

**Ardhanārīśvara in Tiruchengode, Tamil Nadu: A Case Study**

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## **Abstract**

There has been a persistent tendency in the study of religion to emphasize its textual and historical elements, at the expense of ritual, practice, and custom. This trend is evident in the available academic works concerning the androgynous Hindu deity, Ardhanārīśvara. Scholarship largely overlooks Ardhanārīśvara in living context, including information about dedicated sites of worship. To attend to this gap, this project explores Ardhanārīśvara in Tiruchengode, Tamil Nadu, as it is home to a hilltop temple wherein Ardhanārīśvara is the presiding deity. An analysis of my fieldwork observations and impressions yields two types of contributions. The first relates to areas of previous scholastic focus; new information is provided on Ardhanārīśvara iconography, mythological narratives, and regarding interpretations of the figure. The second type of contribution involves unexplored content, including information on the aforementioned site of worship and the place of Ardhanārīśvara in ritual within this context. Additionally, the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of this thesis stress understanding observable phenomena as dynamic. This led to astute observations regarding Ardhanārīśvara that also go delineated. These provisions reaffirm the significance of those areas identified as overlooked in the study of religion and provide a more robust treatment of the figure.

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I am immensely grateful to my supervising professor, Dr. Braj Sinha, whose insights have greatly assisted this project and my life in general. I am also very thankful to my committee members, Dr. George Keyworth, Dr. Lisa Vargo, and Susan Shantz, whose support and feedback helped this thesis come to fruition. A special thanks also goes to the graduate chair, Dr. Mary Ann Beavis, for her involvement throughout my program.

## **Dedication**

I dedicate this thesis to my parents: to my father for introducing me to India and for his work ethic and sense of adventure, and to my mother for her sense of compassion.

## **Note**

For all non-English terms I provide Romanization, with diacritics, in italics.

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## Introduction

Vibrant illustrations of enigmatic deities are what first drew me to Hinduism. From a mischievous blue baby, to a muscular monkey hoisting an entire mountain, to a dark goddess with a bloody tongue, the visuals of Hinduism struck me as altogether fascinating. Much of India, known for its prevalent Hindu population, is punctuated with such images. South India contains monumental towers covered in rainbow-coloured sculptures of mythological figures, stickers of goddesses stare from car windows, and gods adorn the signboards of various shops. In fact, the images are so pervasive that some argue it is perhaps more sensible for students of Hinduism to begin by familiarizing themselves with the iconography of the Hindu pantheon rather than attempting to proceed chronologically from some distant historical point, which often happens to be the case.<sup>1</sup> The project at hand intuitively began in this manner. I allowed my initial attraction to the rich images serve as my departure point. I was leafing through volumes of artwork depicting the Hindu pantheon and paused when I came across Ardhanārīśvara. Ardhanārīśvara is a composite deity; its body is split into male and female halves by a vertical axis.<sup>2</sup> The explicit use of symbolism intrigued me. I decided to focus on this figure and familiarize myself with the available information centering on it.

Meanwhile, I was also reading critiques of the academic study of Hinduism and began relating them to the material on Ardhanārīśvara. The misconceptions and gaps in scholarship purported by these authors appeared relevant. Concordantly, the literature I have accessed largely ignores Ardhanārīśvara in living context, including information about sites of worship.

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<sup>1</sup> Diana Eck, *Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 17. The distant historical point referenced here generally involves the Indus Valley civilization with a focus on the ancient cities, Harappa and/or Mohenjo-Daro. An emphasis on these historical antecedents may reflect Western biases, including a tendency towards a linear conceptualization of time and an infatuation with beginnings. There will be more about biases in the study of religion in the following chapter.

<sup>2</sup> The masculine half is invariably attributed to Śiva and the feminine to Śakti, whose iconographic features are often akin to the goddess Pārvatī. Information regarding Ardhanārīśvara, including its iconographic features will be presented in chapter two.

Instead, it focuses primarily, and often solely, on Ardhanārīśvara iconography, mythological narratives, and their philosophical interpretations. However, I learned of a temple in the South Indian state, Tamil Nadu, where Ardhanārīśvara is the principal deity. To attend to this gap in scholarship, and provide a fuller view of Ardhanārīśvara, I conducted fieldwork at this site. The findings produced are significantly contributive and in several ways present an Ardhanārīśvara unoffered in current academia.

This introductory chapter will summarize the content of the chapters to follow. The first section introduces theoretical and methodological issues, the second provides an overview of relevant literature pertaining to Ardhanārīśvara, the third focuses on fieldwork observations and impressions, and the final section will familiarize the reader with the conclusions and contributions of this project.

### **Chapter One: Contextualizing Ardhanārīśvara**

The first chapter introduces the reader to relevant theoretical and methodological issues. This includes an overview of critiques that highlight biases, misconceptions, and omissions in the study of Hinduism. Accordingly, it acknowledges the ‘world religion paradigm,’ Orientalism, and their contentious relation to Hinduism. This chapter also delineates current approaches meant to address the above matters. Contemporary trends include giving voice to the previously unheard, recognizing Hinduism in terms of diversity, complexity, and fluidity, a focus on particularization over generalization, and the use of anthropological and interdisciplinary approaches to amend a prevalent partiality towards textual and historical traditions. Drawing from this discussion, I argue that the issues raised are applicable to the literature on Ardhanārīśvara and that fieldwork is a viable, corrective option.

I provide the rationale behind my call for fieldwork and discuss theoretical and methodological issues as they relate to fieldwork in general. I elucidate my understanding of the field through analyzing concepts of power, the dynamic nature of observable phenomena; experience, its private and elusive characteristics; and relativity, the uniqueness of each vantage point. Given this information I provide my approach to fieldwork. This also involves describing

my role as participant observer and recognizing my own relative position, shortcomings, and biases.

