrti* within the *garbhagṛha* contains "stylistic traits [appearing] to be of the Chola period datable to 10th century CE;" he does not, however, describe these attributes.[53] Yet an even older presence of Ardhanārīśvara has been indicated. Tiruñāṉa Campantar, a Śaiva poet-saint who lived circa the 7th century CE, composed a poem (enshrined within the *Tēvāram*) extolling Koṭimāṭacceṅkuṉrūr (modern-day Tiruchengode) that begins with describing Śiva as

[50] Given the presence of both Śiva and Pārvatī within Ardhanārīśvara there is no separate Devī shrine present, something one commonly finds at the Śaiva temples of Tamil Nadu.

[51] Furthermore, the temple priests of Tiruchengode maintain adherence to Śaiva Siddhānta (a school of thought evidently holding Śiva as supreme). In this connection, I was told that the associated *Kāmikāgama* and *Kāraṇāgama* texts inform temple ritual life.

[52] Interestingly, dated well before this are a couple of 13th-century rock inscriptions found on Nāgagiri that tie Murukaṉ to Tiruchengode. Dr. Leslie Orr, my PhD supervisor, graciously provided me with relevant inscriptional information.

[53] G. Manoj, *Temple Architecture of South India (Salem Region)* (New Delhi: Bharitya Kala Prakashan, 2017), 153-154. This claim is particularly interesting given the idiosyncrasies of the *mūrti* and the *svayambhū* nature widely ascribed to it; these features and *svayambhū* status will be discussed in the next section.

Ardhanārīśvara while linking him to this place.[54] Thus, it may well be that an Ardhanārīśvara site of worship existed in some form in what is now Tiruchengode since at least around the 7th century. Nevertheless, the focus on Ardhanārīśvara in Tiruchengode today is great and owes largely to the fact that locals believe their Ardhanārīśvara temple exists in a class unto itself.

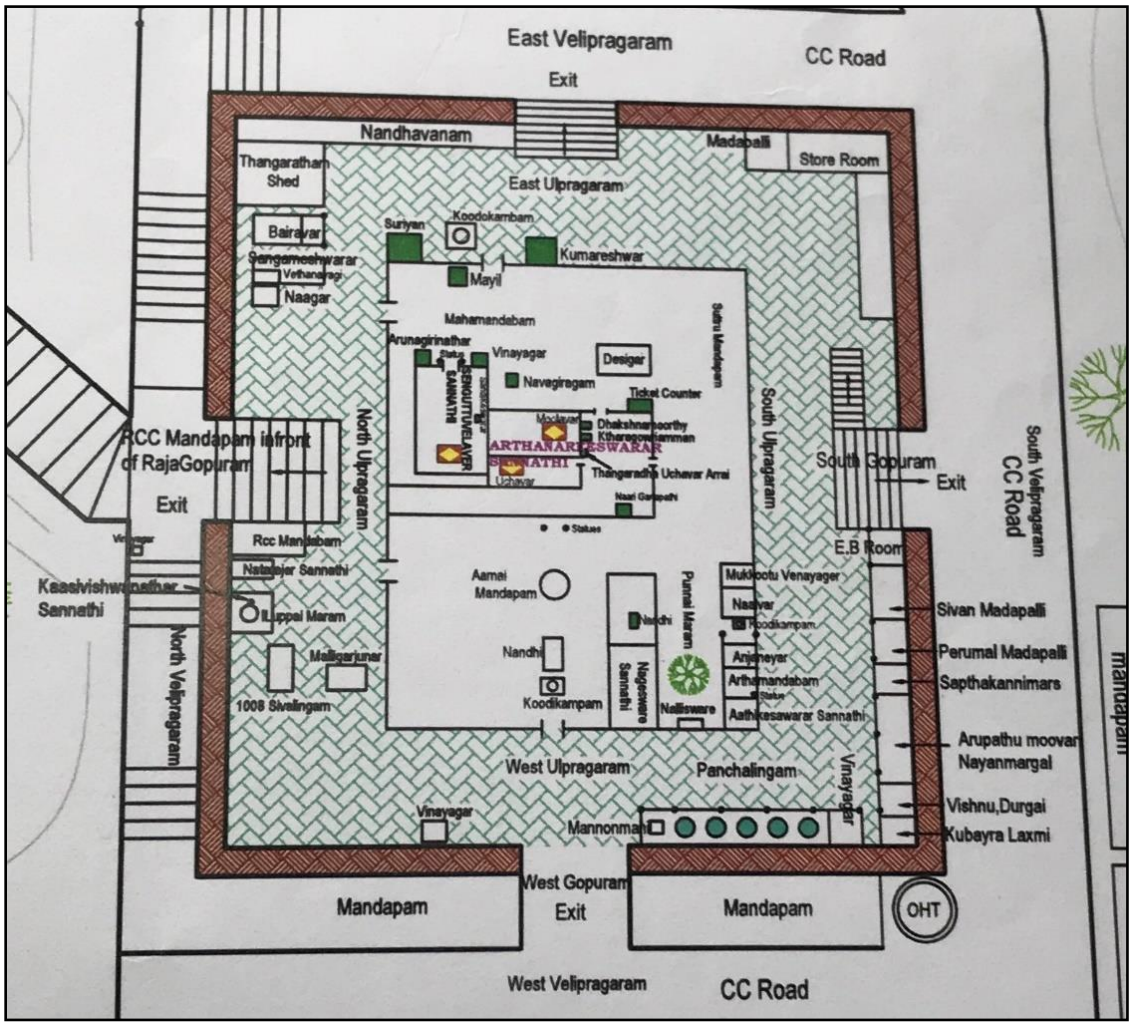

Figure 27: Layout of the Ardhanārīśvara temple compound.[55]

The Ardhanārīśvara Icons of Tiruchengode

In my 2014 and 2022 stays in Tiruchengode, I had dozens upon dozens of people, both locals and visitors, describe its Ardhanārīśvara temple as the only one in India. Of course, this is not exactly the case. Recall, for instance, the Ardhanārīśvara temple of Tiruvannamalai

[54] See the first five stanzas of Tev 1.107 via Subramanya Ayyar, Jean-Luc Chevillard, and S.A.S. Sarma, eds. "Digital Tēvāram," https://www.ifpindia.org/digitaldb/site/digital_tevaram/ (accessed May 2023).

[55] A worker within a temple trust office near the Tiruchengode Kailāsanāthar temple allowed me to take a picture of this layout. The leftmost yellow diamond marks the Murukaṉ *garbhagṛha* icon, the diamond to its right marks the Ardhanārīśvara processional *mūrti*, and the rightmost diamond marks the Ardhanārīśvara *garbhagṛha* icon.

mentioned earlier. Beyond these two, I have personally visited eleven more.[56] However, one priest did differentiate the Tiruchengode temple from other sites where Ardhanārīśvara serves as presiding deity. He explained that while there are other Ardhanārīśvara temples, Tiruchengode bears the only *svayambhū* Ardhanārīśvara *mūrti*. This is to say that its origins are of a spontaneous and miraculous nature devoid of human involvement.[57]

Figure 28: The *mūlamūrti* of Ardhanārīśvara in Tiruchengode.[58]

Indeed, the *mūlamūrti* icon fixed in the *garbhagṛha* is certainly unique.[59] This Ardhanārīśvara figure stands around six feet tall and appears greyish with largely indiscernible features (see Figure 28). Though Manoj attributes this to being "worn out due to continuous worship," a few interlocuters (one priest and two devotees) described its unrefined appearance as the consequence of being divinely comprised of *navapāṣāṇam*, an elixir that may remedy

[56] I have visited one in Mandi, Himachal Pradesh; two within Hardwar, Uttarakhand; one in Guptkashi, Uttarakhand; one in Majra Mahadev, Uttarakhand; one in Pilibhit, Uttar Pradesh; one in Chennai, Tamil Nadu; one in Rishivandiyam, Tamil Nadu; one in Vasudevanallur, Tamil Nadu; one in Makalikudi, Tamil Nadu; and, lastly, the one in Delhi established by Bhavani Ma of the Kinnar Akhāḍā.

[57] A description of *svayambhū* is found on Diana Eck, *Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 107.

[58] Image found through an online search. See Sivam, "Ardhanareeswarar Temple, Tiruchengode," *Sarvam Sivamayam* (blog), https://eshwarthegod.blogspot.com/2012/01/ardhanareeswarar-temple-tiruchengode.html (accessed December 2025).

[59] *Mūlamūrti* refers to the permanent image of a deity found within a temple *garbhagṛha*. See Bunce, *A Dictionary of Buddhist and Hindu Iconography*, 192.

nine poisons.[60] Female garments drape the left half of the figure while the right side is adorned with male clothing. The right, male half also holds a downward-facing "unidentified object" resembling a staff or sceptre from roughly head height while the female half rests its hand on the hip of that side.[61] When devotees congregate for *darśan*, priests lift the draping garbs and expose two legs of differing sizes (i.e., differing sexes) to evince its gynandromorphic nature.[62] Thus, the *mūrti* has an anthropomorphic flavour, which is particularly remarkable for the region and a relative rarity for Śaiva *garbhagṛha*s in general (which more regularly contain a *liṅga*).[63]

Two other notable Ardhanārīśvara icons are housed within the temple complex, and both appear reminiscent of the *mūlamūrti*. In the antechamber before the *garbhagṛha* (from which devotees take *darśan*), there is a relatively small Ardhanārīśvara *mūrti* kept in a holding cage. It resembles the *mūlamūrti* in terms of posture and accoutrements (i.e., downward-facing sceptre and clothing signalling its male and female halves) though differs in containing a bejewelled, slanted crown; discernible facial features owing to human craftsmanship; and golden constitution.[64] This goldenness speaks to the fact that the icon rides upon what is known as the "golden chariot" throughout evening processions around the temple grounds; these can occur daily outside of festival times during which the icon remains caged. Therefore, it is not to be confused with the *utsavar mūrti* used in festivals.[65] The festival icon, during its downtime, rests within a holding cell found in a passageway linking the aforementioned antechamber to the pillared *maṇḍapas* of the compound. This *utsavar mūrti* stands a few feet tall and echoes the design of its golden counterpart (see Figure 29). However, rather than being primarily gold,

---

[60] The quote is from Manoj, *Temple Architecture of South India (Salem Region)*, 153-154. Interestingly, *navapāṣāṇam* is also described as being comprised of said nine poisons. See Brigette Sebastia, "Preserving Identity or Promoting Safety? The Issue of Mercury in Siddha Medicine: A Brake on the Crossing of Frontier," *Asiatische Studien - Études Asiatiques* 69, no. 4 (2015): 946.

[61] The quote is from Manoj, *Temple Architecture of South India (Salem Region)*, 154. Indeed, no one was able to specify what the object is upon my asking.

[62] *Darśan* refers to the "auspicious sight" that occurs between a devotee and the divine when in view of each other. For an analysis of the term, see Eck, *Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*, 3-10.

[63] The uniqueness of their *mūlamūrti* is even highlighted when not visible. During certain ritual undertakings, a curtain is pulled across the *garbhagṛha* entranceway so that priests may perform their tasks out of view. Interestingly, this curtain itself bears an image of Ardhanārīśvara. Above, I say "particularly remarkable for the region" as Manoj suggests all other Śaiva temples in the region contain a *liṅga* in their *garbhagṛhas*. See Manoj, *Temple Architecture of South India (Salem Region)*, 153. It is worth noting that (although existing within other districts) the other Ardhanārīśvara temples I have visited in Tamil Nadu also contain anthropomorphic *mūrtis*.

[64] In this, and other artisan-crafted versions, the "unidentified object" appears as a more defined sceptre. Again, no one was able to explain the significance of its downward-facing position. However, when the *gadā* (mace) of Hanumān is held upside down, it signifies orderliness and contentment in society. Perhaps there is a similar meaning to this feature of Ardhanārīśvara. The temple website describes the crown as intentionally slanted to mark the "majesty and glory of the Lord." It is slanted towards the Śiva half of Ardhanārīśvara, perhaps signalling a *jaṭāmukuṭa* (a crown of matted hair associated with Śiva), and possibly pointing to his primacy. Although its facial features are here discernible, it is worth noting that there is no demarcation of maleness or femaleness on the face; it is not noticeably split into halves.

[65] *Utsavar mūrti* refers to a processional image. See Bunce, *A Dictionary of Buddhist and Hindu Iconography*, 321.

this icon is comprised of *pañchaloha*, a five-metal alloy, and appears largely encased by silver.[66] It also bears a wedding *tāḷi* (a necklace gifted to brides by their grooms), suggesting that Ardhanārīśvara reflects the marital status of Śiva and Pārvatī.[67]

Figure 29: Ardhanārīśvara *utsavar mūrti* with wedding *tāḷi*.[68]

The distinctiveness of these icons is not lost on the Tiruchengode populace; Ardhanārīśvara is prominently represented in the city through iterations derivative of the *garbhagṛha* icon and processional *mūrtis* (see Figure 30). Images of this sort depict the deity with a slanted headpiece, arm bangles, and necklaces. The right arm is made to hold a sceptre, while the left hand is placed on a protruded hip. The figure, often framed by a decorative archway, is generally presented uniformly flesh coloured or white. Its leggings are divided by colour down the middle; the left half is green, and the right half is red. The only other bodily demarcation of male and female halves is an oft-exposed female breast on the left half of the figure.[69] Ardhanārīśvara is often shown accompanied by Bhṛṅgī, an intransigent devotee, in these depictions.[70] Such images are found, for example, on business signboards; merchandise, including necklaces and reusable bags, in the temple market area; as stickers on vehicle windows; upon posters in city shops; on the sides of buses that transport patrons to and from

[66] For a description of *pañchaloha*, see Bunce, *A Dictionary of Buddhist and Hindu Iconography*, 219.

[67] The golden *mūrti* may also bear a *tāḷi*, but I am unsure.

[68] The image is one found through an online search. See R. Selvaraj, "Arthanareeswarar Images," *Pinterest*, https://in.pinterest.com/pin/797137202826037624/ (accessed December 2024).

[69] I was told a singular breast is present on the *mūlamūrti* and processional images, though I was unable to see for the flowers and clothing adorning them.

[70] Bhṛṅgī, who will be discussed at length, also accompanies Ardhanārīśvara in the form of a small icon within the *garbhagṛha*.

the hilltop temple; and as statuettes offered in *pūjā* supply stores as a local specialty (see Figure 31).[71]

Figure 30: The Ardhanārīśvara of Tiruchengode.

Ardhanārīśvara evidently has a full life both within and outside its Tiruchengode temple. I was thankfully able to enjoy a front-row seat to an exceptional example of this fullness when attending a festival in the city, Kārtikai Dīpa. Although I spent the event wholly in Tiruchengode, its proceedings relate to celebrations held in Tiruvannamalai, and it is best to introduce the festival in relation to the latter city before detailing my experiences in the former.

Figure 31: Ardhanārīśvara on the side of a bus, a reusable bag, and a business signboard.

[71] I inquired about the cost of one such statuette at a local store and was taken aback by how much pricier it was versus those of other deities. The shop owner explained that while images of other deities are mass produced for sale across India, the unique Ardhanārīśvara offering was made in limited supply and exclusively sold in Tiruchengode.

Ardhanārīśvara and the Kārtikai Dīpa

Tiruvannamalai is home to the great Kārtikai Dīpa festival. As its name suggests, the festival takes place in the month of Kārtikai (mid-November to mid-December) and relates to the god Kārttikeya (also known as Murukaṉ, Subrahmaṇya, or Skanda).[72] Some versions of his origin story describe the interrupted lovemaking of Śiva and Pārvatī, which resulted in Śiva inadvertently spilling his seed. This seminal fluid was received by Agni, the Vedic fire god, who then deposited it into the Ganges. There, after thousands of years, it ultimately developed into a child who was eventually discovered and reared by six female figures, personifications of stars in a cluster known as Kṛttikā (whose members are of the Pleiades constellation).[73] To oblige them all, this child grew five extra heads, hence Kārttikeya is often depicted with six.[74] The stars of Kṛttikā also constitute one of the *nakṣatras*, asterisms known as "lunar mansions" that reflect days within sidereal months.[75] Kārtikai Dīpa is generally celebrated during the *pūrṇimā* (full moon) of the Kārtikai month on the day in which Bharaṇī, another *nakṣatra*, is predominant at dawn while that of Kṛttikā becomes ascendant in the evening.[76] Some consider this an auspicious time that marks the birth of Kārttikeya. However, the festival is celebrated with greater grandeur in relation to two other divine occurrences: the appearance of Śiva as a *jyotirliṅga* and the granting of his left side to Pārvatī.

In Tiruvannamalai, the Kārtikai Dīpa is popularly framed as the culmination of ten days of festivities known as *brahmotsava*.[77] This culminating day begins its own lasting zenith during the "*pradoṣa* hour" (an auspicious time just before and after sunset), as a fire, referred to as the *mahādīpa*, is lit on top of the Aruṇāchala Hill to both commemorate and annually reinstate the presence of Śiva as a fiery column.[78] The fire itself, which can be seen from miles around, is contained within a large metal cauldron while tonnes of ghee (literally) ensure it burns well over a week. Yet this fire also fulfills a promise made by Śiva to Viṣṇu and Brahmā after he had

[72] The names Kārtikai and Kārttikeya both derive from the Kṛttikā star cluster discussed in this section.

[73] The association between Kṛttikā and Pleiades is noted in Judy Pugh, "Into the almanac: time, meaning, and action in north Indian society," *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 17, no. 1 (1983): 32.

[74] This narrative is found in James Lochtefeld, *The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Hinduism* (New York: The Rosen Publishing Group, Inc., 2002), 655-656.

[75] This description of *nakṣatras* is drawn from Harry Falk, "The Early Use of *Nakṣatras*," in *The Interactions of Ancient Astral Science,* ed. David Brown (Bremen: Hempen Verlag, 2018), 527.

