

The Unique Image of *Ardhanārīśvara* of Dehabandh Village of North Bengal: An Iconographic Study

Rajeswar Roy and A.C. Sahoo *

Assistant Professor of History, M.U.C Women's College,
Burdwan (West Bengal), India, Phone No

Abstract: An *Ardhanārīśvara* (i.e. half male and half female) form of Śiva found at Dehabandh village under Kushamdi Police Station, now preserved in Dakshin Dinajpur District Museum at Balurghat (South Dinajpur District, West Bengal, India) is a notable, and also unique specimen of sculptural art of Bengal. The image which may be assigned to the 12th century AD in the Pala-Sena Period is made of black basalt. The image of *Ardhanārīśvara* form of Śiva is four-armed, standing on lotus pedestal, accompanied by four two-armed attendants- Mahākāla, Nandina Kārtiya or Skanda, and Gaṇeśa. At apex the three niches occupied by four armed seated figure of the Trimurti - Śiva (centre), Brahmā (right), and Viṣṇu (left) - all with their vāhanas (carrier). The whole family of Śiva-Pārvati has been highlighted in the sculptural work.

Key Words: *Ardhanārīśvara*, Hermaphrodite, sculptural art, Śakti cult, niche

Introduction

The name of *Ardhanārīśvara* is associated with three words - *Ardha*, *Nārī* and *Īśvara* - meaning *Īśvara* (Śiva) with *Nārī* (Pārvati) as his *Ardha* (half). A form where the same body is shared by Śiva and Pārvati each of who represent one half of the complete image (Tewari, 1979). Śiva seems to be closer to the famous myths of man-woman unity where as the cause of the creation, the male and female counter parts are always recited as being interdependent and merging together.

The form of *Ardhanārīśvara* of the deity signifies the merger of the bodies of Śiva and Śakti into one in which the right half is male, and the left being female. In the other words, this *Ardhanārīśvara* image of Śiva symbolizes the syncretic ideology- the union of Śiva and Śakti, the primeval parents of the 'Universe'.¹ It is this ideological union of Śiva and Śakti, which has been described by many early Vedic and later texts.

Some eminent scholars have referred to *Ardhanārīśvara* as a Hermaphrodite of Indian myth. The neutral, uncreative substratum first divides itself into substance and energy, into a male and female principle. This is symbolized in the Hermaphrodite (*Ardhanārīśvara*) - half male and half female - whose nature is pure lust (Danie'lou, 1964).

¹ *Bagarthaviva samprktau bagartha –pratipattaye Jagatah pitarau vande Parvati-Paramesvarau Bagartahapratipattaye bande* Raghuvansam, by Kalidasa Canto 1, v.1 (Pārvati and Paramesvara means Śiva, the parent of the universe are eternally connected with each other like words and their significance).

Objective of the Study

The topic of the present study is 'The Unique Image of *Ardhanārīśvara* of Dehabandh Village of North Bengal: An Iconographic Study' and the main objective is to undertake a critical study of the *Ardhanārīśvara* form of Śiva. The author wants to highlight the *Ardhanārīśvara* form in sculptural art and to make an in-depth study of various manifestations of the *Ardhanārīśvara* in the Pala-Sena period of Bengal.

Methodology

The methodology followed in the study is both library works and field study. Primary sources were collected and consulted meticulously. Secondary sources such as District Gazetteers, Journals, periodicals, Weeklies, Newspapers, research articles, and various other reliable sources related to my study also are collected and consulted. For this purpose, the author visited various archeological sites and different museums of West Bengal and closely observed the images of *Ardhanārīśvara*, and took photographs.

Origin and Myth

Diverse descriptions the image of the *Ardhanārīśvara* form is seen in the Purānas, epics and other ancient texts. It is stated in the mythology of *Vāyu Purāna*² (Tarkaratna, 1397) and *Viṣṇu Purāna* (Wilson & Hazra, 1961) that Rudra, i.e. Śiva was born as *Ardhanārīśvara* form from Brahmā's wrath. The same myth was repeated in

² "Tasyarosat shamutyapanna purusoharkasamadyuti Ardhanarinarava puste jasa jwalanopama". (Śiva was born as Ardhanarisvara form of Brahma's wrath)

the *Brahmānda Purāna* (Shastri, 1989) but here, *Ardhanārīśvara* form of *Śiva* was divided into two forms as *Śiva* and *Pārvati*. 'Shristikhanda' of the *Padma Purāna* stated that Brāhmani was pleased and blessed to *Śiva (Hara)* and *Pārvati* to unite them into a one combined body. It is stated in the *Kālikā Purāna*³ (Tarkaratna, 1384) that Brāhmani, i.e. *Pārvati(Gauri)* prayed to *Śiva* to have his body to be embraced in constant happiness. *Śiva* was pleased, and they both took half of their body and became *Ardhanārīśvara*. Thus *Śiva* has been represented as *Ardhanārīśvara* form not only in the Purānas but also in the 'Anuśāshana Episode'⁴ (Singh, 1996) of the great epic, *Mahābhārata*.