## **Chapter Two: Ardhanārīśvara in Contemporary Scholarship: A Literature Review**

In the first chapter I present arguments that contend there are biases, misconceptions, and gaps in the academic study of Hinduism. I argue that some of the issues raised are pertinent to the work on Ardhanārīśvara. To substantiate this claim the second chapter provides a literature review and analyzes the content in light of said issues.

The chapter begins by acquainting the reader with Ardhanārīśvara. This includes discussing conceptual antecedents and the history of the Ardhanārīśvara figure. The reader is presented the diagnostic characteristics of Ardhanārīśvara iconography: its postures, gestures, distinguishing features, various depictions, and associated items and imagery. Subsequently, I review the presence of Ardhanārīśvara in textual sources, including iconographic texts, mythological narratives, and devotional poetry. Contemporary literature recognizes Ardhanārīśvara in miscellaneous areas, such as the performing arts, which also go acknowledged in this chapter. Scholarship offers numerous interpretations of the Ardhanārīśvara figure: as associated with themes centering on devotionism, as an emblem of cult syncretism, and as symbolic of various cosmogonic concepts. In relation, Ardhanārīśvara is discussed in terms of its unique affiliations with specific schools of thought, including Kashmir Śaivism and Tantric traditions. Ardhanārīśvara has undergone modern feminist readings that are overviewed in this chapter as well. I close the literature review by acknowledging the few examples of scholarship referencing Ardhanārīśvara in the lives of devotees.

The above information provides an exhaustive compilation of the presence of Ardhanārīśvara in available academic scholarship. I analyze the contents in light of the biases, misconceptions, and gaps in content mentioned in chapter one. I conclude that the literature on Ardhanārīśvara largely omits information about sites of worship, information regarding customary and ritual aspects, and about Ardhanārīśvara in the lives of devotees; Ardhanārīśvara in living context goes virtually ignored. There are some works that do assess Ardhanārīśvara in relation to life on the ground. However, they make their inferences largely by conjecture. I

recognize the contributions of these authors but also provide critique, maintaining the necessity and contributiveness of the proposed fieldwork.

### **Chapter Three: Ardhanārīśvara in Tiruchengode: Town, Temple, and Devotional Practices**

The third chapter focuses on my fieldwork observations and impressions in Tiruchengode, Tamil Nadu, home to a hilltop temple wherein Ardhanārīśvara is the presiding deity.<sup>3</sup> I introduce the reader to the city itself, providing details on demographics, geography, and culture. I focus on the Ardhanārīśvara temple and discuss its unique location, architecture, and the decorative features of the site. I confer the mythological narratives associated with the city and site, with an emphasis on those myths involving Ardhanārīśvara. I recognize the various iconographic depictions of Ardhanārīśvara; I examine their locations, features and diverse circumstances. This includes an extensive look at Ardhanārīśvara in ritual contexts. In addition, I provide miscellaneous information about temple and town activity relating to the project. There is also a section regarding thoughts expressed to me about Ardhanārīśvara by people at the temple and around the city. Although I do weave my own observations, impressions, and their rationale throughout the chapter, an analysis of the information provided is reserved for the concluding chapter.

### **Chapter Four: Deity, Devotees, and Religious Topography**

The concluding chapter analyzes the fieldwork observations and impressions of chapter three. Accordingly, it is demonstrated that those areas of previous scholarly focus concerning Ardhanārīśvara are incomplete; new information is provided on Ardhanārīśvara iconography, narratives, and regarding interpretations of the figure. This analysis also identifies contributions to unexplored areas concerning Ardhanārīśvara, including information on this particular site of worship and related ritualistic and customary elements within this context. Such provisions reify the purported deficiencies of current works on the figure.

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<sup>3</sup> It suffices here to say that Tamil Nadu, the state in which Tiruchengode is situated, is the southernmost state of India. South India is often topographically characterized by the peninsular Deccan plateau. See K.A. Nilakanta Sastri, *A History of South India: From Prehistoric Times to Fall of Vijayanagar* (New York: Oxford University Press), 2. Accordingly, Tiruchengode reflects characteristics attributed to South Indian culture, including the presence of Dravidian architecture and specific culinary dishes. A much more detailed description of Tiruchengode will be provided in the third chapter.



An examination of the above information yields a fundamentally different conceptualization of Ardhanārīśvara than its presentation in current scholarship. I discuss the actual fluidity of the categories often used to describe Ardhanārīśvara in closed, definite parameters. Ardhanārīśvara is also described as a concept formed in the experiences of people, each idiosyncratic and relative. The ways that devotees engage with Ardhanārīśvara in a transactional manner are also elucidated. As a result, it is argued that to situate Ardhanārīśvara in living context is to situate Ardhanārīśvara in a field of dynamism. This perspective also considers Ardhanārīśvara part and parcel of the city dynamics. Accordingly, it is suggested that the figure be understood in terms of activity, as an agent of power. In this connection, it is argued that the city of Tiruchengode may be considered an Ardhanārīśvara temple in itself; the perimeter of the city demarcates sacred space relating to the *mūlamūrti* Ardhanārīśvara icon, albeit of a different scope and fashion than the temple complex or *garbhagrha*.<sup>4</sup>

I conclude this thesis with a summary of my findings and an analysis of the implications as they relate to the thesis as a whole. The contributions of this thesis make the body of work on Ardhanārīśvara generally more robust while also offering a fundamentally different understanding of the figure; Ardhanārīśvara is conceptualized as alive by the devotees of Tiruchengode. As such, local conceptualizations of Ardhanārīśvara incorporate life on the ground; Ardhanārīśvara is described in terms of gender equality, with an emphasis on family, and is associated with ritual efficacy relating to familial concerns. Additionally, I identify directions that future projects may take involving Ardhanārīśvara considering the insights yielded by the above discussions. Moreover, the approach taken to the specific subject matter of this thesis may be fruitfully applied elsewhere and serve to correct the biases, misconceptions, and gaps in content that continue to ripple through academic works on Hinduism.