[76] Francoise L'Hernault and Marie-Louise Reiniche, *Tiruvaṇṇāmalai: Rites et fêtes* (Pondicherry: Institut français de Pondichéry, 1989), 103. I say "generally" for these phenomena do not always align; such was the case during my 2022 fieldwork.

[77] L'Hernault and Reiniche make a distinction between *bhramotsava* and Kārtikai Dīpa, though they acknowledge that one seamlessly flows into the other, resulting in the popular framing noted above. See L'Hernault and Reiniche *Tiruvaṇṇāmalai: Rites et fêtes*, 63. For details of the *brahmotsava* proceedings see pages 63-107.

[78] "*Pradoṣa* hour" is mentioned in B. Palani Raj, *Hail Arunachala* (Chennai: Global Printing Press, 2017), 163.

appeared to them as a *jyotirliṅga*.[79] Their exchange is presented within the *Aruṇācalapurāṇam* as follows:[80]

> "Immaculate Lord, conceal this beauteous light and make of it a mountain like all others," cried [Brahmā] and [Viṣṇu]. Whereupon the Lord made of it a mountain like all others. And then those two devotees said, "May you gracefully grant that each day a bright light be seen upon this summit." The Lord in his compassion spoke these words: (158)
>
> "In the month of *Karttikai* when the moon is in the constellation of *Krittika* I shall mount a bright beacon upon the summit of this mountain. They who see that most excellent light will endure and prosper upon the earth, free of disease and hunger. . . (159)

Today, when the peak of the Aruṇāchala Hill sets afire as Śiva foretold, an Ardhanārīśvara *mūrti* is briefly brought out into a courtyard of the Aruṇāchaleśvara temple complex.[81] This fleeting occurrence marks the only time in the year that Ardhanārīśvara appears and recalls another episode from the *Aruṇācalapurāṇam* involving the *jyotirliṅga* as well as the composite deity. The penance of Pārvatī that resulted in her merger with Śiva included the circumambulation of the Aruṇāchala Hill on the day of Kārtikai Dīpa (at least in the Tiruvannamalai variant). According to the *Aruṇācalapurāṇam*, this was undertaken due to instructions that actually issued from the fiery radiance of Śiva:[82]

> On the holy day in the month of *Karttikai*, as prescribed by the Saiva Agamas, praises were offered to Him who bears on his forehead an eye of fire, at which time a blaze sprang up on the summit of the mountain, and within that fire the Lord arose as a bright effulgence, as bright as many crores of suns and impossible to describe; speaking the words, "Fair maid, you shall perform *pradakshina* of this excellent mountain," it instantly disappeared. (388)

The *Aruṇācalapurāṇam* goes on to say that this circumambulatory walk was similar to the one Pārvatī made around the sacred fire present in her marriage to Śiva. And just as marriage saw them enjoined in matrimony, the completion of her *pradakṣiṇā* saw Pārvatī become one with Śiva in the form of Ardhanārīśvara described as follows: [83]

> On one side were ruddy braided locks, stacked one upon the other, and on the other, a lady's curls; on one side was a garland of *kondrai* blossoms, and on the other, a fragrant

---

[79] See footnote 16 as it describes the background narrative in which Śiva appears as the *jyotirliṅga*.

[80] These verses from Saiva Ellapa Navalar, *Sri Arunachala Puranam*, trans. Robert Butler, 47.

[81] L'Hernault and Reiniche, *Tiruvaṇṇāmalai: Rites et fêtes*, 108. Photographs of this Ardhanārīśvara *mūrti* may be seen on 110 and on Raj, *Hail Arunachala*, 162.

[82] This verse from Saiva Ellapa Navalar, *Sri Arunachala Puranam*, trans. Robert Butler, 113.

[83] *Pradakṣiṇā* refers to circumambulating a revered figure, object, or place. See Bunce, *A Dictionary of Buddhist and Hindu Iconography*, 232. For the description of this circumambulation as similar to the one at their marriage, see Saiva Ellapa Navalar, *Sri Arunachala Puranam*, trans. Robert Butler, 114; for the verses presented, see 115.

> flower garland; on one side was a sharp-tonged trident, and on the other, a blooming water lily; on one side was a sturdy warrior's ankle ring, and on the other, a delicate lady's anklet. (399)
>
> One side was green in colour, the other was of a coral hue; on one side was a girdled breast, and on the other, a fine bare chest; one hand formed the *varada mudra*, and the other the *abhya mudra*, which removes all fear . . . (400)

Given that Tiruchengode is situated within a variant of this penitent narrative, it sees its Nāgagiri Hill specially linked with Aruṇāchala, and it is home to an established Ardhanārīśvara temple, I wondered how its own Kārtikai Dīpa celebrations were observed. To investigate this matter, I attended the festival there in December of 2022 following my stay in Tiruvannamalai.

The Kārtikai Dīpa of Tiruchengode

Tiruchengode celebrated Kārtikai Dīpa the day after Tiruvannamalai the year I was there. A local acquaintance explained to me that Tiruvannamalai places greater importance on the transition of the Bharaṇī *nakṣatra* into Kṛttikā while Tiruchengode emphasizes the presence of the full moon; apparently, these phenomena did not quite line up in 2022. Unlike at Tiruvannamalai, Tiruchengode did not observe *brahmotsava* prior to its Kārtikai Dīpa celebrations. In fact, other than women creating *kōlams* (geometric designs) in front of shops a day or two beforehand, there was little foreshadowing of the coming festival in either city or temple life.[84] Nevertheless, when the big day arrived, the energy at the temple was palpable.

I walked up the Nāgagiri Hill on the morning of December 7th to spend the occasion in and around the temple. By the time I entered the temple, after making my standard visits with the shopkeepers outside, the Ardhanārīśvara *utsavar mūrti* was already centrally positioned in one of its pillared *maṇḍapas* awaiting *abhiṣeka*.[85] A temple priest encouraged me to watch and told me that the *utsavar mūrti* of Viṣṇu was also set to receive *abhiṣeka*, given that these two deities would be taken outside the temple complex walls to view large fires set for each of them later that evening. In Tiruchengode, three major fires were set on Kārtikai Dīpa: the two for Ardhanārīśvara and Viṣṇu just mentioned and another at the peak of Nāgagiri. It was the latter site I first encountered that day, having made the uphill trek after taking in the *abhiṣeka* of Ardhanārīśvara with the many congregated devotees.

---

[84] *Kōlams* have a variety of purposes; for example, they serve decorative functions during celebratory times, invite prosperity into homes (outside of which they are often made), and honour Bhūmi, goddess of earth. For an interesting study involving *kōlaṁs* (particularly with respect to the latter purpose I listed), see Vijaya Rettakudi Nagarajan, "The Earth as Bhu Devi: Toward a Theory of 'Embedded Ecologies' in Folk Hinduism," in *Purifying the Earthly Body of God*, ed. Lance E. Nelson (New York: SUNY Press, 1998).

[85] *Abhiṣeka* is described as ritual anointing and/or bathing. For a study of the practice, see Sushil Jain, "On the Indian Ritual of Abhiṣeka and Mahāmastakābhiṣeka of Bāhubali," *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute* 78, no. 1/4 (1997).

I had seen pictures online of the festival in Tiruchengode from previous years, and I was particularly taken by one in which an image of Ardhanārīśvara (as uniquely depicted in Tiruchengode) was found on what looked like a barrel shooting flames out its top.[86] I was eager to see this sizeable cylinder and curious whether its Ardhanārīśvara marking reflected a special framing of the figure within the Kārtikai Dīpa of Tiruchengode. Upon exiting the western *gopuram* after the abovementioned *abhiṣeka*, someone told me it was already placed at the top of Nāgagiri. I excitedly set off for my own ascent but quickly learned that it was only *en route* to the peak. As I reached the inclining pathway to the east of the temple, I saw a large group of men with the container in question and many canisters of fuel, in the form of ghee, for its fire. Most of the men were wearing yellow shirts with an image of Ardhanārīśvara printed in red on the right of the chest. They introduced themselves as festival volunteers and encouraged me to help them carry everything up. For a portion of the way, my shoulder was one of several on which a bamboo shaft fastened to the barrel rested. My remaining climb was spent carrying a surprisingly weighty tin of ghee.

Figure 32: Kārtikai Dīpa barrel featuring Ardhanārīśvara.

When the big festival vessel finally found its place on the summit (see Figure 32), the volunteers and onlookers let out a series of victorious cheers. Thankfully, cooking supplies and

[86] I have seen images of the Tiruvannamalai Kārtikai Dīpa cauldron from past years sporting an image of Ardhanārīśvara, too. However, in these cases Ardhanārīśvara resembles the "contemporary poster art" depiction described as such by Goldberg. For an example, see Ellen Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman*: *Ardhanārīśvara in Indian and Feminist Perspective* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2002), 50. To see an instance of the Tiruvannamalai cauldron bearing an Ardhanārīśvara image, see Raj, *Hail Arunachala*, 157.

crates of bottled water were also hauled up the hill so that everyone could refuel and rehydrate. As I took part in my own replenishment, a volunteer coordinator introduced himself to me and shed light on the Dīpa of Tiruchengode. He explained that it was the first year this metal barrel was being used and that it was modelled after the one in Tiruvannamalai. In fact, much was attributed to the traditions of Tiruvannamalai. He said that the Kārtikai Dīpa of Tiruchengode indeed celebrates the union of Pārvatī and Śiva, but he explained that their composite form was first taken on in Tiruvannamalai. He then said that long ago Ardhanārīśvara left Tiruvannamalai for Tiruchengode given that the former was already equipped with a presiding deity while the latter was not. Although this volunteer coordinator was the only person to tell me this narrative specifically, he was not alone in emphasizing Tiruvannamalai in the context of Kārtikai Dīpa. Indeed, most people I spoke to, including temple priests, suggested that Tiruchengode celebrates the festival simply because Tiruvannamalai does and gave no indication that the festival was specially framed to grant primacy to their own locale. However, this is not to say unique features were absent.

That in 2022 Tiruchengode celebrated Kārtikai Dīpa the day after Tiruvannamalai has already been noted. In fact, without specifying to what extent, the volunteer coordinator told me that their hilltop fire must always follow that of Aruṇācala, an ordering that again appeared to acknowledge the pre-eminence of Tiruvannamalai. This piqued my curiosity as to the sequence of impending fires in Tiruchengode; recall that in addition to the one atop Nāgagiri, two would be lit relatively downhill near the Ardhanārīśvara temple. I was told that the fire on the summit would ignite first, at 6 p.m., followed by the fires for Ardhanārīśvara and Viṣṇu below shortly thereafter. Certainly, I was interested in watching the topmost ignition. However, I learned that it would be lit three consecutive days, barring rain (which indeed occurred, unfortunately), whereas the other two fires would smolder out about an hour after their lighting. Thus, for fear of missing them, I opted to watch the fires of Ardhanārīśvara and Viṣṇu. Plus, other than its barrel being stickered with an image of Ardhanārīśvara as found throughout Tiruchengode, the hilltop fire basically echoed the blazing Aruṇācala. The other two, however, seemed like more idiosyncratic incinerations.

Within the Ardhanārīśvara temple complex, three deities have *garbhagṛhas* marked with *vimānas* and an associated *dhvajastambha*: Ardhanārīśvara, Viṣṇu, and Murukaṉ.[87] Therefore, when I learned that only the *utsavar mūrtis* of Ardhanārīśvara and Viṣṇu were to have *abhiṣeka* and be brought out to view fires set in their name, I naturally wondered about Murukaṉ. When asked about this, a temple priest explained that Murukaṉ, too, would have a fire if his *utsavar mūrti* were not away at another temple in Tiruchengode. Though no further elaboration was provided, it could be that the festival image of Murukaṉ was brought elsewhere to celebrate his birthday, given that it coincides with Kārtikai Dīpa. Nonetheless, no fire would be lit for him on Nāgagiri, given his absence. When I asked about the purpose of

[87] *Dhvajastambha* refers to a temple flagstaff. For a description, see Bunce, *A Dictionary of Buddhist and Hindu Iconography*, 83.

these fires, the priest said they would be lit for the enjoyment of the *utsavar mūrtis* whose presence outside the temple complex walls would simultaneously provide *darśan* for all, including those in the city below.

As night fell and *pūrṇimā* ascended, the *utsavar mūrtis* came out and did *pradakṣiṇā* around the temple grounds alongside a parade of priests and devotees. Following this circumambulation, Viṣṇu and Ardhanārīśvara were brought a relatively short walk west of the temple grounds and situated on a lookout point from which the "Ardhanārīśvara fire" could be viewed (see Figure 33). One of the priests told me that the grand pile of leaves and branches present would only be set aflame once the deities took their place. Sure enough, soon after they were properly positioned, enormous flames erupted and danced in front of the crowd that had gathered. This "Ardhanārīśvara fire" (see Figure 34) occurred near where the temple bus would daily drop off its passengers. Once the fire had smoldered out, around 45 minutes later, the crowd turned and walked up the roadway from this spot to take in the "Viṣṇu fire" which was situated nearer the temple complex. This, too, only began once the deities were walked back and placed in view of the impending burn. The "Viṣṇu fire" was the smaller of the two by a significant margin and received less emphasis in general for good reason.

Figure 33: Viṣṇu and Ardhanārīśvara *utsavar mūrtis* and a close-up of the latter.

In my days leading up to the Kārtikai Dīpa in Tiruchengode, I learned that people congregated on Nāgagiri with the hopes of seeing Ardhanārīśvara in its namesake fire; more specifically, it is understood that if one takes a picture of the "Ardhanārīśvara fire," the image may capture something akin to the Ardhanārīśvara form. A man tending a shop outside the temple even told me that one year a photo reflected Ardhanārīśvara so perfectly that it made the front page of a local newspaper. He and other shopkeepers told me that they printed and framed the image in sellable form and quickly sold out of stock. A temple priest confirmed the practice of attempting to capture the fiery Ardhanārīśvara via camera and described the

possibility as miraculous. Thus, to view the "Ardhanārīśvara fire" is a sacred thing, and the priest explained that devotees accordingly come with the hopes their lives will be blessed as a result. Although people surely come with all kinds of hopes and dreams in their hearts, very specific blessing are also sought from Ardhanārīśvara.

Figure 34: The "Ardhanārīśvara fire."

The Efficacy of Ardhanārīśvara in Tiruchengode

During my first visit to Tiruchengode in 2014, numerous interlocuters described the balanced halves of Śiva and Pārvatī that constitute Ardhanārīśvara as representing the equality of members within male-female marital units. Explanations involved identification of these two deities as married and was regularly followed by listing Gaṇeśa and Murukaṉ as their children. This parental framing is reflected in an epithet of Ardhanārīśvara used in Tiruchengode, Ammaiyappaṉ, which means "mother-father" in Tamil. A figure that is half male and half female clearly lends itself well to improvised descriptions of being husband and wife and/or mother and father; impromptu explanations of Ardhanārīśvara as a marital model for humans are easy enough to devise, too. However, my 2022 fieldwork undertaken nearly nine years later would not only show that such conceptualizations have remained remarkably consistent but that they are deeply held. This is particularly evident in the devotional lives of those who pragmatically engage Ardhanārīśvara regarding their own marital and/or familial concerns.

Upon returning to Tiruchengode after many years away, I was eager to revisit the Ardhanārīśvara temple overlooking the city, and I opted to work my way there via the pedestrian method immediately after securing my lodging. Midway on this uphill undertaking, a

man from Madurai, who had been resting in a hillside *maṇḍapa*, introduced himself to me and asked if we could do the rest of the climb together. I readily agreed, and he described making the journey to Tiruchengode with the hope that the *darśan* of Ardhanārīśvara would secure him a marriage. I asked if Ardhanārīśvara was known to give such blessings; he confirmed this and additionally described Ardhanārīśvara as able to secure pregnancies and helpful in the production of breastmilk. This encounter, on my first day back in the city, set the tone for much of what I encountered while there.

After my visits to the Ardhanārīśvara temple, I often found someone who had parked nearby and asked if I could hop in their vehicle for the ride back down. Without fail, I was enthusiastically invited in, and the drives were spent with me answering questions about myself and Canada while my own queries were responded to. During one conversation, a man from Erode, Tamil Nadu, told me that Ardhanārīśvara represents a marriage in harmony, one that includes mutual understanding between spouses. Another trip saw me join a man from Bengaluru, Karnataka, who also described Ardhanārīśvara in terms of matrimony; he said that people come from all over to either have Ardhanārīśvara ensure a marriage or bless an existing one. This was confirmed by two male-female couples on subsequent drives. The first couple, from Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, who had been married five years, were visiting the temple to replenish their conjugal blessedness. The other couple, from Erode, spent their 40th wedding anniversary at the temple the day we met. They visited the temple to thank Ardhanārīśvara for their long-lasting wedlock and said that their daughter, who had an upcoming wedding, would visit the temple the evening after her morning ceremony to guarantee her marriage played out fruitfully.

The emphasis on marital and/or familial matters was present within the temple grounds, too. Throughout my stay, I saw well over a dozen male-female couples walking around in formal attire with garlands around each of their necks. One of these couples, from Trichy, Tamil Nadu, disclosed that they had married a month prior; they were there to thank Ardhanārīśvara for the successful matchmaking that saw them wed and to seek blessings as they embarked on married life together. It surprised me that their wedding had taken place a while back given their apparel, and after another couple, local to Tiruchengode, provided a similar timeline, I asked a priest if this was true for all the garlanded pairs. He elucidated that couples visit the temple after their weddings, feeling indebted to Ardhanārīśvara. These visits involve bringing flowery garlands before the *mūlamūrti* which, through priestly intercessions, become blessed by the deity and returned to the couples who then walk adorned around the temple grounds; this is understood to aid marriages moving forward.