Beautiful descriptions of the inner meaning of the comprehensive body of *Śiva-Pārvati (Sakti)* are available in the '*Raghuvamśam*' (Ray, 1911) of Kālidāsa. Kālidāsa called this form of *Siva* '*Kāntāśangmishradeha*', meaning 'in which form *Śiva* is fully associated with *Kāntā(Lady)*, i.e. '*Pārvati*'. Before 5th Century AD, Vedic literature also made references to the combined body of male-female cult, or the comprehensive body of two opposite form of *Śakti*. Some scholars assumed that *Paśupati Śiva* found in Harappan civilization is the form of *Ardhanārīśvara* of *Siva*. An image of *Ardhanārīśvara* has been found in the gold coin during the Kushana period (Agrawala, 1957). This type of image has been excavated at Basarh in the Gupta period. A lot of *Ardhanārīśvara* images have been found in several places of India during the Gupta and the post-Gupta period (Banerjea, 1941).

Discussion:

Images of *Umā-Maheśvara* are available in Bangladesh, but the *Ardhanārīśvara* form of *Siva* is comparatively rare in Bangladesh (Roy, 1412). Two-armed image of *Ardhanārīśvara* has been found at Purapara, Munshiganj District in Bangladesh (now preserved in the Varendra Research Museum, Rajshahi). This is one of the best specimens among Pala-Sena Sculptures of West Bengal and Bangladesh (Majumder, 1943). Another important and notable image of *Ardhanārīśvara* form of *Siva* have been excavated from Dehabandh village (under Kushmandi Police Station) in the District of North Dinajpur of West Bengal (Sarasvati, 1927) and at Panchantala (Ray & Mandal, 2013) near Sodpur in the District of 24th Parganas of West Bengal. Eminent Scholars discussed and interpreted different dimensions of the image of *Ardhanārīśvara* of Purapara, Bangladesh. But no eminent scholar discussed in details about the *Ardhanārīśvara* which has been discovered at Dehabandh (now preserved in the Dakshin Dinajpur District Museum, South

Dinajpur District of West Bengal, India) though it's a notable and important specimen of sculptural art of Bengal. S. K. Sarasvati (Sarasvati, 1927) and other scholars focused on this sculptural work but it was not in details. So, this is the little bit of attempt to focus on this *Ardhanārīśvara* form of *Śiva*.

The image of *Ardhanārīśvara* may have two, four or even eight arms. Three handed form of *Ardhanārīśvara* is to be found in South India. The artists strictly followed the classical rule at the time of creation of *Ardhanārīśvara* form. If there are four arms, one of the right hands should be held in *abhaya-pose* with the other holding *parasu*, or one hand may also be in *varadā-pose* with the other carrying a *trisula(trident)*. The right portion of the *Ardhanārīśvara* body is surrounded snake, dragon earrings ear. Besides the image wears a tiger skin wrapped, and the sex organ is covered by ornaments and garments. The chest on the right side should also be of a man. Garments should cover up to knee or below the lions only. On the left part of the body (i.e. the portion of *Pārvati*), there should be a *Karanda-Mukutā*, on the forehead a half a *tilaka mark* or *Simanta*, *Kundala(earring)* in the ear, water-lily and mirror in the hand, while arms are covered with bangles. In addition, there should be well developed breast or bosom. Other features include third eye (i.e. *Trinayana* in the forehead), the accompaniment of *Maheśwari Nandi* and Lions of *Pārvati*, *Siva's trident*, and attendants, etc (Dasgupta, 2000).