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<sup>4</sup> The *mūlamūrti* icon refers to the fixed icon within the *sanctum sanctorum* of the temple. This area is where the *mūrti* resides is known as the *garbhagrha*, or “womb chamber.” These and other temple features will be discussed in greater detail in chapter three. It may go noted here, though, that Tiruchengode is known for housing a unique, anthropomorphic Ardhanārīśvara *mūlamūrti* icon in its hilltop Ardhanārīśvara temple.

## Chapter One

### Contextualizing Ardhanārīśvara

#### 1.1 Introduction

The scholarship regarding Ardhanārīśvara invariably places the figure within the broader context of Hinduism.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, there are theoretical and methodological matters that must be addressed. Most introductory texts on Hinduism attend to certain issues concerning its academic study. The contentious view that Hinduism is a univocal enterprise is often punctuated.<sup>6</sup> Also highlighted are the disputed views that *true* religion is located in textual traditions, at the expense of ritualistic elements.<sup>7</sup> I have certainly noted this favoritism in the literature I have encountered on Ardhanārīśvara; there is an emphasis on interpreting the figure as a theological symbol while customary and ritualistic elements are virtually ignored.<sup>8</sup> Thus, to

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<sup>5</sup> The few texts that deal specifically with the Ardhanārīśvara figure do exactly this. See Neeta Yadav, *Ardhanārīśvara in Art and Literature* (New Delhi: D.K. Printworld, 2001), Prem Saran, *Yoga, Bhoga, and Ardhanarishvara : Individuality, Wellbeing, and Gender in Tantra* (London: Routledge, 2008), Dr. Alka Pande, *Ardhanarishvara, the Androgyne: Probing the Gender Within* (New Delhi: Rupa & Co., 2004), and Ellen Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman: Ardhanārīśvara in Indian and Feminist Perspective* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2002).

<sup>6</sup> J.E. Llewellyn, "Introduction," in *Defining Hinduism: A Reader*, ed. J.E. Llewellyn (New York: Routledge, 2005), 3

<sup>7</sup> Ian Reader and George Tanabe Jr., *Practically Religious: Worldly Benefits and the Common Religion of Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1998), 6. For an article that argues certain key elements of Hinduism have not received due emphasis, see Leela Prasad, "Text, Tradition, and Imagination: Evoking the Normative in Everyday Hindu Life." *Numen* 53, no.1 (Sept. 2006): 5. <http://www.jstor.org/> (accessed Sept. 11, 2013).

<sup>8</sup> However, it should be noted that some recent works on Ardhanārīśvara have attempted to relate the figure to the lives of actual devotees. See Ellen Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman: Ardhanārīśvara in Indian and Feminist Perspectives* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2002). Here Goldberg discusses Ardhanārīśvara as a symbol of a stage in Tantric *sādhana* (in chapter 2), and also assesses the figure through a feminist lens, arguing that it is, in many ways, an androcentric symbol whose images and stories are permeated with male privilege. For example, she draws parallels between mythological content and what she argues is the secondary status of women in actual marriages. However, she makes her inferences without touching on actual examples. Also, See Saran, *Yoga, Bhoga, and Ardhanarishvara: Individuality, Wellbeing and Gender in Tantra*. In chapter 5, Saran uses Ardhanārīśvara as a symbol for his conception of the bi-polarity of Indic gender. Although he does speak with informants, it remains a theological discussion and certain elements, such as *Ardhanārīśvara* worship, do not factor in. Finally, in *Ardhanarishvara, the Androgyne: Probing the Gender Within*, Pande discusses the parallels between the *hijra* and *Ardhanārīśvara*. He argues that the androgynous motif is also active in the

set up a proper examination of Ardhanārīśvara, this chapter will address theoretical and methodological issues concerning the academic study of the Hindu traditions. This will include elaborating on some of the factors identified as largely contributive to modern misconceptions of Hinduism, specifically Orientalist influences and the ‘world religions paradigm.’ In response, recent scholarship offers methodologies meant to account for the incompleteness and inaccuracies of these purported misunderstandings. In this chapter I will also outline these corrective academic approaches to Hinduism. A discussion of these approaches will demonstrate that areas which have gone largely ignored in the study of Hinduism are actually rich and relevant. I contend that these gaps in content are present in scholarship regarding Ardhanārīśvara. In turn, I argue that fieldwork is necessary to correct these omissions so that a fuller understanding of Ardhanārīśvara comes into view. I will also discuss theoretical and methodological issues as they relate to fieldwork. I will elucidate my understanding of the field through analyzing concepts of power, experience, and relativity. Finally, I will provide my rationale and approach to fieldwork itself.

## **1.2 Modern Misconceptions of Hinduism**

### **1.2.1 Orientalism and the Emergence of the Modern Conception of Hinduism**

This section will delineate the exchange between Western and Eastern intelligentsia that yielded the Orientalist-influenced modern notion of Hinduism.<sup>9</sup> My goal in doing so is not to argue that Hinduism is the sole fabrication of Oriental discourse. Rather, I intend to show that Orientalism yielded a convoluted understanding of religion, Hinduism included, and subsequently the content therein. As a result, biased focuses in the academic study of religion

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world of cross-dressers, transsexuals, and homosexuals. However, the author also does not discuss worship of the deity nor dive into the relationships that the *hijra* devotees have with Ardhanārīśvara.

