

Ardhanarishvara



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Ardhanarishvara, (Sanskrit: “Lord Who Is Half Woman”) composite male-female figure of the Hindu god Shiva together with his consort Parvati. As seen in many Indian and Southeast Asian sculptures, the right (male) half of the figure is adorned with the traditional ornaments of Shiva. Half of the hair is piled in a hairdress of matted locks, half of a third eye is visible on

the forehead, a tiger skin covers the loins, and serpents are used as ornaments. The left (female) half shows hair well combed and knotted, half of a tilak (a round dot) on the forehead, the eye outlined in black, a well-developed breast, a silk garment caught with girdles, an anklet, and the foot tinted red with henna.

The symbolic intent of the figure, according to most authorities, is to signify that the male and female principles are inseparable. A predecessor of Ardhanarishvara appears in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, which states that the first creature “was of the same size and kind as a man and woman closely embracing. He caused himself to fall into two pieces, and from him a husband and wife were born.”

A popular explanation of the Shaivite form of this figure, as given in a collection of legends known as the *Shiva-purana*, is that the god Brahma created male beings and instructed them in turn to create others, but they were unable to do so. When Shiva appeared before him in an androgynous form, Brahma realized his omission and created females.

Yet another legend has it that the sage (*rishi*) Bhringi had vowed to worship only one deity and so failed to circumambulate and prostrate himself before Parvati. Parvati tried to force him to do so by asking Shiva to unite with her in one form. However, the sage assumed the form of a beetle, pierced a path through the middle of the androgyne, and continued to circumambulate only the male half. Parvati at first cursed Bhringi to become nothing but a skeleton (in classical Hindu embryology, the father gives a child only the bones and sinew while the mother gives the blood and flesh), but eventually they were reconciled, and she blessed him.

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