The same priest told me that unmarried devotees pay to specially partake in “golden chariot” processions; these processions see the golden Ardhanārīśvara *mūrti* of the *garbhagṛha* antechamber placed upon an ornate palanquin and circumambulated around the temple

grounds from within its walls.[88] Although costly, he said that many do so with the understanding that marriage would soon be realized. Noticing that I was without partner, he suggested that I seize this golden opportunity myself. After clarifying that I had a fiancée back in Canada, he urged me to return to the temple after marrying as Ardhanārīśvara, through the "golden chariot" procession, would secure us a child within a year.[89] The priest explained the particular effectiveness of Ardhanārīśvara with respect to such matters as owing to the nuptial status of Śiva and Pārvatī in tandem with their role as parents. Far beyond the scope of Gaṇeśa and Murukaṉ (whom, as mentioned, were often cited when Śiva and Pārvatī were described as progenitors), all creation was described as under their parenthood.

He, and others, also told me of a "mingling festival," the Kedara Gaurī Vrata, observed in Tiruchengode each year. This *vrata* (a vowed observance) honours the merging of Śiva and Pārvatī, which yielded the Ardhanārīśvara form, and the penances Pārvatī performed (for throwing the Universe into a blackout) to ensure this coalescence occurred.[90] The priest said that her penance lasted 21,000 years, so people now, in remembrance, undertake their own, more realistic, observances for 21 days, the last of which aligns with Divālī, the Indian "festival of lights." For these 21 days, participants keep a circlet of string tied on one wrist, fast, and take *darśan* of Ardhanārīśvara daily, he explained.[91] A few locals specified that this *vrata* is primarily observed by women, though not exclusively.[92] At the end of these three weeks, the *utsavar mūrti* is paraded around the temple to commemorate the achievement of Ardhanārīśvara by Śiva and Pārvatī.[93] Once again, the priest stated that unmarried people perform this *vrata* so as to get married and that married folks do so to attain marital bliss and/or children.[94]

---

[88] Although devotees can pay to participate in this process, the processions will occur, nonetheless. My understanding is that if one sponsors the activity, it is done in their name and in honour of their wishes.

[89] Alternatively, a *kalpavṛkṣa* (wish-fulfilling tree) near the Nāgagiri summit could potentially aid me all the same; apparently, the wishes most assuredly granted are those centering on remedying singleness and childlessness. The reader may recall that I was married in a ceremony in Kolkata. Given that this was not legally binding (and that a wedding would also occur in Canada), I described my partner as a fiancée (who had by this time returned home).

[90] For an extensive treatment of *vratas*, particularly as they pertain to women, see Anne Mackenzie Pearson, *"Because It Gives Me Peace of Mind:" Ritual Fasts in the Religious Lives of Hindu Women* (New York: SUNY Press, 1996).

[91] I was told that this fast does not mean complete abstention from food but that certain foods (meat was named) are avoided and that all food consumed should have been present during *pūjā* (devotional worship).

[92] This is reflective of the fact that *vratas*, as noted in scholarship, are primarily observed by women. For example, see Mary McGee, "Desired Fruits: Motive and Intention in the Votive Rites of Hindu Women," in *Roles and Rituals for Hindu Women*, ed. Julia Leslie (Cranbury, New Jersey: Associated University Press, 1991), 71.

[93] It is worth noting that Pārvatī is said to have worshipped a small, emerald *liṅga* during these 21,000 years; this very *liṅga* is understood to be kept in the *garbhagṛha* near Ardhanārīśvara in Tiruchengode and is made viewable three times a day.

[94] It is worth noting, too, that Tiruchengode also celebrates Vaikasi Visakam as its "Ardhanārīśvara car festival" through a two-week period during Vaiśākha (May/June). At this time, four giant chariots carry icons of Murukaṉ, Gaṇeśa, Viṣṇu, and Ardhanārīśvara around its city streets so that *darśan* is made accessible to all (so I was told by numerous devotees at the Ardhanārīśvara temple). The above priest relayed that the largest of these vehicles belongs to Ardhanārīśvara whose icon is placed within its chariot only after a wedding ceremony is

This reputation Ardhanārīśvara has for aiding heterosexual relations and concomitant family life is striking in that the related abilities attributed to the deity are not found in the source materials referenced by those who explain its efficaciousness. Neither its imagery nor its narratives cited in Tiruchengode suggest that the deity is uniquely equipped to intervene within such temporal matters. Instead, it appears that the spousal and parental statuses of Śiva and Pārvatī (i.e., the deities constituting Ardhanārīśvara) – connotations of the pair recognized by Hindu traditions at large – have been creatively extrapolated to the human sphere in this context.

That Ardhanārīśvara is understood as efficacious in alleviating marital and familial concerns within Tiruchengode cannot be overstated. For that matter, given the people I met from outside the city visiting with related petitions, it appears that this reputation has circulated widely. Evidently, Ardhanārīśvara is regularly framed as positively connected to the areas of domestic life identified above. However, anxious undercurrents are also afoot in appeals to Ardhanārīśvara in connection with these spheres.

Danger and Dissolution

Hiltebeitel connects the Tiruvannamalai Ardhanārīśvara narrative with the story of Aṇkāḷammaṉ, a *grāmadevatā* ("village deity") from Melmalayanur (located near Gingee, Tamil Nadu), referring to them as "sister mythologies."[95] In the latter, Pārvatī approached Śiva and Brahmā, who were both clad with five heads, and prostrated before Brahmā, having mistaken him for Śiva. Brahmā laughed at her mistake, and Pārvatī, "angered at the loss of her wifely faithfulness," cursed him to become beheaded. Śiva, angered as well, also "plucked off one head" which regenerated itself; this continued 999 more times.[96] Brahmā then cursed Śiva to wander cremation grounds as a beggar (with the thousandth plucked head serving as his begging bowl). However, "whatever alms Śiva received, the insatiable begging bowl – Brahmā's [skull] – would devour."[97] Eventually, Śiva arrived at Melmalayanur. Aṇkāḷammaṉ, "an exiled form of Pārvatī," had been searching for Śiva and was stationed at Melmalayanur herself. Aṇkāḷammaṉ then found Śiva there in a cremation ground and strewed food about; the *kapāla*

performed for Śiva and Pārvatī. He differentiated this from other festivals, which he said perform wedding ceremonies after participating deities are processioned out of the temple. This emphasis on Ardhanārīśvara (and the marriage of Śiva and Pārvatī) is particularly interesting given that Vaikasi Visakam is otherwise widely recognized as 10-day festival in honour of Murukaṉ. Controversially, within a novel set during colonial times, Perumal Murugan wrote of a tradition in which taboos centering on extramarital sex are relaxed during the "Ardhanārīśvara car festival" so consenting adults may sleep together; this is framed as aiding childless married couples in conceiving a child. See Perumal Murugan, *One Part Woman*, trans. Aniruddhan Vasudevan (New York: Grove Atlantic, 2018).

[95] Hiltebeitel, *The Cult of Draupadī Vol. 1*, 381.

[96] Hiltebeitel, *The Cult of Draupadī Vol. 1*, 375. Hiltebeitel states that there is an incongruity here, though it is unclear what he refers to, though he may be referring to the fact that Brahmā continues to have heads despite Pārvatī cursing him to be beheaded; after all, Śiva is able to pluck one soon after her curse, and even after Śiva plucks a thousand, Brahmā presumably had a head for being able to curse Śiva to become a beggar.

[97] Hiltebeitel, *The Cult of Draupadī Vol. 1*, 375.

(skull) of Brahmā separated from Śiva and devoured the scatterings. In turn, Aṇkāḷammaṉ assumed a frightful form and trampled the feasting skull. Subsequently, she cursed Brahmā to have no temples built in his name, yet she granted him the boon of being fed a thousand lives (of fish) per day. Finally, she obtained the left side of Śiva as Ardhanārīśvara for which she had been longing.[98]

Hiltebeitel highlights an intriguing variant in which the skull of Brahmā "[falls] from Śiva's hand at the very point that he and Pārvatī reunite as Ardhanārīśvara."[99] Connecting this to Tiruvannamalai, he states that "in the Aṅkāḷammaṉ cult and in [versions of] the Tiruvannamalai myth linking Pārvatī's penance with her transformation into Durgā to defeat Mahiṣa, the resorption of the goddess into Śiva's left side cannot occur until the head – in one case Brahmā's, in the other Mahiṣa's – is released."[100] He describes these heads as "multiforms" of each other and states that "the release of the head of [Brahmā/Mahiṣa], the ultimate doomsday weapon, coincides in its pralayic significance with Śiva and Pārvatī merging, the ultimate symbol of the resorption of *puruṣa* and *prakṛti* at the *mahāpralaya* or *prākṛta pralaya*, the salvific 'great dissolution of matter' that occurs at the end of the universe."[101] In fact, Hiltebeitel maintains that "the Tamil Ardhanārīśvara" should be primarily recognized "not as a cosmogonic or procreative image, but an image of [universal] dissolution."[102] However, I suggest that Ardhanārīśvara within the myths of Melmalayanur, Tiruvannamalai, and Tiruchengode signals a different dissolution: that of dangerous uncoupled existence.

In the Melmalayanur and Tiruvannamalai examples, Pārvatī is absorbed into Śiva upon conclusion, or expiation, of her violent escapades (involving Brahmā and Mahiṣa, respectively). In the lore of Tiruchengode, Pārvatī, following her unintentional initiation of universal darkness, merges with Śiva so as to prevent a repeat of this mistake. In each case, resolution and calm coincides with the unification of Śiva and Pārvatī, turmoil with their separateness. Some scholars appear inclined to take such observations as reinforcing the idea that goddesses are safer within the purview of a god. Moreover, those who forward unbridled goddesses as problematic often analogize them to unwed human women. Not only do I take issue with these

---

[98] My presentation of this narrative has drawn from Hiltebeitel, *The Cult of Draupadī Vol. 1*, 375-376. Note that Hiltebeitel states he has himself drawn the main thread of this myth from the 1984 University of Heidelberg dissertation of Eveline Meyer, "Aṅkāḷaparamēcuvari A Goddess of Tamilnadu, her myths and her cult."

[99] Hiltebeitel, *The Cult of Draupadī Vol. 1*, 376. Here, he again cites the above dissertation of Eveline Meyer.

[100] Hiltebeitel, *The Cult of Draupadī Vol. 1*, 446. The reader may recognize that in a variant of this Tiruvannamalai myth presented in an earlier section of this chapter, Pārvatī is described as commanding Durgā rather than becoming her. Also, in the version I presented, it is not the head of Mahiṣa that needs releasing, but the crystal *liṅga* she grabbed at the sliced throat of Mahiṣa.

[101] This "multiform" insight is mentioned is on Hiltebeitel, *The Cult of Draupadī Vol. 1*, 381; the remaining quote is from page 376.

[102] Hiltebeitel, *The Cult of Draupadī Vol. 1*, 447. Evidently, despite the statements of Hiltebeitel, Ardhanārīśvara, in the context of Tiruchengode, remains popularly associated with procreative potential. Flood describes *puruṣa* and *prakṛti* as self and matter, respectively (though the former is often framed in relation to consciousness). See Gavin Flood, *An introduction to Hinduism* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press), 231.

interpretations, but I suggest that danger relates to uncoupled individuals for an entirely different reason.

The idea that female figures (divine or otherwise) possess threatening wanton power if not tethered to a male counterpart through marital bonds has been notably forwarded. McGilvray, speaking of the Tamil context, states that "[in] Hindu thought, marriage is believed to be necessary to channel and control a woman's innate cosmic energy; therefore, an unmarried woman – or goddess – is potentially dangerous."[103] Similarly, Shulman suggests that "the Tamils have seen in woman a concentration of dangerous power."[104] He continues: "Hence like other manifestations of power, the woman must be circumscribed and controlled."[105] Shulman relates such circumscription and control to mythologies in which virgin goddesses, "the epitome of violent power," must also be contained, a notion that, he suggests, "gives us the popular image of the goddess locked in a box."[106] However, he qualifies that Tamil women are not locked in literal boxes; they are instead "given in marriage . . . and the state of marriage in itself becomes a form of control and limitation."[107] In my view, the foregoing is problematic on a few counts. For one, unwed and dangerous gods are left out of the conversation. A freshly widowed Śiva, for example, rampaged destructively throughout the cosmos following the death of Satī.[108] Moreover, the understandings of unwed Tamil women presented are misleadingly framed as sweepingly held by "the Tamils" and "Hindu thought." Finally, the proposed relationship between danger and unwedded people is narrow in its androcentric scope.

I encountered no mention of unwed females as embodying an extreme, wanton, and/or menacing power in Tiruchengode. However, I did speak with the adult and spouseless daughters of temple market shopkeepers who described, in their minds, a real and contemporary danger connected to unmarried women: social ostracization. They explained that both men and women face pressures to wed and bear children but that remaining single and childless is particularly negative for women. Specifically, they spoke of the likelihood of such women facing slanderous gossip and tarnished reputations. In something of an inversion of the above then, menacing conditions are actually felt and feared by single women for their relationship and parental statuses. Thus, Ardhanārīśvara, so often described in Tiruchengode as symbolic of marital bliss and parenthood, also implies the contrasting conditions of a stressful singledom (and childlessness). And just as congruous conditions coincide with the Goddess and

---

[103] Dennis McGilvray, *Symbolic Heat: Gender, Health & Worship among the Tamils of South India and Sri Lanka* (Ahmedabad: Mapin Publishing Pvt. Ltd., 2003), 46.

[104] Shulman, *Tamil Temple Myths*, 140.

[105] Shulman, *Tamil Temple Myths*, 140.

[106] Both quotes from Shulman, *Tamil Temple Myths*, 140. For his discussion on this sealed box motif, see pages 192-211. In short, Shulman relays that "the box motif expresses an underlying concept of control," one that sees "[power], especially the power located in the goddess or woman . . . contained within strict, tangible limits." See page 198.

[107] Shulman, *Tamil Temple Myths*, 198.

[108] For details on this narrative, see Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses: Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1988), 37-41.

Śiva commingled, single individuals may desire uniting in matrimony, in part, for believing social discord will dissolve and more desirable conditions will ensue.

So far, this chapter has largely considered men, women, and the relations between them. After all, it is the marriage between man and woman that Ardhanārīśvara is widely understood to symbolize, embody, secure, and/or assist in Tiruchengode. Yet, in this context, how might Ardhanārīśvara relate to those whose identities and orientations do not operate within such stark binaries? I will answer this question against the backdrop of a final narrative meriting introduction.

The Bhṛṅgī Narrative

In Tiruchengode, the most widely told story involving Ardhanārīśvara is one featuring a sage named Bhṛṅgī. It was shared most often with me by locals, a version of it appears on the temple website, and the majority of Ardhanārīśvara depictions around Tiruchengode pay homage to this episode by including an image of the tripodal Bhṛṅgī next to the composite deity (see Figure 35). The upper walls of the *garbhagṛha* antechamber even showcase a mural depicting the story. Adiceam also recounts the tale as found within a Tiruchengode *sthalapurāṇa*.[109] Drawing from these sources, a synthesized version is as follows:

A number of devotees gathered to worship Śiva and Pārvatī on Mount Kailāsa. Everyone in attendance was willing to undertake *pradakṣiṇā* of both Śiva and Pārvatī aside from the sage Bhṛṅgī; he only circumambulated Śiva. Pārvatī requested that Bhṛṅgī also worship her, but he refused. To demonstrate their actual oneness, and so that Pārvatī would also receive *pradakṣiṇā*, Śiva and Pārvatī united as Ardhanārīśvara. However, Bhṛṅgī persisted, took on the form of an insect, gnawed through the central axis of Ardhanārīśvara, and made his way around Śiva alone. Offended, Pārvatī cursed the sage to lose his bodily constituents derived from her (i.e., his flesh and fluids), rendering him weak and skeletal. Yet Śiva was sympathetic towards his ardent devotion and granted Bhṛṅgī a third leg, allowing him to stand, and then explained to Bhṛṅgī the inherent unity of Śiva and Śakti. Following this, Bhṛṅgī realized the error of his ways, apologized to Pārvatī, and was forgiven.

Varied interpretations of the Bhṛṅgī myth(s) have been presented in scholarship. For example, reflecting another Tiruchengode-Tiruvannamalai link, L'Hernault and Reiniche connect Bhṛṅgī to the latter site. There, they say devotees have incorporated the story of Bhṛṅgī into the Tiruvūḍal festival, an event recognizing and reenacting the "divine quarrel" between lovers, Śiva and Pārvatī. At this time, according to the authors, devotees maintain that Pārvatī took issue with Śiva for a number of reasons, including his restoration of Bhṛṅgī despite the fact that he offended her.[110] Interestingly, during my 2022 stay in Tiruvannamalai, I encountered a temple marking the spot where Pārvatī is said to have eventually forgiven the stubborn sage

[109] She cites this *sthalapurāṇa* in a footnote on Adiceam, "Les images de Śiva dans l'Inde du Sud, VI. Ardhanārīśvara," 146.

[110] L'Hernault and Reiniche, *Tiruvaṇṇāmalai: Rites et fêtes*, 121-122.

(see Figure 36). Additionally, Gopinatha Rao recounts a variant which concludes with Pārvatī actually admiring Bhṛṅgī for his steadfast devotion to Śiva (following his insectoid transformation and determined circling of the god); he does not tie the story to any particular place.[111] Doniger, commenting on the Rao rendition, recognizes that Bhṛṅgī may be mistaken in believing Śiva is separate from Pārvatī, but she adds that the episode may also "show Pārvatī how mistaken she is in believing they *cannot* be separated."[112] In Tiruchengode, however, the narrative is tied to its locality, and the popular takeaways appear to be the ignorance (and redemption) of Bhṛṅgī and the oneness of Śiva and Śakti.[113]

Figure 35: The tripodal Bhṛṅgī and Ardhanārīśvara on an ornate Nāgagiri archway.

It is particularly intriguing that Pārvatī removed only the flesh and fluids of Bhṛṅgī. Doniger insightfully touches on this point: "Pārvatī is said to have punished Bhṛṅgin by taking

[111] Gopinatha Rao, *Elements of Hindu Iconography Volume 2, Part 1* (Varanasi and Delhi: Indological Bookhouse, 1971), 322-323.