<sup>9</sup> King actually places the word Hinduism in quotations because, as he describes, there is no single Hindu tradition. In his view, the term Hinduism, used to denote a single world religion, emerged alongside the rise of an Indian nationalist agenda in response to various pressures from the West. I will elaborate on this point further in the thesis. See Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and ‘The Mystic East’* (London: Routledge, 1999), 106. Although it is important to note this discussion regarding Hinduism, it is also important to recognize that other traditions have received similar treatment. Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism, for example, have also been described in a rather singular sense, while in actuality they are also marked by members of varying interpretations, expressions, etc.

have generated inaccurate and incomplete information. I argue, and will discuss further in a section to follow, that these biases are present in scholarship centering on Ardhanārīśvara.

In his book, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India, and the 'The Mystic East,'* Richard King argues there is a prevalent view of a univocal Hindu and/or Indian set of beliefs that are synonymous with Neo-Vedāntic discourse. Neo-Vedānta refers to the non-dual philosophical school, Advaita Vedānta, in its modern form.<sup>10</sup> However, my understanding is that India, and Hinduism, are marked by cultural diversity, including multiple ethnicities and various schools of thought and practice.<sup>11</sup> In this section I will examine the role Orientalist discourse played in the emergence of Neo-Vedāntic thought to demonstrate that the perspective of a single, crystallized Hinduism is contrived.

Orientalism in this case refers to a reductionism of Asian peoples into descriptive stereotypes. As mentioned, the Orientalist views of India developed as a result of convoluted exchanges between Eastern and Western thought.<sup>12</sup> King asserts that the West, during the 18<sup>th</sup> century to first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, projected its own paradigm on the 'Hindoos.'<sup>13</sup> It is worth noting that the term 'Hindoo' is described as the Persian variant of *sindhu*, originally referring to the people of the Indus River region.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, some argue the term is difficult to define in terms of belief; the word was originally infused with territorial associations, not

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<sup>10</sup> This modern view was forwarded largely by Vivekananda and Radhakrishnan. Forwarding this view did benefit particular agendas. However, it has led to misleading overgeneralizations. See King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory India and 'The Mystic East,'* 135

<sup>11</sup> For example there are Dvaita (dualist) and Advaita (non-dualist) schools of thought. There are also various understandings of how dualism and non-dualism operate. I would like to add that there are often 6 orthodox schools of Hindu philosophy listed (these are those that acknowledge the Vedas): Nyasa, Vaiśeṣika, Sāṃkhya, Yoga, Mīmāṃsā, and Vedānta. However, there are alternative lists and a number of other philosophical schools. Furthermore, there are several religious traditions present in India, including Sikhism, Christianity, and Islam, who, again, are also marked by their own diversifications.

<sup>12</sup> It is important to note that there is no univocal Orientalist view either. Also worth noting is that just as the East was stereotyped as Oriental, these cultural exchanges also resulted in stereotypical ideas of the West, dubbed Occidentalism. See *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory and 'The Mystic East,'* 86. For more information see Anthony Pagden, "The Immutability of China: Orientalism and Occidentalism in the Enlightenment," in *The Anthropology of the Enlightenment*, ed. Larry Wolff and Marco Cipolli (California: Stanford University Press, 2007), 50-65

<sup>13</sup> 'Hindoos' appears written here as it does because it was an earlier label used and demarcates it from modern Hinduism which emerged later. This spelling is sometimes found in scholarship when referring to this time, such as in the work of King.

<sup>14</sup> See Marie Lecomte-Tilouine, "Hindu Society in Anthropological Perspective," in *The Bloomsbury Companion to Hindu Studies*, ed. Jessica Frazier (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, Plc, 2011), 152

ideological connotations.<sup>15</sup> To correlate specific beliefs with a word of regional significance has been viewed as problematic.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, even in its early usage, the 'Hindoo' label emerged as an exonym; it was originally applied by others.<sup>17</sup>

The imperial West often classified the East as their opposite. Whereas Eurocentric authors considered the West as marked by empiricism, scientism, and Enlightenment convictions, the Hindus were described as mystical, irrational, and superstitious.<sup>18</sup> Essentialism of this kind is misrepresentative of cultural heterogeneity and results in misleading generalizations.<sup>19</sup> Categorizations of this nature are especially deceiving when it comes to the different strains of beliefs and practices now known to comprise Hinduism. In fact one of the most frequently cited challenges in defining Hinduism is the widely variant nature of the elements thought to constitute it.

However, it should be noted that Orientalist generalizations were not univocal either, and certainly not unanimously dismissive; they also conveyed romanticized sentiments.<sup>20</sup> For example, India was described as spiritually advanced and containing a 'universalistic mysticism.'<sup>21</sup> It is argued that Hindu-reformists and supporters of the Independence Movement saw this inclusivity, in line with Advaita Vedānta, as a cultural symbol capable of uniting the

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<sup>15</sup> See Dr. S Kumar and Dr. S Ram, *Hinduism: Religion and Philosophy* (New Delhi: Crescent Publishing Corporation, 2008), 124. For corroboration see Will Sweetman, "Unity and Plurality: Hinduism and the Religions of India in Early European Scholarship," in *Defining Hinduism: A Reader*, ed. J.E. Llewellyn (New York: Routledge, 2005), 88. I would also like to make note that in my own travels I have spoken to people who identify as Muslims yet consider themselves Hindu because they believe the word carries with it territorial significance.