The statue of *Ardhanārīśvara* form of *Siva* excavated at Dehabandh village (under Kushmandi Police Station) in the District of South Dinajpur, West Bengal and now preserved in the Dakshin Dinajpur District Museum in Balurghat in the District of South Dinajpur can be treated as ideal pattern of sculptural work in Bengal as well as entire Eastern India. Surprisingly, however, the critics, eminent scholars did not properly highlight it. This image which may be assigned to the 12th century AD in the Pala Period is made of black basalt stone. The statue is 46 inches (116.84 cm) in height and 24 inches (60.91cm) in length. This image of *Ardhanārīśvara* is made of a full large carved black stone with sound techniques and exquisite craft. The image was made by contemporary artists of Bengal followed by the rules of Classical art (*Śāstriya Vidhi*).

Name of the Image: Ardhanarisvara

Finding Spot: Dehabandha, South Dinajpur

Size: 116.84 cm x 60.91cm

Date: c.12th Century AD

Picture: Courtesy by Dakshin Dinajpur District Library

³ "To Brahmabarahay namaskritya mahaujase Ardhanarisvarang kayaddevang vyajayata"

⁴"Tumi Ardhanarisvara, Vrisabahana o gajendragamana"



(Ardhanarisvara Dehabandh, West Bengal)

The image of *Ardhanārīśvara* which has been excavated at Dehabandh village (under Kushmandi Police Station) is four-armed, standing on lotus pedestal, and accompanied by four two-armed attendants, *Mahākāla* and *Nandina* (right behind Śiva's Bull, *Kārtiya* or *Skanda* and *Ganeśa* (left, behind *Uma*'s Lion). A peculiar *Trisula* (trident) is in the right upper hand of the statue, at the bottom of the right hand there is nothing but it is in *Varada* pose. The statue is standing on the lotus pedestal (Mevisse, 2013). Coronet head of the statue is rich ornaments; *Trinayana* (Third Eye) and *Simanta* or *Tilaka* mark are on the forehead with two eyes half-closed. Lifted hood of a serpent (*Nāgayajñopāvita*) on Siva's neck is on the right. The actual representation of Siva- *Ardhanārīśvara* wears *Nāgayajñopāvita* where the breast from the *Pārvati* side is nicely shown covered with the serpent hood (Tewari, 1979). The left part of the body, i.e. the part of the *Pārvati*'s, *Kundala* (earring) is in the ear, holding a trident in the upper left hand and a small *jāra* (ghata) in the lower left hand. It appears that the Sari is draped around the female sculpture in a particular fashion - the lower part of the yard is draped around the waist while the upper part goes across the shoulder and falls down at the back though it is not visible in the statue. The left foot of the image, i.e. the foot of *Pārvati*'s is beautifully tied with fold of Sari's and the lower left hand is bejeweled with bangles (*Keyūra*) and other ornaments. On the other hand, the male part of the image (i.e. part of Siva) is dressed in men's clothing. Surprisingly, sex organs of the image are beautifully covered with beautiful ornaments and

dresses of *Śiva-Pārvati*. The navel coupe of the image is very clear in the figure.

The special features of this image of *Ardhanārīśvara* that at apex the three niches occupied by four-armed seated, figure of the *Trimurti* – *Śiva* (centre), *Brahmā* (right) and *Visnu* (left) with their *vāhanas* (carrier) accompanied by two kneeling worshipers (male on the right and female on the left) in *navaratha* pedestal. Another kneeling worshiper is beneath of the central Siva at apex (Mevisse, 2013). With regards to their structures, heights, artistry, gesture of these images are distinguished. The ideological sense of these images seemed to be different. They looked at the opposite from one another.

Kārtikeya and *Ganeśa* (behind *Umā*'s Lion) two sons of *Śiva-Pārvati* are standing at the bottom left of the image, and *Mahākāla* and *Nandina* at the right behind the Siva's Bull. The owl, *Vāhana* of goddess *Laxmi* is just above the *Nandi*, and a male figure is above the owl. Just above the owl a running horse is present and a female figure is on the running horse in praying pose. Running horse is considered a symbol of progress. Exactly in the same way, on the left side an image of a carved elephant with a male figure on his back in a sitting posture is sculpted. A running horse is positioned just above the elephant, there is a man sitting on a horse who is perhaps riding it. On both sides of the statue there are two two-crocodiles biting the legs of the male figures. A girl is dancing on the head of these crocodile. It is really a very rare and fine sculptural work in Bengal.