[112] Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *Women, Androgyne, and Other Mythical Beasts* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 317.

[113] Other than the *sthalapurāṇa* cited by Adiceam, no textual sources are provided by the above scholars in presenting the Bhṛṅgī narrative(s). Even the textually-inclined Doniger simply calls the Bhṛṅgī narrative variants a "South Indian series of myths;" see Doniger O'Flaherty, *Women, Androgyne, and Other Mythical Beasts*, 316. This is true for other available works. The Purāṇic encyclopedia of Vettam Mani has an entry for Bhṛṅgī but provides no textual reference; see Vettam Mani, *Puranic Encyclopedia: A Comprehensive Dictionary with Special Reference to the Epic and Purāṇic Literature* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1975), 141. Yadav, who presents the Rao version nearly verbatim, is alone in claiming it can be found in the *Śiva Purāṇa* yet provides no additional reference information. See Neeta Yadav, *Ardhanārīśvara in Art and Literature* (New Delhi: D.K. Printworld Ltd., 2001)., 114-115. Despite diligent effort, I have been unable to locate the episode within the Purāṇic corpus myself. Adiceam appears to have also tried unsuccessfully, concluding it is not found therein to her knowledge; this is recognized in a footnote on Adiceam, "Les images de Śiva dans l'Inde du Sud, VI. Ardhanārīśvara," 146.

from him his flesh and blood – that of his body that belongs to the female, given by his mother – leaving him a mere skeleton, reduced to bones, given by this father."[114] Here Doniger notably attributes certain bodily constituents to male origin and others to female. Furthermore, she states: "Ostensibly, this teaches Bhṛṅgin that all creatures are truly androgynous, that a male cannot remove or ignore the female half of his god, or of himself, and still be whole; and so he worships Her as well as Him."[115] Thus, the curse to be skeletal and incomplete indicated to Bhṛṅgī something of his own nature, a nature also present at divine degrees as evidenced by the consummation of Ardhanārīśvara. Yet the idea that the body is comprised of both female and male parts is not unique to this narrative.

Figure 36: A Tiruvannamalai temple entranceway marking where Pārvatī forgave Bhṛṅgī.

Red, White, and Bhṛṅgī

In "The Color of Gender," Selby analyzes the *Caraka Saṃitā* and the *Suśruta Saṃitā*, two compendiums of "classical Indian medicine."[116] These texts "fall under the generic category known as *Āyurveda*" and accordingly reflect ideals promoting the quality and duration of human life.[117] Each describes wide-ranging and sophisticated medical treatments, including the removal of bladder stones, the resectioning of intestines due to abdominal wounds, and

[114] Doniger O'Flaherty, *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts*, 316.
[115] Doniger O'Flaherty, *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts*, 316.
[116] Note that these texts were discussed in Chapter 3 of this dissertation.
[117] Martha Ann Selby, "The Color of Gender: On substance, Sex Determination, and Anatomical Difference in the Medical Texts of Ancient India" (unpublished but provided via courtesy of the author through my supervisor), 6.

rhinoplasty techniques.[118] Specifically, their emphasis on the "logic of color" in relation to embryological developments is of interest as these themes echo motifs found in the story of Bhṛṅgī and Ardhanārīśvara. In this connection, Selby notes semiotic patterns within the *Caraka Saṃitā* and *Suśruta Saṃitā* based on red and white colouration: "Women and the 'feminine' are red; men and the 'masculine' are white. The redness of women and the whiteness of men are based on the colors of their observable sexual effluents: menstrual fluid in the case of women, and semen in the case of men."[119] Importantly, Selby demonstrates how this schema relates to conception, sex determination, and bodily construction. For example, the *Caraka Saṃitā* maintains that "a girl is produced if there is a superabundance of blood or 'redness' (*rakta*) at the moment of conception, and that if there is a superabundance of semen (*sukra*), the embryo will be male."[120] As Selby perceptively highlights, it is an imbalance in these fluids that results in anatomical sex determination for "normative" embryos.[121] Following the same line of reasoning, she also notes that it is the "perfect symmetry of red and white substances that results in the production of a hermaphrodite."[122] Yet despite symmetrical or asymmetrical balances, all people are considered comprised of male and female structures; the mother contributes skin, blood, flesh, fat, and the organs, and the father contributes hair, nails, teeth, bones, veins, ligaments, arteries, and semen.[123] As such, Selby infers a tacit understanding of "gender that is not binary, nor even tertiary, but theoretically infinite, incorporating shades of neither [absolute] white or red, but hues of the deepest rose and the whitest of pinks."[124] Interestingly, she recognizes that localized Tamil notions of conception (as documented by Valentine Daniel) differ from *āyurvedic* systems, namely that the relative *density* of fluids

[118] Selby, "The Color of Gender," 7.

[119] Selby, "The Color of Gender," 13. This observation on male and female effluents is one she makes elsewhere, too. See Martha Ann Selby, "Narratives of Conception, Gestation, and Labour in Sanskrit Āyurveda Texts," *Asian Medicine* 1, no. 2 (2005): 260. Selby attributes this red and white pairing to "a powerful archetypal binary pair in early Indian culture, that of *agni* (fire) and *soma* (most typically a sacrificial beverage, but used to denote cooling, watery properties);" see 260. Here it is indicated that cooling properties are linked with the white and masculine, heating properties with the red and feminine. Together these trios (i.e., white-masculine-cooling and red-feminine-heating) form a pervasive schema found within contemporary Tamil life. The border walls of temple complexes are even painted with alternating red and white stripes, representing the feminine-red-heating and masculine-white-cooling principles in balance. McGilvray dedicates a work to surveying the presence of this "symbolic heat" schema, including its place in diet, wardrobe, and worship. See McGilvray, *Symbolic Heat* (in its entirety). With respect to how this schema relates to deities, see Diane Mines, *Fierce Gods: Inequality, Ritual, and the Politics of Dignity in a South Indian Village* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 17; also see C.J. Fuller, *the Camphor Flame: Popular Hinduism and Society in India* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992), 46. For information on this schema and divination, see (in its entirety) Brenda Beck, "Colour and Heat in South Indian Ritual," *Man* 4, no. 4 (December 1969).

[120] Selby, "The Color of Gender," 17-18.

[121] Selby, "The Color of Gender," 18.

[122] Selby, "The Color of Gender," 18.

[123] Selby, "The Color of Gender," 20.

[124] Selby, "The Color of Gender," 23.

determines sex in the "Tamil system" versus relative *amounts* in the *āyurvedic*.[125] Nonetheless, the "Tamil system" demonstrates "persistent *āyurvedic* resonances of color as well as kind: Male [sexual fluids] makes bones; female [sexual fluids] makes flesh."[126]

It is precisely this understanding that is reflected in the Bhṛṅgī tale of Tiruchengode. After all, Bhṛṅgī is cursed to lose all his parts of female origination, and the losses align with those female bodily structures identified by Selby. As noted, Doniger took this diminution, along with the advent of Ardhanārīśvara within the story, to indicate that "all creatures are truly androgynous," an observation echoing the nonbinary view of gender posited by Selby in light of traditional Indian thought on embryological developments.[127] This popular Tiruchengode narrative does present masculine and feminine principles as explicitly coexistent within Bhṛṅgī (and all beings by implication) as well as Śiva and Pārvatī as ultimately nondifferent. Accordingly, one might expect the Tiruchengode populace to recognize nonbinary understandings of gender and/or for the Nāgagiri site (tied to and enshrining this myth in its hillside and Ardhanārīśvara temple imagery) to attract those identifying between or beyond binaries.

For the vast bulk of my time in Tiruchengode, I did not encounter anyone who expressed an identity easily associable with the "third gender" rubric. I did, however, speak to others of their presence at the Ardhanārīśvara temple while waiting for my own direct interaction(s). A handful of people told me that *aravāṉis* occasionally visit the temple because they believe that Ardhanārīśvara reflects their own constitution.[128] A temple priest affirmed that *aravāṉis* come to the temple thinking that they are like Ardhanārīśvara. However, he expressed feeling that their sense of connection is based on an inaccuracy. In his words, *aravāṉis* change their hormones, but Śiva, despite the gynandromorphic appearance of Ardhanārīśvara, conversely undergoes no hormone changes in taking this form; his maleness is not compromised (and neither is the femaleness of Pārvatī, presumably). Another man (a local devotee) I spoke with said that while *aravāṉis* may view Ardhanārīśvara as like them, the men and women of Tiruchengode do not agree; he suggested that Ardhanārīśvara depicts Śiva and Pārvatī as a happy couple for all but the *aravāṉis*. Then, on the night of Kārtikai Dīpa, a group of what I took as "third gender" folks filed out of a car in front of the temple. They approached me, told me they had come from nearby Salem, Tamil Nadu, and requested that I take a picture with them (perhaps for being a visible foreigner). After taking the picture, I asked if they had

---

[125] Selby, "The Color of Gender," 25. For this view as encountered within the ethnographic work of Daniel, see E. Valentine Daniel, *Fluid Signs: Being a Person the Tamil Way* (California: University of California Press, 1984), 176.

[126] Selby, "The Color of Gender," 25.

[127] Doniger O'Flaherty, *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts*, 316.

[128] "*Aravāṉi*," in popular parlance, is used interchangeably with "*hijṛā*" in South India. The term *aravāṉi* relates to the "third gender" tutelary deity Aravāṉ whose major festival occurs in Koovagam, Tamil Nadu. Note that there is a growing movement among those embodying gender and/or sexual variance to foreground *thirunangai* ("respected woman") in place of *aravāṉi* (at least within Tamil Nadu). I have used *aravāṉi* myself, given that my interlocutors used the term.

arrived for the festival. They responded in the negative and clarified that as "transgender people" (the term they used) they only came to see Ardhanārīśvara. They hurried off before anything else could be discussed, apparently satisfied with the photo.

Some takeaways emerge from the above: indication of affinity for Ardhanārīśvara by those who presented as transgender; the perception, in both priest and lay populations, that *aravāṉis* feel a resonance with Ardhanārīśvara in Tiruchengode; the idea that *aravāṉi*s are mistaken to feel this way; and the idea that *aravāṉi* understandings of Ardhanārīśvara are distinct from those held by males and females (presumed, I suspect, to be cisgender and heterosexual). I feel that these latter two sentiments reflect both a distancing from *aravāṉi* sensibilities and a preference for the prevailing local conceptualizations of Ardhanārīśvara as the perfect picture of husband and wife and/or mother and father. Such understandings appear to view the male and female halves of Ardhanārīśvara as complementary but distinct in their union; while they do form a whole, it is the whole of a connubial and/or parental unit. When the ultimate oneness of Śiva and Pārvatī was cited, it was not taken as indicating truths about human gender. Moreover, when interlocuters described the masculine and feminine principles constituting Bhṛṅgī as at play within people, they spoke in terms of bodily constituents and never explicitly broached the domain of human gender and/or sexuality (despite much to play off in this regard). I conclude that the association between Ardhanārīśvara and "third gender" populations (and the recognition thereof) has presence but not prevalence in Tiruchengode; the predominant view, without question, is that Ardhanārīśvara relates to male-female couples and associated familial domains. The feminine and masculine, while viewed as going together (e.g., via matrimony), remain as perceptibly partitioned within local heteronormative imagination as their colour-coded counterparts that stripe the Ardhanārīśvara temple complex walls red and white; the middle ground of pink is never overtly entertained (see Figure 37).

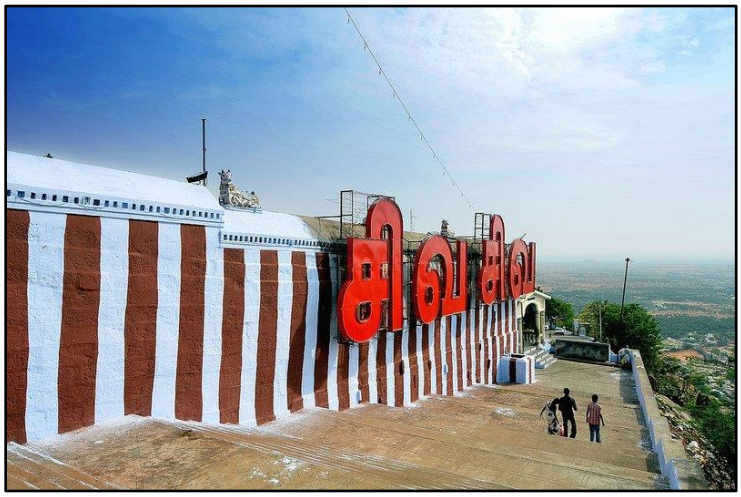

Figure 37: Alternating stripes on the Ardhanārīśvara temple complex border walls.[129]

[129] This image was found through an online search. See TN Temples Project, "Ardhanareeswarar, Tiruchengode, Namakal." *TN Temples Project* (blog), https://tntemplesproject.in/2015/10/01/ardhanareeswarar-tiruchengode-namakkal/ (accessed December 2024).

Conclusion

This chapter has presented an extensive analysis of Ardhanārīśvara in relation to Tiruchengode, its temple there, and related sites (namely Tiruvannamalai and, to a lesser extent, Melmalayanur). I have discussed the significant ties between Tiruchengode and Tiruvannamalai, Ardhanārīśvara within festival and ritual life, local iconographic depictions of the deity, and Ardhanārīśvara narratives in conversation with *āyurvedic* notions of embryological development. Several aspects of this study emerge as particularly meaningful to the project at hand.

In Tiruchengode, Ardhanārīśvara is popularly understood as an image of husband and wife and/or mother and father in perfection, and the figure is viewed as efficacious in alleviating heteronormative marital and familial concerns. Indeed, whether excited for marriage and family or anxious over its inherent variables and related (sometimes patriarchal) pressures, we nevertheless see male-female relations at the forefront in Tiruchengode with respect to Ardhanārīśvara. That the deity is thought uniquely capable of intervening in these matters reflects creative framings of the figure inspired by established connotations – such as the notion that Śiva and Pārvatī are matrimonially linked.

The previous two chapters provided evidence that Ardhanārīśvara has been increasingly integrated within "third gender" spheres and become associated (if not revered) as a patron deity of these populations. Yet in the context of Tiruchengode, such connections, although present, are nowhere near as predominant. This shows that while Ardhanārīśvara has certainly been innovatively associated with gender and sexual variance in recent years, the composite deity continues to meaningfully relate to those subscribing to cisgender and heterosexual sensibilities all the same. Interestingly, although these people may more regularly have matrimony over their marginalization in mind when petitioning Ardhanārīśvara (in contrast to the "third gender" communities examined in the preceding chapters), they nonetheless engage the deity with respect to "this-worldly" matters, a feature common to all the living contexts involving Ardhanārīśvara that have been considered in this dissertation.

Chapter 7
Conclusions, Contributions, and Future Considerations

Introduction

In the introduction of this dissertation, I presented my plan to investigate the purported relationship between "third gender" populations and Ardhanārīśvara. This line of inquiry was prompted by the fact that previous scholarship had linked Ardhanārīśvara with people operating outside of cisgender and heterosexual identities on primarily hypothetical and/or theoretical grounds. Work directly engaging associated populations was deemed critically lacking. Moreover, I recognized a lacuna in scholarship reflecting the omission of content concerning temples and surrounding communities in which Ardhanārīśvara serves as the main deity. To account for these issues, I conducted research on the figure as found within three contexts: Durgā Pūjā festivals observed in Kolkata; Kinnar Akhāḍā affairs; and life centering on the Ardhanārīśvara temple of Tiruchengode, Tamil Nadu (alongside associated sites).

I have examined the place of Ardhanārīśvara within ongoing formulations of gender and sexual variance in India, placed the deity in conversation with accusations of religious nationalism, and highlighted its reputation as efficacious in alleviating heteronormative marital and familial concerns. My research indicates that varied and active discourses center on (and have been varyingly inspired by) Ardhanārīśvara, affirming both its multimodal and transforming nature. Yet while actors and agendas differ across them, I conclude that each living context examined demonstrates invocations of both tradition and innovation as Ardhanārīśvara is strategically engaged, embraced, and employed as a means of securing worldly ends.

Adopting Ardhanārīśvara

In presenting her typology of androgynes, Doniger categorizes Ardhanārīśvara either as a "splitting" or "fusing" type depending on the textual context she is analyzing. Moreover, she asserts that earlier texts emphasize the former and later texts the latter, stating that "gradually the emphasis shifts from Śiva as the splitting androgyne to Śiva as the fusing androgyne."[1] Given my research, I suggest that another turn in the history of Ardhanārīśvara has been actively underway, one that sees the figure increasingly adopted within situated "third gender" spheres. In this connection, Chapter 4 focused on the integration of Ardhanārīśvara into Durgā Pūjā festivals by transgender activists, while Chapter 5 examined the place of Ardhanārīśvara within the Kinnar Akhāḍā for naming the deity their patron god and being chiefly comprised of "third gender" membership.

The two contexts proved remarkably distinct from one another. For example, the Durgā Pūjā initiatives – contrary to prevailing views ascribing the form to Śiva – presented

[1] Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 314.

Ardhanārīśvara as a form of the Goddess within the Devī-centered festivities, while the Kinnar Akhāḍā (and the place of Ardhanārīśvara therein) appears more aligned with the Śaiva leanings of its leader. Furthermore, the activists whom I interviewed distanced their Durgā Pūjā efforts involving Ardhanārīśvara from any strictly Hindu framing; they instead presented the deity as a marker of radical inclusivity. In fact, the group that first introduced Ardhanārīśvara into the festival even discontinued their use of the figure for fear of being erroneously framed as aligned with Hindu-centered politics. Conversely, the Kinnar Akhāḍā presents itself and Ardhanārīśvara as expressly Hindu, and the religious order has been accused of Hindu nationalist alignment (and saffronization) for filtering out Islamic aspects of *hijṛā* life in constructing its identity. It is also worth recognizing the differing terminology used by the communities Ardhanārīśvara has been attached to. Those showcasing Ardhanārīśvara at Durgā Pūjā noticeably link the deity and themselves to the term "transgender," one they often used as a "loose marker" (in order to englobe South Asian categories of gender and sexual variance) and foregrounded, in part, for its increasing global respectability. The Kinnar Akhāḍā contrastingly connect the figure and its members predominantly to the Hindu-affiliated "*kinnar*," a reclaimed (or repurposed) term used to positively signal "third gender" populations. However, both contexts, notwithstanding their different orientations and techniques, frame Ardhanārīśvara as a legitimizer of marginalized gender and sexual minorities within attempts to sway public opinion towards recognizing their validity.