<sup>16</sup> See King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory and 'The Mystic East,'* 118-134

<sup>17</sup> Murray Leaf, *The Anthropology of Eastern Religions: Ideas, Organizations, and Constituencies* (United Kingdom: Lexington Books, 2014), 83

<sup>18</sup> Hugh Urban, *The Power of Tantra: Religion, Sexuality and the Politics of South Asian Studies* (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd., 2010), 7. Urban references Eurocentric authors such as H.H. Wilson and D.L. Barnett. See also, Llewellyn, "Introduction," *Defining Hinduism: A Reader*, ed. J.E. Llewellyn, 7 as it references Eurocentric authorship describing the Orient as Other. Peter Hamilton provides ten points as his paradigm of Enlightenment thought. See King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory India and 'The Mystic East,'* 44-45

<sup>19</sup> As argued by Inden. See King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory India and 'The Mystic East,'* 92

<sup>20</sup> King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory and 'The Mystic East,'* 116

<sup>21</sup> This notion of universalistic mysticism is evocative of Advaita Vedānta. As an aside, the inclusivity of Advaita Vedānta ideology lent itself well to the Western perennialist agenda which suggested that at a fundamental level all cultures have a shared origin, and all religions express the same truth. See *Ibid.* 136

Hindu people under a cohesive national and religious identity.<sup>22</sup> The association between Hindu thought and the non-dual Advaita Vedānta became widespread. As Gavin Flood notes, the term ‘Hinduism,’ and its association with the characteristics of Advaita Vedānta, were appropriated by Indians themselves and put to use in their fight for home rule, *swaraj*.<sup>23</sup> I do not mean to side with, nor denounce, the practicality of this political development. However, I do feel the Hindu identity presented above does not properly acknowledge the diverse views included under its umbrella label.<sup>24</sup>

However, the above views on the relationship between Orientalism and the emergence of the modern conception of Hinduism are not exempt from critique. Will Sweetman argues that the Orientalist influence has been exaggerated, and that there are documented examples of European writers that appear fully aware of religious diversity in India.<sup>25</sup> In fact, he largely argues against any outside influence or imposition and claims that the idea of a unified Hindu tradition owes more to Indian self-representation that, more or less, informed and aided the evolution of European understanding.<sup>26</sup> He references the writings of Ziegenbalg (1682-1719), a Christian missionary to India, wherein the notion of a single, pan-Indian religion is present. Ziegenbalg reported that devotees of Śiva and the devotees of Viṣṇu extended some degree of mutual recognition, whereas they regarded Buddhists and Jains as belonging to entirely separate trains of thought.<sup>27</sup> Ziegenbalg arrived at his conclusion of unity in diversity on the bases of similarity and mutual recognition, through what Indians themselves reported about

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<sup>22</sup> See King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory India and ‘The Mystic East,’* Chapter 6: Mystic Hinduism: Vedānta and the Politics of Representation. Here King discusses that Vivekananda famously, in 1893, gave speeches at the Parliament of Religions, relaying his understanding of Hinduism. However, this is not to say that the view of universalistic mysticism held by Vivekananda and others was insincere. This is to say that stereotypes of the spiritual East versus material West were reified by Indians too.

<sup>23</sup> Gavin Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 6

<sup>24</sup> Again, I say this considering that there are normally 6 orthodox schools of Indian philosophy listed: Nyaya, Vaiśeṣika, Sāṃkhya, Yoga, Mīmāṃsā, Vedānta. Important to note here is that Sāṃkhya, for example, is strongly dualistic, whereas the conceptualizations of Hinduism yielded, in part, by Orientalist discourse is generally the opposite, non-dual.

<sup>25</sup> Sweetman, “Unity and Plurality: Hinduism and the religions of India in early European Scholarship” in *Defining Hinduism: A Reader*, ed. J.E. Llewellyn, 83. He then provides examples of two missionary accounts between 85-93

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. 85

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. 91

their ideological affiliations.<sup>28</sup> For Sweetman this missionary account supports the reasonable potential that the modern Hinduism King and others are critical of is perhaps less fabricated than claimed. Yet I believe that King is not concerned so much with whether or not there are historical accounts of inclusivity, that there were those that believed a common thread tied together diverse Indian traditions. I believe that King is concerned that this became known as the definitive perspective, and associated solely with Advaita Vedānta. He and others are simply trying to ensure that multiplicity remains acknowledged and contend that the recognition of diversity was compromised by some measure around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. At any rate, most introductory texts on Hinduism now describe diversity as a salient feature that must be kept mind.<sup>29</sup>

In addition to the assertion that Hinduism should be acknowledged as variegated, there are concerns raised with how religion itself is understood. Some maintain that the concept of religion comes with inherent biases and that as a result certain characteristics of Hinduism have been tweezed as laudable while others have been misleadingly filtered out. To shed light on this topic, the following section will discuss Hinduism vis à vis the ‘world religions paradigm.’

### **1.2.2 The World Religions Paradigm**

This section will elaborate on issues regarding the role the ‘world religions paradigm’ has played in generating misconceptions about Hinduism. The ‘world religions paradigm’ emerged in the West during the Enlightenment.<sup>30</sup> At this time various traditions around the globe, including modern Hinduism, were identified as religions. However, King highlights that the term religion is derivative of Latin ‘*religio*,’ and provides an etymology that emphasizes theistic

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid. 93. Of course the Ziegenbalg accounts cannot be taken as wholly representative of the climate of thought at the time.

<sup>29</sup> I will also add that in my own travels of India I have had, on many occasions, people who identify as Hindu, quip expressions such as “unity in diversity,” “different paths to the same peak of the mountain,” and “different rivers to one ocean.”

<sup>30</sup> The Enlightenment is considered to center on the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Peter Hamilton provides ten points as his paradigm of Enlightenment thought. See King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory India and ‘The Mystic East,’* 44-45. They include: primacy afforded to reason and rationality, empiricism, rise of science, belief that scientific ideals could be applied outside of European society, progressive view of history, individualism, rise of tolerance in the form of human rights, powerful rhetoric of freedom, notion of uniformity of human nature, and secularism.