Conclusion

The most surprising thing is that all the parts of the statue were formed by carving on a single large black stone. From the outside it would seem that the other carved statue beside the *Ardhanārīśvara* image has been fitted separately cutting from another place. The whole statue was carved from a large piece of black stone. Though, the period lacked technological progress compared to that of ours, it is surprising to note that how such minute details could be sculpted with such an enterprise. There is no doubt that the contemporary artists of Bengal - particularly belonging to North Bengal, had unquestionable skills. These artistic activities are considered to be valuable resources in Bengal as well as in the entire Eastern India. (Roy, 2015)

The artists of Bengal engraved not only the image of *Ardhanārīśvara* form of Siva but also highlighted the whole family of *Śiva-Pārvati*. It is a great achievement and commendable act for the artists of Bengal, particularly belonging to North Bengal. The composite forms of Siva which have been found in Bengal as well as in Bangladesh are relatively very few. The worship of *Ardhanārīśvara* was not too much popular in Bengal. The individual images of

Śiva and *Pārvati* were more popular than the combined form of *Śiva-Pārvati* (Roy Chowdhury 1983-84). The sculptors of Bengal not only created this superb form of art from a religious point of view but also contributed to the uplift of the society by emphasizing the equality of men and women - thus giving women their deserved place in the social hierarchy. (Roy, 2015)

Acknowledgement

I would like to offer special thanks to my guide, Prof Ananda Chandra Sahoo, Department of Ancient Indian History, Culture and Archaeology,

Visva-Bharati who inspired and encouraged me to take sculptural art as my area of research. I am very grateful to the members of the Dakshin Dinajpur District Museum who gave me opportunity to take photographs of the image of *Ardhanarisavara*. I would also like to thank Mr Fazlul Haque, (Technical Assistant and In-Charge of the Museum) and other staff of Akshay Kumar Maitriyee Museum of North Bengal University who permitted me to use the valuable books of Museum Library. My acknowledgement is also due to my friend Prof Milan Ch. Roy who pleased enough to give company during the study.

References:

- Agrawala, V, S. (1957). *A Catalogue of Brahmanical Images in Mathura Art*. Uttar Pradesh: Historical Society. 27-28
- Banerjea, J, N. (1956). *Development of Hindu Iconography*. Delhi: Kessinger Publishing. 181-182
- Danielou, A. (1964). *Hindu Polytheism*, London: 46-47
- Dasgupta, K, K. (2000). *Pratima Shilpe Hindu Deb-Debi*. Kolkata: Paschim Banga Bangla Academy. 243-245
- Majumder, R.C. (1943). *History of Bengal*, Dacca: Bharatiya Vidya-Bhavan. 445-446
- Mevissen Gerd, J, R. (2013). Corpus of *Ardhanarisvara* Images from Nepal, Eastern India and South East Asia. *Berlin Indological Studies*, 21, 286-287.
- Ray, S. & Mandal, B. (2013). *The Reappearance of the Lord: Dhoyi's Ardhanarisvara Resurrected?* . *Berlin Indological Studies*, 21, 267-272.
- Ray, V. S. (1911). *Raghuvamsam* (15th Ed.). Kolkata: 1-2
- Roy, N. (1412). *Bangalir Itihasa* (Adiparva), (5th Ed.). Calcutta: Dey's publishing. 655-656
- Roy Chowdhury, J (1983-84). *Worship of Ardhanarisvara in Ancient Bengal*. *Journal of Ancient Indian History*, 14(1), 244-249.
- Roy, R. (2015). *Composite Sculptures of North Bengal (c. 800-c.1200 AD): An Iconographic Study*. *International Journal of Research in Social Sciences*, 5(1):10-20
- Sarasvati, S.K. (1927). Notes on a Third Tour in the District of Dinajpur –chiefly along the Chiramati River, *Journal and Proceedings of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, 28, 185-195.
- Shastri, G. (1989). *Brahmanada Purana*. Kolkata: Nabapatra Prakashan. 34-35
- Tarkaratna, P. (1384, B. S). (Ed.). *Kalika Puranam*. Kolkata: Nababharata Publishers. 222-223
- Tarkaratna, P. (1397, B.S). *Vayu Puranam*. (Ed.). Kolkata: Nababharata Publishers. 56-59
- Tewari, S, P. (1979). *Hindu Iconography*. Delhi: Agam Kala Prakashan. 43-44
- Singh, K. (1403, B.S). (Ed.). *Mahabharata, Anushasana Parva*. Kolkata: Tuli Kalam. 888-889
- Wilson, H.H. and Hazra, R.C. (1961). *The Visnu Purana (A System of Hindu Mythology and Tradition)*. Kolkata: Puthi Pustak. 6-7