Tradition and Innovation Revisited

In Chapter 1, I suggested that all three contexts examined in this dissertation contain creative coactivations of tradition and innovation in their mobilizations of Ardhanārīśvara. In analyzing the place of Ardhanārīśvara within contemporary Durgā Pūjā celebrations, I demonstrated that the figure has acted in interrelatedly inventive ways: as a marker calling for (and celebrating) the inclusion of those marginalized for their gender and/or sexuality; an activistic emblem counteracting regimes considered oppressive to these demographics; a transgender religious icon legitimizing associated populations; a parental figure for trans people whose families had abandoned them; and a rallying point for the reconsideration of understandings pertaining to gender norms, roles, and identities. Meanwhile, Ardhanārīśvara was also selected as tutelary deity of the Kinnar Akhāḍā so as to reflect the "half female, half male" nature characterizing many of its members (and validate "third gender" people in general), and thus symbolizes their opposition to androcentrism within the *akhāṛā* system and to patriarchy more broadly.

These innovatory conceptions and applications of Ardhanārīśvara are tactically paired with its established place in Hindu history; the figure is forwarded for being deemed recognizable and respected by the (majority Hindu) Indian public. In connecting themselves and their agendas to Ardhanārīśvara, the marginalized people in question attempt to appeal to society at large and improve their place within it. In sum, the figure, framed as having legitimizing ties to tradition, has been inventively embraced and advanced in the pursuit of

upward social mobility by those aiming to correct their disenfranchisement. Within these communities and campaigns, the mere presence of a Hindu deity split into male and halves was pointed to as proof that human gender and sexual variance should be valued; the image of Ardhanārīśvara was emphasized, while its connections to other areas (e.g., mythology and/or philosophy) appeared peripheral. Its imagery is also paramount in inspiring creative augmentations at Tiruchengode, though mythological narratives also offer evident reinforcement in this context.

In Tiruchengode, the Ardhanārīśvara form is popularly understood to represent an image of husband and wife and/or mother and father in perfection, and localized legends affirm the spousal and parental statuses of Śiva and Pārvatī (i.e., the deities constituting Ardhanārīśvara). This is not without basis elsewhere; the *Aruṇācalapurāṇam*, for example, cites their marriage, while Purāṇic literature describes them as parents (e.g., to Gaṇeśa). Undoubtedly, the Hindu traditions at large recognize these characteristics of the pair. The creative contributions found within Tiruchengode lie in the extension of these connotations to the human sphere. As Chapter 6 indicated, Ardhanārīśvara is correspondingly engaged by local (and visiting) devotees who believe the figure can alleviate concerns regarding their own heterosexual relations and associated family life. The deity is considered effective in aiding these domains and is accordingly understood to, for instance, secure male-female marriages for the unwed and children for the childless. Often, devotional life revolving around Ardhanārīśvara in its Tiruchengode temple is aimed at attaining (or offering appreciation for the attainment) of such benefits. Importantly, the eminence of Ardhanārīśvara in these regards is not found within the source materials cited by those who explain its reputation in Tiruchengode; neither its imagery nor its narratives inherently suggest the deity is uniquely efficacious in these temporal matters. Instead, this understanding is based on innovative extrapolations inspired by established tradition (e.g., that Śiva and Pārvatī are connubially linked).

One may compare contemporary discourses centering on Ardhanārīśvara to a palimpsest. Just as palimpsests bear both newer and partially effaced earlier forms, it is clear that as Ardhanārīśvara unfolds to include new connotations, reverberations of the old continue to ripple at present all the same. In fact, as implied above, innovative framings of the deity are given credence through their connection to entrenched understandings; it is the strategic interplay of both the novel and the known that allows for Ardhanārīśvara to be successfully mobilized in the cases examined within this dissertation.

The Accommodating Ardhanārīśvara

Several scholars have traced the transformations of Hindu deities. For example, Lutgendorf focuses on Hanumān and his "continuing rise as a comprehensive and encompassing deity."[2] Urban states that goddess Kāmākhyā has clearly undergone a

[2] See Philip Lutgendorf, *Hanuman's Tale: The Messages of a Divine Monkey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 333 (within the abstract of this page). Throughout this book, Lutgendorf examines the emergences of

"sweetening" and "deodorization" over time, shifting from associations with the bloody and transgressive rites of left-hand tantric practices to an increasingly popular, devotional, and right-hand form of worship.[3] For her part, McDermott discusses how Kālī has progressively taken on softer qualities in addition to her fiercer framings.[4] In each of these cases, the sea changes have occurred in clear conjunction with the popularization of their respective deities. In this connection, McDermott insightfully posits that "[the] greater a deity's claim to devotee numbers, the more accommodative [it] must become to their varied tastes."[5]

However, numbers alone cannot account for the character of such accommodations; the populations involved are relevant in this regard. This dissertation has demonstrated that enthusiasm for Ardhanārīśvara is growing, particularly amongst (or in relation to) those whose sexual orientations and gender identities exist outside of straight and cisgender frameworks. As Chapter 3 outlined, these populations have long been forced to navigate complex circumstances, and in looking to Ardhanārīśvara as a figure deemed capable of counteracting their marginalized positionalities, they have elicited assistance from the composite deity. Indeed, the deity has not been embraced in vain; the sheer amount of supportive news stories covering the Ardhanārīśvara Durgā Pūjā installations alone suggests that the deity has effectively aided their twin desires to counteract oppression and gain social recognition. Moreover, the "third gender" communities in question demonstrate compelling new modes of articulating their own legitimacy through adopting, engaging, and publicly forwarding Ardhanārīśvara in novel ways.

Of course, Ardhanārīśvara devotees also include people beyond those of "third gender" affiliation, and the deity accommodates them, too. After all, the men and women of Tiruchengode petition Ardhanārīśvara regarding heteronormative relations and concomitant familial matters. In fact, I encountered numerous people indicating that the deity had successfully assisted them in their own related supplications. Although I did meet a few trans-identifying people who expressed affinity for Ardhanārīśvara at its Tiruchengode temple (and local men who suggested that *aravāṉi* people visit the temple for feeling a special bond with the deity), the figure is without a doubt primarily linked to male-female relations in this context. So, should Ardhanārīśvara be considered of "third gender" ilk, or as reflective of

---

novel affiliations between, for example, Hanumān and Hindu nationalism, middleclass demographics, and environmental concerns.

[3] Hugh Urban, *The Power of Tantra: Religion, Sexuality, and the Politics of South Asian Studies* (New York: I.B. Taurus, 2010), 168.

[4] Rachel Fell McDermott, *Revelry, Rivalry, and Longing for the Goddesses of Bengal: The Fortunes of Hindu Festivals* (New York: Colombia University Press, 2011), 173-180.

[5] McDermott, *Revelry, Rivalry, and Longing for the Goddesses of Bengal*, 193.

cisgender and heteronormative sensibilities? To echo a point Caldwell made in her study of Bhagavatī, Ardhanārīśvara is an amalgam and confluence of all its renderings.[6]

Encountering Ardhanārīśvara

My research has shone a light on representations of Ardhanārīśvara unaccounted for in earlier catalogues of its imagery. Some of these representations – the Durgā Pūjā *pratimās*, official Kinnar Akhāḍā seal, and bifurcated *mukhaliṅga* of the Kinnar Akhāḍā Ardhanārīśvara temple in Delhi – are of recent creation and could not have been considered in works published beforehand. However, in Chapter 6, I also discussed older images, including the Ardhanārīśvara *utsavar* and *mūlamūrtis* found in Tiruvannamalai and Tiruchengode, as well as the "golden chariot" idol of the latter. Moreover, I noted the presence of a unique, illustrated rendition of Ardhanārīśvara, one reminiscent of the *garbhagṛha* icon and processional *mūrtis* of its Tiruchengode temple. Images of this sort are found throughout the city, from shop signboards to its Kārtikai Dīpa fire barrel. These representations have been overlooked in academic works concerned with the figure, and inventories of Ardhanārīśvara imagery may thus be improved through inclusion of these forms.[7]

In terms of mythology, scholarship on Ardhanārīśvara mainly focuses on the figure as found within the Purāṇic corpus, but recognition of its place within *sthalapurāṇas* and local lore also occurs (though often in works not specifically dedicated to the deity). In addition to consolidating them into a single offering (i.e., the present project), I have engaged its narratives in other significant ways. Particularly with respect to Tiruchengode, scholars have presented localized Ardhanārīśvara mythologies in brief. I have provided fuller versions and more substantial analysis. For example, I placed one local narrative involving the deity in Tiruchengode (the one co-starring the tripodal Bhṛṅgī) in conversation with *āyurvedic* notions of embryological development and local heteronormativity. I also considered the myths of Tiruchengode and Tiruvannamalai as linked and brought attention to material expressions of divine episodes within their respective landscapes.

My study of the Ardhanārīśvara temple complex of Tiruchengode, the largest dedicated to Ardhanārīśvara in India, is an original contribution to existing scholarship, especially in terms of accounting for matters of lived religiosity. Yet I explored praxis pertaining to Ardhanārīśvara not only at Tiruchengode, but elsewhere, too. For example, I also described how the Kinnar Akhāḍā devotionally engages Ardhanārīśvara during their Kumbha Melā gatherings, and I

[6] Sarah Caldwell, "Waves of Beauty, Rivers of Blood: Constructing the Goddess in Kerala," in *Seeking Mahādevī: Constructing the Identities of the Great Hindu Goddesses*, ed. Tracy Pintchman (New York: SUNY Press, 2001), 111.

[7] Adiceam does include an image of a bronze that can be safely considered a three-dimensional representation of the popular Tiruchengode image mentioned above. See Marguerite E. Adiceam, "Les images de Śiva dans l'Inde du Sud, VI. Ardhanārīśvara" *Arts Asiatique* 17 (1968); reference Fig. 27 found at the end of the article. However, she simply discusses its hairstyle (page 155) and identifies it as an interesting two-armed form (page 161); she does not recognize its pervasiveness (nor any illustrated renditions) within Tiruchengode.

discussed the unique Ardhanārīśvara Pūjā created by a transgender priest that remains utilized by trans folk in Kolkata.

In these various ways, I hope that this dissertation has contributed to general scholarship on its titular deity. However, loose ends remain. The following section will focus on a few strands that stand out as I suggest potential avenues for future research.

Future Considerations

During my 2022 fieldwork, I visited three Ardhanārīśvara temples: one in Delhi established by Bhavani Ma of the Kinnar Akhāḍā, one in Tiruvannamalai marking where Śiva and Pārvatī coalesced, and another overlooking Tiruchengode, Tamil Nadu, atop its Nāgagiri Hill. Future research may investigate how Ardhanārīśvara operates and is understood within other Indian temples where the figure is central. Doing so would allow one to assess how various aspects of Ardhanārīśvara, within these contexts, compare to the findings of the present study. I have identified and visited ten additional Ardhanārīśvara temples that would aid in this endeavor: one in Mandi, Himachal Pradesh; two within Hardwar, Uttarakhand; one in Guptkashi, Uttarakhand; one in Majra Mahadev, Uttarakhand; one in Pilibhit, Uttar Pradesh; one in Chennai, Tamil Nadu; one in Rishivandiyam, Tamil Nadu; one in Vasudevanallur, Tamil Nadu; and, lastly, one in Makalikudi, Tamil Nadu.[8] Although I made my way to these sites (during 2014 and 2018 trips), the visits were of preliminary nature due to time constraints; I sought to simply confirm their existence, acquaint myself with the travel paths to reach them, and document the iconography of Ardhanārīśvara at each.

Of these sites, I find the last particularly intriguing with respect to future research, given that it is the only Devī temple among them. Interestingly, its bifurcated *garbhagṛha mūrti* is described as the Goddess in Ardhanārīśvara form and is thus at odds with scholarly views suggesting that Ardhanārīśvara should primarily be regarded as a form of Śiva. Moreover, the *mūrti* in question reflects a reversal of the typical male and female positionings; the female half is instead on the right while the male half occupies the left. In Chapter 2, I suggested that more consideration should be granted to the possibility that inverted Ardhanārīśvara images reflect a decided reversal of both the positions and primacies of Śiva and Śakti. Thus, the Makalikudi temple, for containing its atypical icon and being Devī-oriented, offers an opportunity to investigate these matters further.

Ardhanārīśvara beyond the Indian subcontinent is also worth inspection. For example, I know of an impressive Ardhanārīśvara shrine in Bangkok, Thailand; a Śaiva temple in Benoni, South Africa, boasting a massive Ardhanārīśvara figure on its roof (and a *mūrti* of the figure centered within); and of a Brooklyn-based Indo-Caribbean community that has incorporated

[8] It is worth noting that when I visited the Rishivandiyam temple in 2014, I met a man from Puducherry who went to the site because he was about to wed and understood that visiting Ardhanārīśvara there assists new marriages along; this aligns with the reputation widely afforded Ardhanārīśvara in Tiruchengode.

the deity within efforts to establish queer-friendly Hindu spaces.[9] Examination of these (and other) contexts would allow one to contribute to areas of prior academic focus (e.g., Ardhanārīśvara in relation to gender and sexuality) and explore themes yet to be placed in conversation with the deity, including those concerned with diasporic transmissions, transformations, and continuities.

At various points in this dissertation, I acknowledged how popular sources have linked Ardhanārīśvara to gender and sexual variance. In certain cases, such as those articles reporting on the Durgā Pūjā installations examined in Chapter 4, there is some real-world basis for the associations. Other times, these connections seem chiefly anchored in the fancy of those forwarding them. Yet no matter the inspiration for framing Ardhanārīśvara in these ways, such presentations, available as they are for public consumption, can no doubt influence (and/or mirror) prevailing conceptualizations of the deity. Accordingly, a future study may wish to more pointedly focus on Ardhanārīśvara as presented in popular sources, including within social media forums and the entertainment industry. Regarding the latter, I watched the Dev Patel-directed *Monkey Man* in theatres during the latter-stages of this project (in April 2024) and was surprised to find its protagonist, Kid, saved by a "third gender" community whose living quarters center on an Ardhanārīśvara temple. The profound connection that the critically and commercially successful film draws between the deity and these people alone merits analysis.

Final Thoughts

This dissertation has shown that Ardhanārīśvara is in many ways a dialectical deity. Of course, the figure had already (and often) been framed as representing a confluence of apparent opposites, such as transcendence and immanence, *puruṣa* and *prakṛti*, and the masculine and feminine. However, my research indicates that this divine gynandromorphic figure is also part and parcel of other forces rendering it dialectical. When looked at comprehensively, Ardhanārīśvara also reflects past and present, tradition and innovation, heteronormative and marginalized orientations, and discourses both endogenous and exogenous to the Indian subcontinent.

For bringing together conflicting and contradictory elements, dialectical images have been deemed "constellation[s] saturated with tension."[10] This appears an apt characterization

[9] For images of the Ardhanārīśvara Bangkok shrine, see Terry Hall, "A Quiet Spot Amidst the Chaos: Sri Ardhanarishvara Shrine, Bangkok," *Cleared and Ready for Takeoff* (blog), https://clearedready.blogspot.com/2012/05/quiet-spot-amidst-chaos-durga-shrine.html (accessed December 2024). For information on (and images of) the Benoni Ardhanārīśvara figure, see Heather Mason, "The Awe-Inspiring Shiva Temple of Actonville, Benoni," *2 Summers* (blog), https://2summers.net/2022/05/04/the-awe-inspiring-shiva-temple-of-actonville-benoni/ (accessed December 2024). For an article on this Indo-Caribbean community and their initiatives, see Harsha Nahata, "Making Room for Oneness," *The Juggernaut*, https://www.thejuggernaut.com/making-room-for-oneness (Accessed December 2024).

[10] This quote is taken from Urban, though he had borrowed it himself from Walter Benjamin who used it to describe his notion of the dialectical image. See Urban, *Tantra: Sex, Secrecy, and Power in the Study of Religion*, 16

of Ardhanārīśvara, given that the figure also "lies at a nexus of contradictory forces."[11] The findings of this project indicate that the push and pull of these forces, and therefore the predomination and yielding of characteristics associated with the deity within public perception, is bound to shift over time. It is also likely, if history is any indicator, that Ardhanārīśvara will take on new connotations that remain to be seen. Thus, just as the story of Ardhanārīśvara has been undoubtedly dynamic and compelling so far, it should persist in this way through its continual unfolding.

[11] Urban, *Tantra: Sex, Secrecy, and Power in the Study of Religion*, 17. This phrasing was used by Urban in explaining why the category of Tantra may be considered a dialectical image.

Works Cited

Adiceam, Marguerite E. “Les images de Śiva dans l'Inde du Sud, VI. Ardhanārīśvara.” *Arts Asiatique* 17 (1968): 143-172.

Agrawal, Anuja. “Gendered Bodies: The Case of the ‘Third Gender’ in India.” *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 31, no. 2 (1997): 273-297.

Alaimo, Stacy. “Trans-corporeality.” In *Posthuman Glossary*. Edited by Rossi Braidotti and Maria Hlavajova. London and New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018.

Ali, Daud. “Censured Sexual Acts and Early Medieval Society in India.” In *Sexual Diversity in Asia, c. 600-1950*. Edited by Raquel A.G. Reyes and William G. Clarence-Smith. London: Routledge, 2012.

Anand, Dibyesh. “Anxious Sexualities: Masculinity, Nationalism and Violence.” *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 9, no. 2 (May 2007): 257-269.