Christian beliefs and signifies an adherence to doctrine.<sup>31</sup> Catherine Bell in her article, *Paradigms Behind (And Before) the Modern Concept of Religion*, corroborates that 'religion' is infused with Christian presumptions. She writes that because of its prevalence in Europe Christianity emerged as the idealized model for the concept of religion.<sup>32</sup> In turn, Christianity was used as a prototype in the development and spread of 'religion' as a more general category.<sup>33</sup> Consequently, as Europe interacted with different cultures, other "religions," structured after the Christian model, began to be acknowledged.<sup>34</sup> In doing so, the 'world religions paradigm' reduced traditions into a group of comparable characteristics.<sup>35</sup> In this connection, Western thought influenced the modern conceptualizations of Hinduism in a few frequently cited ways. First, is the textualization of Indian religion; this is the understanding that the crux of Indian religiosity is located in certain Sanskrit texts.<sup>36</sup> This misleading favoritism of the textual has been interpreted as occurring at the expense of ritual, custom and practice. These prominent aspects of Hinduism have been dismissed as comparatively rudimentary. Second, as mentioned above, religions were popularly perceived to resemble a Judeo-Christian framework, inaccurately understood as comprised by ecclesiastical hierarchy, doctrinal uniformity, and exclusivist claims to truth.<sup>37</sup>

### 1.2.3 Approaching Hinduism

Given that the above sections present the concepts of Hinduism and religion as quite contrived, one may suggest the terms be discarded completely. However, rather than argue we

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<sup>31</sup> These points from King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory India and 'The Mystic East,'* 35-38. Interestingly, he presents an earlier etymology that suggests the word was used in relation to ancestral homage through the performance of ritual.

<sup>32</sup> Catherine Bell, "Paradigms behind (And before) the Modern Concept of Religion," in *History and Theory* 45, no. 4 (Dec., 2006): 29

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. 31. Bell also notes that religion became known as what science was not: irrational. This influenced the Enlightenment's separation of Church and State.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. 32

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. 34

<sup>36</sup> Sweetman, "Unity and Plurality: Hinduism and the Religions of India in Early European Scholarship," in *Defining Hinduism: A Reader*, ed. J.E. Llewellyn, 82. It should be noted that Sweetman is referencing the beliefs of Richard King here.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. 93. I would like to make note that I have personally encountered people in India whom identify as Hindus and whole heartedly argue against the consideration of Hinduism as a religion. In these instances I have been told that the term Hinduism actually references belonging to the Indian subcontinent, while preferring to describe Hinduism as a philosophy, or a way of life, versus the term religion.



do away with the terms altogether, the possibility of which is rather unlikely, I think tweaking our understanding of Hinduism and religion is more pragmatic. Even King, who has critically described Hinduism as being infused with Orientalist biases, still posits a few reasons in favour of keeping the term. He concedes that since the 19<sup>th</sup> century a Hinduism similar to the one forwarded by Orientalist discourse does exist.<sup>38</sup> This is to say that there are many people who identify with a form of Hinduism described as having Neo-Vedāntic features.<sup>39</sup> However, this is not to say that Neo-Vedānta is the solely existent form of Hinduism, but that at least since the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century it has been extensively adopted. With the above in mind, King suggests the term Hinduism is practical when used as an introductory marker, as a departure point from which the diverse niches and nuances of this comprehensive label may be explored.

Similarly, in the introduction of *Defining Hinduism: A Reader*, J.E. Llewellyn suggests that it is no longer debated if there *is* a Hinduism. Instead, she proposes the question if *a* Hinduism exists, in the singular sense.<sup>40</sup> I agree that there is now such a thing as Hinduism, in that it is acknowledged in virtually all introductory texts on world religions, and by virtue of the millions of people who identify as practicing Hindus; it exists in the minds of many people. I also agree with the sentiment that one should keep the prismatic nature of Hinduism in mind.<sup>41</sup> Congruently, most introductory texts describe Hinduism in terms of extreme diversity. As mentioned, the term Hinduism should be treated as a departure point, as an umbrella term under which there is cultural diversity, multiple ethnicities, and various schools of thought. Moreover, I understand every location, situation, and experience as unique.<sup>42</sup> There is a different Hinduism between all schools of thought, between groups of people, and ultimately from person to person. Additionally, Llewellyn makes the insightful point that the characteristics

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<sup>38</sup> King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory India and 'The Mystic East,'* 110

<sup>39</sup> Neo-Vedānta refers to the Hinduism that emerged in response to colonialism and Orientalism, contributed to reform movements, and emphasized ideas akin to Advaita Vedānta

<sup>40</sup> Llewellyn, "Introduction," in *Defining Hinduism: A Reader*, ed. J.E. Llewellyn, 10

<sup>41</sup> King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory India and 'The Mystic East,'* 110. I would also like to draw attention to the fact that this rings true for all traditions. There is no single Christianity, there is no single Islam, there is no single anything per se, and it is somewhat a trend of academia at the moment to recognize this.

<sup>42</sup> I will expand this when discussing the concepts of 'power relations' and 'experience' in sections to follow.

and definitions of Hinduism are not only varied, they are also fluid.<sup>43</sup> The Hinduism of each school of thought, location, and person is dynamic.