Apoorvm6. “Inside Kinnar Akhada.” *Students’ Beat*. https://thestudentsbeat.wordpress.com/2017/09/14/inside-kinnar-akhada/ (accessed June 2022).

Ashton, Geoff. “Divine Androgyny and the Play of Self-Recognition: Revisiting Some Issues in Gender Theory through an Unorthodox Interpretation of Ardhanārīśvara.” In *The Bloomsbury Research Handbook of Indian Philosophy and Gender*. Edited by Veena R. Howard. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020.

Avise, John C. *Hermaphroditism: A Primer on the Biology, Ecology, and Evolution of Dual Sexuality*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011.

Ayyar, Subramanya, Jean-Luc Chevillard, and S.A.S. Sarma, eds. “Digital Tēvāram.” https://www.ifpindia.org/digitaldb/site/digital_tevaram/ (accessed May 2023).

Bajpai, Shiva Chandra. *Kinnaur in the Himalayas: Mythology to Modernity*. Michigan: Concept Publishing Company, 1981.

Bajrang Dal. “Profile Pictures.” *Facebook*. https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.468952121942698&type=3 (accessed December 2024).

Bakshi, Kaustav and Arnab Adak. “Androgynous Divinity: Celebrating Transsexuality in the Kolkata Durga Puja.” *In Plainspeak*. https://www.tarshi.net/inplainspeak/ardhanarishwara-celebrating-transsexuality-in-the-kolkata-durga-puja/ (accessed May 2021).

Banerjea, Jitendra Nath. *The Development of Hindu Iconography*. Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1956.

Banerjee, Aheli. “Canadian researchers get hitched in Kolkata trans shelter, with rituals by transwoman.” *The Times of India*. https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kolkata/canadian-researchers-get-hitched-in-city-trans-shelter-with-rituals-by-transwoman/articleshow/94905227.cms (accessed December 2024).

Bansal, Sunita Pant. *Hindu Pilgrimage: The Teerthas*. Delhi: Hindology Books, 2008.

Basu, Indrani. “How India Got Its First Transgender Durga Idol.” *Huffpost*. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/how-india-got-its-first-transgender-durga-idol_n_561ead92e4b028dd7ea65245 (accessed March 2021).

———. “India’s First Transgender Durga Puja will Be In A Small Neighborhood in Kolkata.” *Huffpost*. https://www.huffpost.com/archive/in/entry/india-transgender durga_n_8292488 (accessed May 2021).

Basu, Tapan, Pradip Datta, Sumit Sarkar, Tanika Sarkar, and Sambuddha Sen. *Khaki Shorts and Saffron Flags: A Critique of the Hindu Right*. Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 1993.

Beatty, Andrew. “On Ethnographic Experience: Formative and Informative (Nias, Indonesia).” In *Being There: Fieldwork in Anthropology*. Edited by C.W. Watson. London: Pluto Press, 1999.

Beck, Brenda. “Colour and Heat in South Indian Ritual.” *Man* 4, no.4 (December 1969): 553-572.

Bevilacqua, Daniela. “Are women entitled to become ascetics?” *Kervan International Journal for Afro Asiatic Studies*, no. 21 (July 2017): 51-79.

———. “From the Margins to Demigod: The Establishment of the Kinnar Akhara in India.” *Asian Ethnology* 81, No. 1/2 (2022): 53-82.

Bhaskaran, Suparna. *Made in India: Decolonizations, Queer Sexualities, Trans/national Projects*. New York: Pallgrave Macmillan, 2014.

Bhatt, Niddodi Ramachandra. *Shaivism in the Light of Epics, Purāṇas, and Āgamas*. Varanasi: Indica Books, 2008.

Bhattacharya, Sarbani. "Documentary focusing on the rights of transgender people to start its shoot during durga puja." *Millenium Post.* https://www.millenniumpost.in/bengal/documentary-focusing-on-rights-of-transgender-people-to-start-its-shoot-during-puja-536182?infinitescroll=1 (accessed March 2024).

Bhattacharya, Sayan. "The Transgender Nation and its Margins: The Many Lives of the Law." *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal* 20 (2019): 1-19.

Bhattacharya, Tithi. "Tracking the Goddess: Religion, Community, and Identity in the Durga Puja Ceremonies of Nineteenth-Century Kolkata." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 66, no. 4 (November 2007): 919-962.

Bhattacharyya, Ananda. Introduction to *A History of Dasnami Naga Sannyasis*. Edited by Ananda Bhattacharyya. New Delhi: Manohar Publishers & Distributors, 2018.

Bhattacharyya, Dipak Chandra. *Iconology of Composite Images.* Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1980.

Bhattacharyya, Sromona. "Durga Puja Festivities: Kolkata's Transgenders Organise The First Puja Where Everyone Is Welcome." *The Logical Indian*. https://thelogicalindian.com/exclusive/transgender-durga-puja/ (accessed July 2021).

Biswas, Arpita Phukan. "The Iconography of Hindu(ized) Hijras: Idioms of hijra representation in Northern India." In *Gender, Sexuality, Decolonization: South Asia in the World Perspective*. Edited by Ahonaa Roy. Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2021.

Biswas, Premankur. "God of All Things." *The Indian Express.* https://indianexpress.com/article/lifestyle/god-of-all-things/ (accessed May 2021).

Bockrath, Joseph. "Bhartia Hijro Ka Dharma: The Code of India's Hijra." *Legal Studies Forum* 27, no. 1 (2003): 83-95.

Boisvert, Mathieu. "Cultivating a female body: Appropriation of female rituality (*samskāra*) within the hijra community." In *Rethinking the Body in South Asian Traditions*. Edited by Diana Dimitrova. London and New York: Routledge, 2021.

———. *Les hijras: portrait socioreligieux d'une communauté transgenre sud-asiatique*. Montréal: Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 2018.

Boyce, Paul. "Conceiving *Kothis*: Men Who Have Sex with Men in India and the Cultural Subject of HIV Prevention." *Medical Anthropology* 26, no. 2 (April 2007): 175-203.

Bronner, Yigal and Lawrence McCrea. "The Poetics of Distortive Talk: Plot and Character in Ratnākara's 'Fifty Verbal Perversions' (*Vakroktipañcāśikā*)." *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 29, no. 4 (August 2001): 435-464.

Bunce, Fredrick. *A Dictionary of Buddhist and Hindu Iconography: Objectives, Devices, Concepts, Rites, and Related Terms*. New Delhi: D.K. Printworld, 1997.

Butler, Robert. Introduction to *Sri Arunachala Puranam* by Saiva Ellapa Navalar. Translated by Robert Butler. Tiruvannamalai: Sri Ramanasramam, 2015.

Caldwell, Sarah. "Waves of Beauty, Rivers of Blood: Constructing the Goddess in Kerala." In *Seeking Mahādevī: Constructing the Identities of the Great Hindu Goddesses*. Edited by Tracy Pintchman. New York: SUNY Press, 2001.

Chaturvedi, Rajiv Nayan. "Our Aim is the Regain the Lost Space of Transgender Community in Hindu Religion: Laxmi Narayan Tripathi." *Outlook*. https://www.outlookindia.com/culture-society/eunuchs-have-sacred-place-in-sanatan-dharma-we-are-fighting-to-regain-it-says-trans-activist-laxmi-narayan-tripathi-news-192284 (accessed July 2022).

Chaudhuri, Sumanta Ray. "Durga puja pandals in Kolkata celebrate Supreme Court verdict on section 377." *Hindustan Times*. https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/durga-puja pandals-in-kolkata-celebrate-supreme-court-verdict-on-section-377/story-0cI6dSzu5njtDYiOSsMm2L.html (accessed July 2021).

Chaurasiya, Laxman. "India's transgender became Ardhnarishwar, made Hindus proud on world stage." *Justice News*. https://www.justicenews.co.in/indias-transgender-became ardhnarishwar-made-hindus-proud-on-world-stage/ (accessed March 2025).

Chakraborty, Ajanta. "Ardhanarishwar gets a permanent home after 3 years." *The Times of India*. https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kolkata/ardhanariswar-gets-a-permanent-home-after-3-yrs/articleshow/86850065.cms (accessed November 2023).

Chakraborty, Chandrima. *Masculinity, Asceticism, Hinduism: Past and Present Imaginings of India*. New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2011.

Chakraborty, Yajnaseni. “Durga Puja: How changing times reflect in the goddess.” *Daily News and Analysis*. https://www.dnaindia.com/lifestyle/report-one-pujo-many-avatars-2262533 (accessed May 2021).

Chandra, Soham. “Transgender Durga Idol – Ardhanariswar … Hype, Misconception or Exceptional Interpretation??!!” *Wanderlust* (blog). http://sohamchandra.blogspot.com/2015/10/transgender-durga-idol-ardhanariswar.html (accessed November 2023).

Chawla, Devika. “Subjectivity and the ‘Native’ Ethnographer: Researcher Eligibility in an Ethnographic Study of Urban Indian Women in Hindu Arranged Marriages.” *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 5, no. 4 (December 2006): 13-29.

Chitwood, Ava. *Death by Philosophy: The Biographical Tradition in the Life and Death of the Archaic Philosophers Empedocles, Heraclitus, and Democritus*. Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2004.

Clark-Decès, Isabelle. *The Encounter Never Ends: A Return to the Field of Tamil Rituals.* Albany: SUNY Press, 2007.

Clifford, James. “On Ethnographic Allegory.” In *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Edited by James Clifford and George E. Marcus. Berkley: University of California Press, 1986.

Craddock, Elaine. “Un/Desirable Encounters at the Intersections of Race, Class, and Caste in South Asia. *Feminist Review* 135, no. 1 (December 2023): 126-140.

Curley, David L. “Kings and commerce on an agrarian frontier: Kālteku’s story in Mukunda’s *Caṇḍimaṅgal*.” *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 38, no. 3 (September 2001): 299-324.

Cutler, Norman. *Songs of Experience: The Poetics of Tamil* Devotion. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987.

Dainik Bhaskar Group. “Bhasma Aarti Darshan of Mahakal on Wednesday.” *Dainik Bhaskar*. https://www.bhaskar.com/local/mp/ujjain/news/charming-makeup-in-the-form-of-ardhanarishvara-129384551.html (accessed April 2024).

Daniel, E. Valentine. *Fluid Signs: Being a Person the Tamil Way*. California: University of California Press, 1984.

Daniélou, Alain. *Shiva and the Primordial Tradition: From the Tantras to the Science of Dreams*. Rochester: Inner Traditions, 2003.

Das, Monalisa. "For a progressive puja, Kolkata's first Durga Puja organized by a transgender community." *The News Minute*. https://www.thenewsminute.com/news/progressive puja-kolkatas-first-durga-puja-organized-transgender-community-35231 (accessed November 2023).

Davé, Naisargi N. *Queer Activism in India: A Story in the Anthropology of Ethics*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2012.

Dehejia, Harsha V. *Leaves of a Pipal Tree: Aesthetic Reflections of some Hindu Myths and Symbols*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2005.

———. *Pārvatīdarpaṇa: An exposition of Kashmir Śaivism through the images of Śiva and Pārvatī*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas Publishers, 1997.

Delliswararao, Konduru and Chongneikim Hangsing, "Socio-Cultural Exclusion of Trans-genders in India." *International Journal of Social Sciences and Management* 5, no. 1 (January 2018): 10-17.

Dasgupta, Rohit K. "Launda Dancers: The Dancing Boys of India." *Asian Affairs* 44, no. 3 (October 2013): 442-448.

Doniger, Wendy. *Redeeming the Kamasutra*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.

Doniger, Wendy and Sudhir Kakar. Introduction to *Kamasutra* by Vātsyāyana. Translated and edited by Wendy Doniger and Sudhir Kakar. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Doniger O'Flaherty, Wendy. *Asceticism and Eroticism in the Mythology of Siva*. London: Oxford University Press, 1973.

———. *Śiva: The Erotic Ascetic*. United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 1981.

———. *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980.

Dreger, Alice Domurat. *Hermaphrodites and the Medical Invention of Sex*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1996.

Dutta, Aniruddha and Raina Roy. “Decolonizing Transgender in India: Some Reflections.” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 3 (August 2014): 320-337.

Dutta, Krishna. *Image-makers of the Kumortuli and the Durga Puja Festival*. New Delhi: Niyogi Books, 2016.

Eck, Diana. *Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998.

———. *India: A Sacred Geography*. New York: Three Rivers Press, 2012.

Eliade, Mircea. *The Two and the One*. London: Harvill Press, 1965.

Elison, William. *The Neighborhood of Gods: The Sacred and the Visible at the Margins of Mumbai*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018.

Ellis, Sonia J. “Gender.” In *Intersectionality, Sexuality, and Psychological Therapies: Working with Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Diversity*. Edited by Roshan das Nair and Catherine Butler. Oxford: BPS Blackwell, 2012.

Falk, Harry. “The Early Use of *Nakṣatras*.” In *The Interactions of Ancient Astral* Science. Edited by David Brown. Bremen: Hempen Verlag, 2018.

Flood, Gavin. *An introduction to Hinduism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Flueckiger, Joyce Burkhalter. *Everyday Hinduism*. United Kingdom: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015.

Fuller, C.J. *The Camphor Flame: Popular Hinduism and Society in India.* New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992.

Gaffin, Dennis. *Running with the Fairies: Towards a Transpersonal Anthropology of Religion.* Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012.

Gannon, Shane. “Exclusion as Language and the Language of Exclusion: Tracing Regimes of Gender through Linguistic Representation of the ‘Eunuch.’” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 20, no.1 (January 2011): 1-27.

Garland, David. “What is a ‘history of the present’? On Foucault’s genealogies and their critical preconditions.” *Punishment & Society* 16, no. 4 (October 2014): 365-384.

Gaston, Anne-Marie. *Śiva in Dance, Myth, and Iconography*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982.

Ghai, Rajat. "The Hindu canon is inclusive of the sexuality spectrum: Kavita Kane." *Down to Earth*. https://www.downtoearth.org.in/interviews/governance/the-hindu-canon-is inclusive-of-the-sexuality-spectrum-kavita-kane-92354 (accessed Nov. 2023).

Ghatwai, Milin. "At Simhastha Kumbh, Kinnar Akhara becomes a huge draw." *The Indian Express*. https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/at-simhastha-kumbh-kinnar-akhara-becomes-a-huge-draw-2775463/ (accessed July 2022).

Ghosal, Chandikaprosad. "Kolkata's Changing Puja Ethos." *Economic and Political Weekly* 41, no. 46 (November 2006): 4727-4729.

Ghosh, Annesga. "Kolkata's First Durga Puja By Transgenders Promises to Be Amazing." *Youth Ki Awaaz*. https://www.youthkiawaaz.com/2015/10/first-durga-puja-in-kolkata-by-transgenders/ (accessed May 2021).

Ghosh, Bishwanath. "Landmark Durga Puja for transgender community." *The Hindu*. https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/kolkata/landmark-durga-puja-for-transgender-community/article65878774.ece (accessed November 2023).

———. "Police prevent protest in Kolkata by transgender people miffed over not getting Durga Puja grant." *The Hindu*. https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/kolkata/police-prevent-protest-in-kolkata-by-transgender-people-miffed-over-not-getting-durga-puja-grant/article66001495.ece (accessed December 2024).

Goel, Ina. "India's Third Gender Rises Again." *Sapiens*. https://www.sapiens.org/biology/hijra-india-third-gender/ (accessed June 2022).

———. "Queer Politics of Representation: Ram Mandir and Kinnar Akhada Controversy." *Economic & Political Weekly* 55, no. 4 (January 2020): 1-5.

Gohain, Hiren. "On Saffronisation of Education." *Economic and Political Weekly* 37, no. 46 (November 2002): 4597-4599.

Goldberg, Ellen. "Ardhanārīśvara: An Androgynous Model of God." In *Models of God and Alternative Ultimate Realities*. Edited by Jeanine Diller and Asa Kasher. Germany: Springer Science & Business Media, 2013.

———. *The Lord Who is Half Woman: Ardhanārīśvara in Indian and Feminist Perspective*. New York: State University of New York Press, 2002.

Goldman, Robert. "Transsexualism, Gender, And Anxiety in Traditional India." *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 113, no. 3 (July-September 1993): 374-401.

Goldman, Robert and Sally J. Sutherland Goldman. *Devavāṇīpraveśikā: An Introduction to The Sanskrit Language*. California: IEAS Publications Program, 2004.

Goodall, Dominic. "Dressing for Power: On vrata, caryā, and vidyāvrata in the Early Mantramārga, and on the Structure of the Guhyasūtra of the Niśvāsatattvasaṃhitā." In *Śaivism and the Tantric Traditions: Essays in Honour of Alexis G.J.S. Sanderson*. Edited by Dominic Goodall, Shaman Hatley, Harunaga Isaacson, and Srilata Raman. Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2020.

Goodyear, Sheena. "This rare male-female cardinal is 'something pretty special.'" *CBC News*. https://www.cbc.ca/radio/asithappens/as-it-happens-monday-edition 1.5005086/thisrare-male-female-cardinal-is-something-pretty-special-1.5005090 (accessed September 2024).

Goswami, Kali Prasad. *Kamakhya Temple: Past and Present*. Delhi: A.P.H. Publishing Corporation, 1998.

Govindrajan, Radhika. *Animal Intimacies: Interspecies Relatedness in India's Central Himalayas*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018.

Greaves, Laxshmi Rose. "The Enigma of the Centauress and Her Lover: Investigating a Fifth century Terracotta Panel from Ahichhatrā." In *Framing Intellectual and Lived Spaced in Early South Asia*. Edited by Elizabeth A. Cecil & Lucas den Boer. Germany: De Gruyter, 2020.

Gross, Robert Lewis. *The Sādhus of India: A Study of Hindu Asceticism*. New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 1992.