#### 1.2.4 Approaching Hinduism in the Context of Religion

Another concern is that the study of Hinduism takes place within the ‘world religions paradigm.’ Religion, as a category, is comparative. There is the implication that all religions share something, united in juxtaposition with what they are not. As aforementioned, there are infused Western biases and general limitations found in religion as a category. Reader and Tanabe, in *Practically Religious: Worldly Benefits and the Common Religion of Japan*, propose that this bias is ongoing; there is a tendency to identify “true religion” or the “essence of religion” with textual sources and to dismiss other areas, such as their ritual counterparts, as superstitious.<sup>44</sup> This is at odds with descriptions made by some insiders who view Hinduism more in terms of orthopraxy than orthodoxy.<sup>45</sup> As a corrective measure, Tanabe and Reader urge that the study of religion incorporate both anthropological and theological approaches; the former focuses more on phenomena such as ritual, practice, and custom while the latter focuses on creed, text, and doctrine.<sup>46</sup> Tanabe and Reader acknowledge the limited parameters of what is widely held to constitute the concept of religion and in turn propose an alternative understanding and working definition. They choose to continue using the term ‘religion’ despite the fact they are primarily dealing with action and practice, commerce, entertainment and casual behaviour, not doctrine, teaching, or even belief.<sup>47</sup> Instead, they utilize religion as an

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<sup>43</sup> Llewellyn, “Introduction,” in *Defining Hinduism: A Reader*, ed. J.E. Llewellyn, 3. The notion of fluidity as it pertains to concepts will be a key point, and elaborated on, in sections to follow

<sup>44</sup> Ian Reader and George Tanabe Jr., *Practically Religious: Worldly Benefits and the Common Religion of Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1998), 6

<sup>45</sup> I do not mean to insinuate that textual sources and ritual practices are mutually exclusive. Many rituals have their basis in texts and likewise many rituals are documented textually. The point here is that documented doctrinal tenets are raised up while ritual is downplayed. Furthermore, there are those who cite other alternatives as emphasized. For example, Narayanan notes familial traditions as a heralded aspect of her life celebrating Hindu traditions. See Vasudha Narayanan, “Diglossic Hinduism: Liberation and Lentils,” in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 68 no.4 (2000) <http://www.jstor.org/> (accessed Sept. 11, 2013)

<sup>46</sup> Reader and Tanabe, *Practically Religious: Worldly Benefits and the Common Religion of Japan*, 4. It may be noted that the work on phenomenology by Mircea Eliade represents the latter emphasis on theology. See Douglas Allen, *Structure and Creativity in Religion: Hermeneutics in Mircea Eliade’s Phenomenology and New Directions* (The Hague: Mouton Publishers, 1978), 173-196

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

inclusive term that does not have distinct parameters. Rather, they see it as interactive with cultural and social themes. In their view, religion also involves participation, custom, ritual, action, practice, and belonging.<sup>48</sup> They present religion as something not only interested in ultimate concerns, such as the nature of the universe or the destination of the soul, but as something that permeates the mundane processes of day-to-day life. They conclude that belief and doctrine can, and often does, play a part in religious life but are not essential to all aspects of religion.<sup>49</sup> As an example, Vashuda Narayanan, in *Diglossic Hinduism: Liberation and Lentils*, describes their experience during festival times as more focused on special culinary dishes than beliefs per se.<sup>50</sup> Similarly, King urges the study of religion to take the material, political, cultural, and religious as mutually imbricated.<sup>51</sup>

One may recall the assertion by J.Z. Smith that religion is the creation of the scholar.<sup>52</sup> That is to say the definitions we conjure are for our own aims, and ultimately arbitrary. This arbitrariness is important to keep in mind as it implies that alternative definitions may be used. The fact that the definition of religion has been disputed and revised also points to the fluidity of religion as a concept. However, I am aware that in the study of religion there has been a stringent theological emphasis. Following the lead of Tanabe and Reader, my work will also be cognizant of the aforementioned anthropological aspects of religion, which I recognize have been largely ignored. The following section will outline current approaches to the study of Hinduism which demonstrate that these overlooked elements are valid propositions, and whose aim is to fill the void left in the wake of said omissions.

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. 6

<sup>50</sup> See Narayanan, "Diglossic Hinduism: Liberation and Lentils," in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 68 no.4 (2000): 762 <http://www.jstor.org/> (accessed Sept. 11, 2013)

<sup>51</sup> King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and 'The Mystic East,'* 61

<sup>52</sup> Smith, J.Z., *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982),

## 1.3 Contemporary Approaches to Hinduism

### 1.3.1 Textual Approach

The *Bloomsbury Companion to Hindu Studies* provides a keen overview of the main approaches presently used for the study of the Hindu traditions. Each approach is contributive to the developing understanding of Hinduism by correcting past misconceptions, considering content previously neglected, and/or reframing approaches to subject matter in general.

It has been argued that the study of religion has misleadingly emphasized certain components of religiosity, such as its textual aspects. However, this is not to say that textual studies should be ignored either. After all, the written word has played a significant part in the intellectual culture of Hinduism.<sup>53</sup> As such, current textual approaches are still proving contributive. Genres of texts that were previously downplayed or ignored, such as vernacular *bhakti* (devotional) texts, are now being studied.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, there are many undiscovered texts, and discovered texts that have not been read, studied, translated, archived, or digitized. Contemporarily, textual studies are also beginning to incorporate anthropological aspects. For example, there is now the consideration of memorization and public recitation of texts; there is a focus on their role in living tradition.<sup>55</sup> As new texts surface and others are readdressed philological developments also occur.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Jessica Frazier, "Research Methods: From Manuscripts to Fieldwork," in *The Bloomsbury Companion to Hindu Studies*, ed. Jessica Frazier (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2011), 239

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.* 201. It is often noted that for some time there was a narrow focus on Vedic Sanskrit texts.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.* 239. During my travels I ended up in Mandi, Himachal Pradesh for Rāma Navamī, Rām's birthday. The whole Rāmāyaṇa was recited straight through over the course of around 24 hours by a group of men. Community members would come to hear portions of the recitation, finally culminating in a celebration upon its completion. This attests to the dynamic, living presence of texts.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.* 210

### 1.3.2 Philosophical and Theological Approaches

Philosophical and theological approaches are described as decidedly addressing its material from within the traditions, reflecting on its aims, and not concerning itself with keeping methodological difference.<sup>57</sup>