Hall, Terry. "A Quiet Spot Amidst the Chaos: Sri Ardhanarishvara Shrine, Bangkok." *Cleared and Ready for Takeoff* (blog). https://clearedready.blogspot.com/2012/05/quiet-spot-amidst-chaos-durga-shrine.html (accessed December 2024)

Hausner, Sondra. *Wandering with Sadhus: Ascetics in the Hindu Himalayas*. Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2007.

Hiltebeitel, Alf. *The Cult of Draupadī Vol. 1*: *Mythologies: From Gingee to Kurukṣetra*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1991.

Hinchy, Jessica. "Troubling bodies: 'eunuchs,' masculinity and impotence in colonial North India." *South Asian History and Culture* 4, no. 2 (February 2013): 196-212.

Huju, Kira. "Saffronizing diplomacy: the Indian Foreign Service under Hindu nationalist rule." *International Affairs* 98, no. 2 (March 2022): 423-441.

IANS. "Maa Durga worshipped as Ardhanariswara by Kolkata transgenders." *Hindu Post*. https://hindupost.in/dharma-religion/maa-durga-worshipped-as-ardhanariswara-by-kolkata-transgenders/ (accessed December 2024).

IN Bureau. "Transgenders celebrate Durga Puja in Kolkata worshipping Ardhanarishvara idol." *India Narrative*. https://www.indianarrative.com/culture-news/transgenders-celebrate-durga-puja-in-kolkata-worshipping-ardhanarishvara-idol-26454.html (accessed December 2024).

Ishikawa, Takeshi. "Hijras." *Indian Literature* 55, no. 6 (November/December 2011): 213-228.

Jaffrey, Zia. *The Invisibles: A Tale of the Eunuchs of India*. New York: Vintage Departures, 1996.

Jahner, Joshua P., Lauren K. Lucas, Joseph S. Wilson, and Matthew L. Forister. "Morphological Outcomes of Gynandromorphism in *Lycaeides* Butterflies (Lepidoptera: Lycaenidae)." *Journal of Insect Science* 15, no. 1 (April 2015): 1-8.

Jain, Sushil. "On the Indian Ritual of Abhiṣeka and Mahāmastakābhiṣeka of Bāhubali." *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute* 78, no. 1/4 (1997): 61-86

Jayakar, Pupal. *The Earth Mother: Legends, Goddesses, and Ritual Arts of India*. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1990.

Jha, Dhirendra. "At Kumbh Mela, VHP joins male-dominated akharas in denying demands of women ascetics." *Scroll.in*. https://scroll.in/article/744570/at-kumbh-mela-vhp-joins-male-dominated-akharas-in-denying-demands-of-women-ascetics (accessed June 2022).

Jha, Nishita. "India Just Decriminalized Gay Sex." *Buzz Feed News*. https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/nishitajha/india-section-377-gay-sex (accessed November 2023).

Jha, Sadan. “Challenges in the History of Colours: the case of saffron.” *Indian Economic & Social History Review* 51, no. 2 (June 2014): 199-229.

Johari, Harish. *Tools for Tantra*. Vermont: Destiny Books, 1986.

Jones, Alexandra Mae. “This bird isn’t just half green and blue – it’s half female and half male.” *CTV News*. https://www.ctvnews.ca/climate-and-environment/article/this-bird-isnt-just-half-green-and-half-blue-its-half-female-and-half-male/ (accessed September 2024).

Kalidos, Raju. “Ardhanari in South Indian Cult and Art.” *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 52 (1991): 1037-1043.

———. “The Twain-Face of Ardhanārī.” *Acta Orientalia* 54 (1992): 68-106.

Kandasamy, P. “Ardhanārīśvara: Samples of Cōḻa Masterpieces.” *East and West* 44, no. 2/4 (December 1994): 491-496.

Khan, Md Asghar. “Jharkhand Still Awaits A Transgender Welfare Board.” *Outlook India*. https://www.outlookindia.com/national/jharkhand-still-awaits-a-transgender-welfare board-news-315495 (accessed March 2025).

Khan, Shahnaz. “Trans Individuals and Normative Masculinity in British India and Contemporary Pakistan.” *Hong Kong Law Journal* 6, no. 1 (January 2016): 9-29.

Khandelwal, Meena. *Women in Ochre Robes: Gendering Hindu Renunciation*. New York: SUNY Press, 2004.

Kineer Services. “Homepage.” http://www.kineerservices.com/ (accessed June 2022).

King, Richard. *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and ‘the Mystic East.’* London: Routledge, 1999.

Kinnar Akhāḍā. “Photos.” *Facebook*. https://www.facebook.com/kinnarakhara/ (accessed December 2024).

Kinsley, David. *Hindu Goddesses: Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition*. Berkley: University of California Press, 1988.

———. “Kālī.” In *Encountering Kālī*: *In the Margins, at the Center, in the West*. Edited by Rachel Fell McDermott and Jefferey J. Kripal. Berkley: University of California Press, 2003.

Kramrisch, Stella. *The Presence of Śiva*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1981.

Krishnan, Kripa. “Holy Encounters of the Third Kind.” *Live News Daily*. https://qrius.com/holy-encounters-of-the-third-kind/ (accessed June 2022).

Lahariya, Khabar. “How Kumbh’s Kinnar Akhada Is Changing Attitudes.” *The Wire*. https://thewire.in/lgbtqia/how-kumbhs-kinnar-akhada-is-changing-attitudes (accessed June 2022).

Lahiri, A.N. “Iconography of Ardhanārīśvara on a Tripurā Coin.” In *The Śakti Cult and Tārā*. Edited by D.C. Sircar. Calcultta: Calcutta University, 1960.

Lal, Vinay. “Not This, Not That: The Hijras of India and the Cultural Politics of Sexuality.” *Social Text* 17, no. 4 (Winter 1999): 119-140.

Langston, Amy. “The Intersectionality of Flags, Religion, and the Gay Pride Movement.” *Flag Research Quarterly* 5, no. 12 (May 2017): 1, 3-11.

L’Hernault Francoise and Marie Louise Reiniche. *Tiruvaṇṇāmalai: Rites et fêtes*. Pondicherry: Institut français de Pondichéry, 1989.

Lochtefeld, James G. *God’s Gateway*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.

———. *The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Hinduism Vol. 1*. New York: Rosen Publishing Group, 2002.

———. *The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Hinduism Vol. 2*. New York: Rosen Publishing Group, 2002.

Lutgendorf, Philip. *Hanuman’s Tale: The Messages of a Divine Monkey*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Majumder, Debojit. “Female Impersonators or Human Counterparts of Ardhanariswaras?” In *Androgyny and Female Impersonation in India: Nari Bhav*. Edited by Tutun Mukherjee and Niladri R. Chatterjee. New Delhi: Niyogi Books, 2016.

Mal, Sibsankar and Grace Bahalen Mundu. “Hidden Truth about Ethnic Lifestyle of Indian Hijras.” *Research Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 9, no. 3 (July-September 2018): 621-628.

Mani, Rajiv. “Allahabad: Kinnar akhara to participate in Magh mela.” *The Times of India*. https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/allahabad/allahabad-kinnar-akhara-to-participate-in-magh-mela/articleshow/72918800.cms (accessed May 2024).

Mani, Vettam. *Puranic Encyclopedia: A Comprehensive Dictionary with Special Reference to the Epic and Purāṇic Literature*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1975.

Manoj, G. *Temple Architecture of South India (Salem Region)*. New Delhi: Bharitya Kala Prakashan, 2017.

Mārkaṇḍeya, Ṛṣi. *Devī-Māhātmyam*. Translated by Svāmi Jagadīsvarānanda. Chennai: Sri Ramakrishna Math Printing, 2014.

Mason, Heather. “The Awe-Inspiring Shiva Temple of Actonville, Benoni.” *2 Summers* (blog). https://2summers.net/2022/05/04/the-awe-inspiring-shiva-temple-of-actonville-benoni/ (accessed December 2024).

McDermott, Rachel Fell. *Revelry, Rivalry, and Longing for the Goddesses of Bengal: The Fortunes of Hindu Festivals*. New York: Colombia University Press, 2011.

McDermott, Rachel Fell and Jeffery J. Kripal, eds. *Encountering Kālī: In the margins, at the Center, in the West.* Berkley and Los Angeles: University of Berkley Press, 2003.

McGee, Mary. “Desired Fruits: Motive and Intention in the Votive Rites of Hindu Women.” In *Roles and Rituals for Hindu Women*. Edited by Julia Leslie. Cranbury, New Jersey: Associated University Press, 1991.

McGilvray, Dennis. *Symbolic Heat: Gender, Health & Worship among the Tamils of South India and Sri Lanka*. Ahmedabad: Mapin Publishing Pvt. Ltd., 2003.

McHugh, Ernestine. *Love and Honour in the Himalayas: Coming to Know Another Culture.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001.

Mevissen, Gerd. “Corpus of Ardhanārīśvara Images from Nepal, Eastern India and Southeast Asia.” *Berliner Indologische Studien* 21 (2013): 273-298.

Meyer, Eveline. “Aṅkāḷaparamēcuvari A Goddess of Tamilnadu, her myths and her cult.” PhD dissertation. Universität Heidellberg, 1986.

Mines, Diane. *Fierce Gods: Inequality, Ritual, and the Politics of Dignity in a South Indian Village*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005

Ministry of Home Affairs. “Census Tables.” *Government of India*. https://censusindia.gov.in/census.website/data/census-tables (accessed May 2023).

Mishra, Ishita. “Kinnars find acceptance in vedas and that is enough.” *The Times of India*. https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/dehradun/akhada-parishad-is-male-dominated-and-patriarchal-dont-expect-it-to-recognize-kinnar-akhada/articleshow/81472983.cms (accessed June 2022).

Mishra, Kamalakar. *Kashmir Śaivism*. Varanasi: Indica Books, 2011.

Mishra, Nihar Manjan. *Kamakhya: A Socio-Cultural Study*. Delhi: D.K. Printworld Ltd., 2004.

Mookerjee, Ajit and Madhu Khanna. *The Tantric Way*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1977.

Moorti, Sujata. “A queer romance with the *Hijra*.” *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking* 3, no. 2 (Summer 2016): 18-34.

Mount, Liz. “‘I Am Not a Hijra’: Class, Respectability, and the Emergence of the ‘New’ Transgender Woman in India.” *Gender & Society* 34, no. 4 (2020): 620-647.

Mukherjee, Rushati. “Praying for acceptance.” *Hindustan Times.* https://www.hindustantimes.com/kolkata/praying-for-acceptance/story zCJ1u3U3P2XiZ9RBs5bZUI.html (accessed May 2021).

Muller-Ortega, Paul E. “On the Seal of Śambu: A Poem by Abhinavagupta.” In *Tantra in Practice*. Edited by David Gordon White. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000.

Murugesan, Muthukumar Dr. “Lord Arthanareeswarar Temple.” https://web.archive.org/web/20200117154458/http://arthanareeswarar.com/English/ (accessed May 2023).

Nabokov, Isabella. *Religion Against the Self: An Ethnography of Tamil Rituals*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Nagarajan, Vijaya Rettakudi. “The Earth as Bhu Devi: Toward a Theory of “Embedded Ecologies” in Folk Hinduism.” In *Purifying the Earthly Body of God*I. Edited by Lance E. Nelson. New York: SUNY Press, 1998.

Nahata, Harsha. “Making Room for Oneness.” *The Juggernaut*. https://www.thejuggernaut.com/making-room-for-oneness (accessed December 2024).

Nanda, Serena. *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 1999.

Narayanan, Vasudha. "Diglossic Hinduism: Liberation and Lentils." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 68, no.4 (December 2000): 761-779.

National Legal Services Authority v. Union of India, 5 SCC 438. 2014. Available at https://web.archive.org/web/20140527105348/http://supremecourtofindia.nic.in/outtay/wc40012.pdf (accessed March 2021).

Navalar, Saiva Ellapa. *Sri Arunachala Puranam*. Translated by Robert Butler. Tiruvannamalai: Sri Ramanasramam, 2015.

Nemec, John. *The Ubiquitous Śiva: Somānanda's Śivadṛṣṭi and His Tantric Interlocutors*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Newport, Sarah. "Writing Otherness: Uses of History and Mythology in Constructing Literary Representations of India's Hijras." PhD dissertation. University of Manchester, 2018.

Olmstead, Allen W. and Gerald A. LeBlanc. "The Environmental-Endocrine Basis of Gynandromorphism (Intersex) in a Crustacean," in *International Journal of Biological Sciences* 3, no. 2 (December 2006): 77-84.

Padoux, André. *The Hindu Tantric World: An Overview*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017.

Pal, Alasdair. "From pariah to demi-god: transgender leader a star at Kumbh." *Reuters*. https://www.reuters.com/article/india-religion-kumbh-transgender-idINKCN1PE04J (accessed June 2022).

Pallardy, Richard. "How gynandromorphs manage to be half male and half female." *Earth.Com.* https://www.earth.com/news/gynandromorphs-half-male-half-female/ (accessed September 2024).

Pamment, Claire. "The *Hijra* Clap in Neoliberal Hands: Performing Trans Rights in Pakistan." *TDR: The Drama Review* 63, no. 1 (Spring 2019): 141-151.

Pande, Alka. *Ardhanarishvara the Androgyne: Probing the Gender Within.* New Delhi: Rupa & Co., 2004.

Pandey, Jhimli Mukherjee. “The Women Behind the Goddess.” *The Times of India*. https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/the-women-behind-the goddess/articleshow/54502334.cms (accessed May 2021).

Pareek, Shreya. “Kolkata Welcomes Country’s First Transgender Durga Puja Idol. Breaks All Stereotypes.” *The Better India*. https://www.thebetterindia.com/36364/transgender durga-idol-in-kolkata/ (accessed May 2021).

Parikh, Runa Mukherjee. “By us, for all.” *The Hindu Business Line*. https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/blink/know/by-us-for-all/article25259301.ece (accessed November 2023).

Parry, Jonathon. “The Brahmanical tradition and the technology of the intellect.” In *Reason and Morality*. Edited by Joanna Overing. London: Tavistock Publications Ltd., 1985.

Pattanaik, Devdutt. “How a new akhara of transgendered people stole the spotlight at the Ujjain Kumbh.” *Devdutt*. https://devdutt.com/articles/how-a-new-akhara-of-transgendered-people-stole-the-spotlight-at-the-ujjain-kumbh/ (accessed June 2022).

———. *The Man Who Was a Woman and Other Queer Tales of Hindu Lore*. New York: Harrington Park Press, 2002.

Pearson, Anne Mackenzie. *“Because It Gives Me Peace of Mind:” Ritual Fasts in the Religious Lives of Hindu Women*. New York: SUNY Press, 1996.

Pennington, Brian K. and Amy L. Allocco. Introduction to *Ritual Innovation: Strategic Interventions in South Asian Religion*. Edited by Brian K. Pennington and Amy L. Allocco. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2018.

Peterson, Indira. *Poems to Śiva: The Hymns of the Tamil Saints*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989.

Philip, Kavita. *Civilising Natures: Race, Resources, and Modernity in Colonial South India*. Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2003.

Pinch, William. *Warrior Ascetics and Indian Empires*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Pinkney, Andrea. “Prasāda, the Gracious Gift, in Contemporary and Classical South Asia.” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 81, no. 3 (September 2013): 734-756.

Pinney, Christopher. *'Photos of the Gods:' The Printed Image and Political Struggle in India.* London: Reaktion Books, 2004.

Prasad, Leela. *Poetics of Conduct: Oral Narrative and Moral Being in a South Indian Town*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007.

Prakasham, Priya. "India's first transgender Durga Puja idol in Kolkata is breaking stereotypes in Navaratri 2015!" *India.com*. https://www.india.com/news/india/indias-first-transgender-durga-puja-idol-in-kolkata-is-breaking-stereotypes-in-navratri-2015-638879/ (accessed March 2021).

Pratyay Gender Trust. "About." *Facebook*. https://www.facebook.com/PratyayGenderTrust/ (accessed March 2021).

———. "Text, Tradition, and Imagination: Evoking the Normative in Everyday Hindu Life." *Numen* 53, no. 1 (September 2006): 1-46.

Pugh, Judy. "Into the almanac: time, meaning, and action in north Indian society." *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 17, no. 1 (1983): 27-49.

Pulickal, Anivinda and Tiruchi Siva. "A Story of Two Bills." *Indian Express*. https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/transgenders-persons-bill rajya-sabha-private-member-bill-3195872/ (accessed March 2021).

Raj, B. Palani. *Hail Arunachala*. Chennai: Global Printing Press, 2017.

Rajarajan, R.K.K. "Dance of Ardhanārī as Pattinī-Kaṉṉaki with special reference to the Cillapatikāram." *Berliner Indologische Studien* 13/14 (2000): 401-414.

———. "Dance of Ardhanārī: A Historiographical Retrospection." In *Glimpses of Indian History and Art: Reflections on the Past, Perspectives for the Future*. Edited by Tiziana Lorenzetti and Fabio Scialpi. Italy: Sapienza University of Rome, 2012.

Ram, Ronki. "Religion, identity and empowerment: the making of Ravidassia Dharm (Dalit religion) in contemporary Punjab." In *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary India*. Edited by Knut A. Jacobsen. New York: Routledge, 2016.

Raman, Bhuvaneswari. "Patterns and Practices of Spatial Transformation in Non-Metros: The Case of Tiruchengode." *Economic and Political Weekly* 49, no. 22 (May 2014): 46-54.

Ramberg, Lucinda. *Given to the Goddess: South Asian Devadasis and the Sexuality of Religion*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2014.

Rao, Gopinatha. *Elements of Hindu Iconography Vol. 2, Part 1*. Madras: Law Printing House, 1916.

Rawat, Sandeep. "Akhada Parishad divided over inclusion of 'Kinnar Akhada.'" *Hindustan Times*. https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/akhada-parishad-divided-over-inclusion-of-kinnar-akhada/story-soaupMdHzuOnsTIspFeBZO.html (accessed June 2022).

———. "Third gender seers inducted into Juna Akhara at Kumbh." *Hindustan Times*. https://www.hindustantimes.com/dehradun/third-gender-seers-inducted-into-juna-akhara-at-kumbh/story-t4hCBFdcrpmQqxOimK1rsK.html (accessed June 2022).

Reader, Ian and George Tanabe Jr. *Practically Religious: Worldly Benefits and the Common Religion of Japan*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1998.

Reddy, Gayatri. "Paradigms of Thirdness: Analyzing the Past, Present, and Potential Futures of Gender and Sexual Meaning in India." *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking* 5, no. 3 (Fall 2018): 48-60.

———. *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India*. New Delhi: Yoda Press, 2005.

Revathi, A. *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story.* Translated by V. Geetha. India: Penguin Books India, 2010.

Rodrigues, Hillary. "Bengali Durgā Pūjā: Procedures and Symbolism." In *Nine Nights of the Goddess: The Navarātri Festival in South Asia*. Edited by Caleb Simmons, Moumita Sen, and Hillary Rodrigues. New York: State University of New York Press, 2018.

———. *Introducing Hinduism*. New York: Routledge, 2006.

———. *Ritual Worship of the Great Goddess: The Liturgy of the Durgā Pūjā with Interpretations*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003.

Roy, Tasmayee Laha. "Kolkata to worship its first transgender durga idol this puja." *The Economic Times*. https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/magazines/panache/kolkata-to-worship-its-first-transgender-durga-idol-this-puja/articleshow/49410121.cms (accessed March 2021).

Ṛṣi Mārkaṇḍeya. *Devī-Māhātmyam*. Translated by Svāmi Jagadīsvarānanda. Chennai: Sri Ramakrishna Math Printing, 2014.

Rushdie, Salman. "The Half-Woman God." In *AIDS Sutra*. Edited by Negar Akhavi. New York: Anchor Books, 2008.

Sakthivel, A. "Sri Arunachaleswarar Temple: A Historical Study." *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 70 (2009-2012): 951-959.

Saran, Prem. *Yoga, Bhoga, and Ardhanariswara*: *Individuality, Wellbeing and Gender in Tantra*. London: Routledge, 2008.

Saria, Vaibhav. "Begging for Change: Hijras, law and nationalism." *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 53, no. 1 (February 2019): 1-25.

———. *Hijras, Lovers, Brothers: Surviving Sex and Poverty in Rural India*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2021.

———. "To Be Some Other Name: The Naming Games that Hijras Play." *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal* 12 (October 2015): 1-16.

Sathaye, Adheesh A. *Crossing the Lines of Caste: Viśvāmitra and the Construction of Brahmin Power in Hindu* Mythology. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

Sarkar, Jadunath. "The Ten Orders or Dasnamis." In *A History of the Dasnami Naga Sannyasis*. Edited by Ananda Bhattacharyya. New Delhi: Manohar Publishers & Distributors, 2018.

Sébastia, Brigette. "Preserving Identity or Promoting Safety? The Issue of Mercury in Siddha Medicine: A Brake on the Crossing of Frontier." *Asiatische Studien - Études Asiatiques* 69, no. 4 (2015): 933-969.

Selby, Martha Ann. "Narratives of Conception, Gestation, and Labour in Sanskrit Āyurveda Texts." *Asian Medicine* 1, no. 2 (2005): 254-275.

———. "The Color of Gender: On substance, Sex Determination, and Anatomical Difference in the Medical Texts of Ancient India" (unpublished).

Selvaraj, R. "Arthanareeswarar Images." *Pinterest*. https://in.pinterest.com/pin/797137202826037624/ (accessed December 2024).

Sen, Moumita. “Politics, Religion, and Art in the Durgā Pūjā of West Bengal.” In *Nine Nights of the Goddess: The Navarātri Festival in South Asia*. Edited by Caleb Simmons, Moumita Sen, and Hillary Rodrigues. New York: State University of New York Press, 2018.

Sengupta, Anuradha. “Durga Puja: A Festival For Everyone.” *Outlook Traveller*. https://www.outlookindia.com/outlooktraveller/explore/story/69150/durga-puja-is-a festival-that-is-all-about-inclusion (accessed July 2021).

Shankar, Soumya. “Hindu monastic order is reclaiming transgender people’s status in Indian society.” *Religion News Service*. https://religionnews.com/2019/02/20/hindu-monastic-order-is-reclaiming-transgender-peoples-status-in-indian-society/ (Accessed June 2022).

Sharda, Shailvee. “From Haj pilgrim to leader of the Kinnar Akhara at Kumbh.” *The Times of India*. https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/allahabad/the-haji-who-led-kinnars-at-kumbh-shahi-snan/articleshow/67650171.cms (accessed June 2022).

Sharf, Robert. “Experience.” In *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*. Edited by Mark C. Taylor. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.

Sharma, Arvind. *Ramana Maharshi: The Sage of Arunachala*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2006.

Shore, Cris. “Fictions of Fieldwork: Depicting the ‘Self’ in Ethnographic Writing (Italy).” In *Being There: Fieldwork in Anthropology*. Edited by C.W. Watson. London: Pluto Press, 1999.

Show, Kamala Kanta. “Human Rights Perspectives of the Third Gender in India,” in *The Rights* 1, no. 2 (December 2015): 1-7.

Shukla, Lalit Kumar Dr. *A Study of Hindu Art and Architecture*. Varanasi: Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series Office, 1971.

Shulman, David Dean. *Tamil Temple Myths: Sacrifice and Divine Marriage in the South Indian Śaiva Tradition*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980.

Siliconindia. “Ardhanarishvara: The First Transgender Idol of Durga in India.” *Siliconindia*. https://www.siliconindia.com/news/general/ardhanarishvara-the-first-transgender-idol of-durga-in-india-nid-188275-cid-1.html (accessed November 2023).

Simmons, Caleb and Moumita Sen. “Introduction: Movements of Navarātri.” In *Nine Nights of the Goddess: The Navarātri Festival in South Asia*. Edited by Caleb Simmons, Moumita Sen, and Hillary Rodrigues. New York: State University of New York Press, 2018.

Singh, Amit Kumar. “From Colonial Castaways to Current Tribulation: Tragedy of Indian *Hijra*.” *Unisia* 40, no. 2 (December 2022): 297-314.

Singh, Ankita. “In a First, Transgender ‘Akhada’ Participates in Mahakumbh Rituals at Haridwar.” *The Logical Indian*. https://thelogicalindian.com/inclusivity/transgenders-participate-in-mahakumbh-rituals-27221 (accessed June 2022).

Singh, Neha. “The Ardhanārīśvaramūrti in Early Medieval Indian Temple Art.” *Proceedings from the Indian History of Congress* 75, Platinum Jubilee (2014): 173-177.

Sircar, D.C. *The Śākti Pīṭhas*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1973.

Sivam. “Ardhanareeswarar Temple, Tiruchengode.” *Sarvam Sivamayam* (blog). https://eshwarthegod.blogspot.com/2012/01/ardhanareeswarar-temple-tiruchengode.html (accessed December 2024).

Śivananda, Swami. *All About Hinduism*. Uttar Pradesh: Divine Life Society, 1999.

Sivaramamurti, C. *Nataraja in Art, Thought, and Literature*. Delhi: National Museum, 1974.

Slaje, Walter. “Kalhaṇas Ode an der androgynen Gott Ardhanārīśvarastotra.” *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenlandischen Gesellschaft* 165, no. 2 (2015): 395-416.

Srinivas, Tulasi. *The Cow in the Elevator: An Anthropology of Wonder.* Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2018.

Srinivasan, Doris Meth. *Many Heads, Arms, and Eyes: Origin, Meaning and Form of Multiplicity in Indian* Art. Leiden: Brill, 1997.

Stainton, Hamsa. *Poetry as Prayer in the Sanskrit Hymns of Kashmir*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019.

Stewart, Tony K. “In Search of Equivalence: Conceiving Muslim-Hindu Encounter Through Translation Theory.” In *History of Religions* 40, no. 3 (February 2001): 260-287.

Stimpson, Catherine R. and Gilbert Herdt. Introduction to *Critical Terms for the Study of Gender*. Edited by Catherine R. Stimpson and Gilbert Herdt. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014.

Storm, Rachel. *Indian Mythology: Legends of India, Tibet, and Sri Lanka*. New Delhi: Anness Publishing, 2006.

Svoboda, Robert. *Aghora II: Kundalini*. New Delhi: Rupa Publications, 1994.

Tastevin, Yann Philippe. "From Ox-Carts to Borewell Rigs: Maintenance, Manufacture and Innovation in Tiruchengode." In *Subaltern Urbanization in India: An Introduction to the Dynamics of Ordinary Towns*. Edited by Eric Denis and Marie-Hélène Zérah. New Delhi: Springer India, 2017.

Taylor, Mark C. *After God.* Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2007.

Terry, Jennifer. *Deviant Bodies: Critical Perspectives on Difference in Science and Popular* Culture. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995.

The Pulse India. "Kinnar Akhara takes part in the Shahi Snan of Maha Kumbh." *YouTube* (video), 2:00 (accessed June 2022).

The Rights of Transgender Persons Bill, 2014, Rajya Sabha, Bill No. 49 of 2014 (2014). Available at http://164.100.47.4/BillsTexts/RSBillTexts/asintroduced/trangder-E.pdf (accessed March 2021).

Thilagam, N. Lakshmi and Uttam Kumar Banerjee. "The morphological characteristics of medieval temple towns of Tamil Nadu." *Environment and Planning B: Planning and Design* 43, no. 1 (2016): 7-33.

Times News Network. "Akhara Parishad not to admit Kinnar Akhara." *The Times of India*. https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/allahabad/akhara-parishad-not-to-admit-kinnar-akhara/articleshow/55675491.cms (accessed April 2022).

Times News Network. "Ram temple: Kinnar Akhara Member Attends Ram Temple Consecrated Ceremony in Ayodhya." *The Times of India*. https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/allahabad/kinnar-akhara-member-attends-ram-temple-consecration-ceremony-in-ayodhya/articleshow/106972925.cms (accessed May 2024).

Tiruchengode Municipality. “Municipality at a Glance.” *Commissionerate of Municipal Administration*. https://www.tnurbantree.tn.gov.in/thiruchengode/ (accessed May 2023).

TN Temples Project. “Ardhanareeswarar, Tiruchengode, Namakal.” *TN Temples Project* (blog). https://tntemplesproject.in/2015/10/01/ardhanareeswarar-tiruchengode-namakkal/ (accessed December 2024).

Torella, Raffaele. *The Īśvarapratyabhijñākārikā of Utpaladeva: Critical Edition and Annotated Translation*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Limited, 2002.

Törzsök, Judit. “The rewriting of a Tantric tradition: from the Siddhayogeśvarīmata to the Timirodghāṭana and beyond.” *Hal: Open Science* (2012): 1-15.

Towle, Evan B. and Lynn M. Morgan. “Romancing the Transgender Native: Rethinking the Use of the ‘Third Gender’ Concept.” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 8, no. 4 (2002): 469-497.

Trans, Gender Nonconforming, and Intersex Collectives. “Trans, Gender Nonconforming & Intersex Collectives Strongly Condemn Kinnar Akhara’s Support for Ram Temple at Ayodhya, India.” *Sampoorna*. https://sampoornaindiablog.wordpress.com/2018/11/24/trans-gender-nonconforming-intersex-collectives-strongly-condemn-kinnar-akharas-support-for-ram-temple-at-ayodhya-india/ (accessed July 2022).

Tripathi, Laxmi Narayan. *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi*. Translated by P.G. Joshi and R. Raj Rao. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

Tripathi, Laxmi Narayan and Pooja Pande. *Red Lipstick: The Men in My Life*. Haryana: Penguin Random House India, 2016.

Trouillet, Pierre-Yves. “Hindu Temples and Development of Localities in Tamil Nadu (South India).” In *Subaltern Urbanization in India: An Introduction to the Dynamics of Ordinary Towns*. Edited by Eric Denis and Marie-Hélène Zérah. New Delhi: Springer India, 2017.

Upadhyay, Nishant. “Hindu Nation and its Queers: Caste, Islamophobia, and De/coloniality in India.” *International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 22, no. 4 (2020): 464-480.

Urban, Hugh. “India’s Darkest Heart.” In *Encountering Kālī: In the margins, at the Center, in the West*. Edited by Rachel Fell McDermott and Jeffery J. Kripal. Berkley: University of California Press, 2003.

———. *Tantra: Sex, Secrecy, Politics and Power in the Study of* Religion. Berkley: University of California Press, 2003.

———. *The Power of Tantra: Religion, Sexuality, and the Politics of South Asian Studies*. New York: I.B. Taurus, 2010.

Van Straten, Roelof. *An Introduction to Iconography*. Translated by Patricia de Man. New York: Taylor & Francis, 1994.

Vanita, Ruth and Saleem Kidwai. "Introduction: Modern Indian Materials." In *Same-Sex Love in India: Readings from Literature and History*. Edited by Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2001.

Vembar, Sreevasta. "Transgender community celebrates Durga puja with special Ardhanarishvara idol in Kolkata." *The Tatva*. https://thetatva.in/art-culture/transgender-community-celebrates-durga-puja-with-special-ardhanarishvara-idol-in-kolkata/7959/ (accessed December 2024).

Venkatesananda, Swami. *The Concise Srimad Bhagavatam*. New York: SUNY Press, 2010.

Vilain, Eric, John C. Achermann, Erica A. Eugster, Vincent R. Harley, Yves Morel, Jean D. Wilson, and Olaf Hiort. "We used to call them hermaphrodites." *Genetics in Medicine* 9, no. 2 (February 2007): 65-66.

Watts, Alan. "The Essential Lectures of Alan Watts – Time." Lecture recorded 1972. *The Library of Consciousness*. https://www.organism.earth/library/document/essential lectures-6 (accessed December 2024).

White, David Gordon. Introduction to *Tantra in Practice*. Edited by David Gordon White. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000.

———. *Kiss of the Yoginī: "Tantric Sex" in its South Asian* Contexts. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003.

———. *The Alchemical Body: Siddha Traditions in Medieval India*. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1996.

Yadav, Neeta. *Ardhanārīśvara in Art and Literature*. New Delhi: D.K. Printworld Ltd., 2001.

Zwilling, Leonard and Michael Sweet. “The Evolution of Third-Sex Constructs in Ancient India: A Study in Ambiguity.” In *Invented Identities: The Interplay of Gender, Religion and Politics in India*. Edited by J. Leslie and M. McGee. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.

———. “The First Medicalization: The Taxonomy and Etiology of Queerness in Classical Indian Medicine.” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 3, no. 4 (April 1993): 590-607.

Appendix: Ethics Certificates[1]

CERTIFICATION OF ETHICAL ACCEPTABILITY
FOR RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMAN SUBJECTS

Name of Applicant:	Philip Lagace
Department:	Faculty of Arts and Science\Religion
Agency:	N/A
Title of Project:	The Living traditions of Ardhanārīśvara: An Ethnographic Study
Certification Number:	30012889

Valid From: May 19, 2020 To: May 18, 2021

The members of the University Human Research Ethics Committee have examined the application for a grant to support the above-named project, and consider the experimental procedures, as outlined by the applicant, to be acceptable on ethical grounds for research involving human subjects.

Richard DeMont

Dr. Richard DeMont, Chair, University Human Research Ethics Committee

[1] Note that the project name reflects a previous working title.

CERTIFICATION OF ETHICAL ACCEPTABILITY
FOR RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMAN SUBJECTS

Name of Applicant:	Philip Lagace
Department:	Faculty of Arts and Science\Religion
Agency:	N/A
Title of Project:	The Living traditions of Ardhanārīśvara: An Ethnographic Study
Certification Number:	30012889

Valid From: October 20, 2020 To: October 19, 2021

The members of the University Human Research Ethics Committee have examined the application for a grant to support the above-named project, and consider the experimental procedures, as outlined by the applicant, to be acceptable on ethical grounds for research involving human subjects.

Richard DeMont

Dr. Richard DeMont, Chair, University Human Research Ethics Committee

CERTIFICATION OF ETHICAL ACCEPTABILITY
FOR RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMAN SUBJECTS

Name of Applicant:	Philip Lagace
Department:	Faculty of Arts and Science\Religion
Agency:	N/A
Title of Project:	The Living traditions of Ardhanārīśvara: An Ethnographic Study
Certification Number:	30012889

Valid From: October 19, 2021 To: October 18, 2022

The members of the University Human Research Ethics Committee have examined the application for a grant to support the above-named project, and consider the experimental procedures, as outlined by the applicant, to be acceptable on ethical grounds for research involving human subjects.

Richard DeMont

Dr. Richard DeMont, Chair, University Human Research Ethics Committee

CERTIFICATION OF ETHICAL ACCEPTABILITY
FOR RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMAN SUBJECTS

Name of Applicant:	Philip Lagace
Department:	Faculty of Arts and Science\Religions and Cultures
Agency:	N/A
Title of Project:	The Living traditions of Ardhanārīśvara: An Ethnographic Study
Certification Number:	30012889

Valid From: September 09, 2022 To: September 08, 2023

The members of the University Human Research Ethics Committee have examined the application for a grant to support the above-named project, and consider the experimental procedures, as outlined by the applicant, to be acceptable on ethical grounds for research involving human subjects.

Dr. David Waddington, Chair, University Human Research Ethics Committee

CERTIFICATION OF ETHICAL ACCEPTABILITY
FOR RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMAN SUBJECTS

Name of Applicant:	Philip Lagace
Department:	Faculty of Arts and Science\Religions and Cultures
Agency:	N/A
Title of Project:	The Living traditions of Ardhanārīśvara: An Ethnographic Study
Certification Number:	30012889

Valid From: September 08, 2023 To: September 07, 2024

The members of the University Human Research Ethics Committee have examined the application for a grant to support the above-named project, and consider the experimental procedures, as outlined by the applicant, to be acceptable on ethical grounds for research involving human subjects.

Richard DeMont

Dr. Richard DeMont, Chair, University Human Research Ethics Committee