Indian culture has long standing traditions that focus on epistemological and metaphysical inquiries.<sup>58</sup> Many look to these works as contributive resources for ongoing philosophical discourses. According to *The Bloomsbury Companion to Hindu Studies*, current philosophical approaches relate to Indian works in three ways. First, it is said that they use philosophical analysis to interpret texts in terms of their logical soundness and the effectiveness of their arguments.<sup>59</sup> Reassessment may yield new insights and applications, and may also produce new criticisms. The issue here is that the rubric of logic being employed may be fundamentally different from that which it assesses. Second, Indian philosophical works may be treated by some as altogether new arguments.<sup>60</sup> Their insights and distinctive approaches may be applied to other trains of philosophical thought and to existing unresolved issues therein. For example, certain branches of Indian thought have expounded an interconnected, unified, view of reality. The adoption of this view may in turn change how one views their own identity, from

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<sup>57</sup> In my opinion, this section of *Ibid.* 247 uses some confusing language. For one, it describes all the previously discussed approaches as keeping ‘phenomenological’ distance. I am uncertain if this is meant to indicate an attempt at objectivity or if it is meant to emphasize experience. Also, this section describes theological and philosophical approaches as being the sole approaches that seek to speak from within the tradition, on its own terms. However, in another section it is described that participant observation seeks to do exactly that. Also, in the section on art historical and visual approaches the author describes a tendency in recent scholarship to familiarize itself with internal concepts such as *mūrti*. Furthermore, the author describes that analytic-philosophy and theological approaches are done via comparative philosophy and theology. Yet the author claims that one who adopts these approaches works within their contents. This is not solely the case if other traditions are concerned and I caution that this method may actually be at odds with some philosophies that believe comparison of philosophical systems is ultimately an apples and oranges affair. The author also mentions Western philosophical analysis in a manner that is from without not within.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.* 247. The difference between philosophy and theology in this case is that whereas philosophy concerns itself with inquiries about truths and principals of being, theology assesses these same concerns in terms of god and/or divinity.

<sup>59</sup> However, the logical soundness is often in line solely with Western analytical methods. See *Ibid.* 248. Also, I have included language such as “Indian philosophy” because the author has also done so. This is quite broad language to use, as there are certainly a myriad of philosophical traditions, methods, etc. I imagine that the author is referring to strands associated with Hinduism but I used the language that the author has so to reference consistently.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

more to less limited. Third, one may explore ways in which the material offers alternative understandings to what philosophy is as a discipline.<sup>61</sup> There is also work to be done regarding the translation and reconstruction of philosophical treatises in order to provide access to new audiences of different language, time, and culture.

Hinduism is recognized as having a history of rich, thorough, and seemingly endless theological texts. However, in recent years there have been minimal theological advancements.<sup>62</sup> Some suggest this is due to a growing focus on overlooked anthropological components of Hinduism.<sup>63</sup> It may be that those with theological interests have been unable to push theological understandings further at this point, or perhaps existing theological treatises are viewed as complete; they are to be deciphered and not furthered. At any rate, there are still contributive ways in which theological interests are being employed. For example, scholars are taking lofty theological treatises and translating them into volumes accessible to new audiences. In addition, authors are looking to theological works and drawing from them practical applications for contemporary times.<sup>64</sup> Discussions are also taking place between Hindus and members of other traditions. *The Bloomsbury Companion to Hindu Studies* provides an example where Hindu approaches have influenced the theological understandings of some Catholic adherents.<sup>65</sup>

### 1.3.3 Historical Approach

The trend of acknowledging previously ignored elements continues in contemporary historical approaches. Needless to say, recognizing ignored histories produces a fuller view of

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<sup>61</sup>Ibid. 247

<sup>62</sup>Ibid. 249. It is argued here that this is especially intriguing in light of the fact that other religious traditions are currently engaged in theological reflection to a large degree. Perhaps important to note is that the religious traditions listed in this section are Abrahamic.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid. 250

<sup>64</sup>For a good example of this look to the Aghora trilogy by Robert Svoboda: Robert Svoboda, *Aghora: At the Left Hand of God* (New Mexico: Brotherhood of Life Inc., 1986), Svoboda, *Aghora II: Kundalini* (New Delhi: Rupa Publications, 1994), and Svoboda, *Aghora III: The Law of Karma* (New Delhi: Rupa Publications, 1998)

<sup>65</sup>Jessica Frazier, "Research Methods: From Manuscripts to Fieldwork," in *The Bloomsbury Companion to Hindu Studies*, ed. Jessica Frazier, 250

history at large. In the past there was a very narrow emphasis on Brāhmin Sanskritists.<sup>66</sup> As a result, vernacular literature and information regarding the rituals and practices of lower-castes, especially women, have been largely absent.<sup>67</sup> The Indian subcontinent has been occupied by numerous and diverse religious cultures that have in some way connected to Hinduism in its current form. Thus, there are many historical branches that are still being explored in relation. These new historical threads, alongside the incorporation of new perspectives, such as those by women and otherwise oppressed, are resulting in alternative histories.<sup>68</sup> Additionally, revisions to periodization and chronologies are being made. This often requires an intercultural examination, referencing the fastidious historiographies of other cultures, such as the Chinese.<sup>69</sup>

### 1.3.4 Archeological Approach

The archeological approach focuses on material remains from the past, including temples, shrines, pottery, jewellery, etc.<sup>70</sup> In this way it is deeply connected with historical and textual approaches. The dating of these remains can be analyzed in conjunction with textual material so that we may get a more accurate and extensive view of the past. For example, recent discoveries in Gujarat, the Himalayas, and the Middle East have suggested cultural

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<sup>66</sup> This relates to notions surrounding the great and little traditions of culture. According to Redfield, great tradition, also known as “high culture” or “classic culture,” refers to traditions of philosophers, theologians, and the literary. It has been described as the traditions of the “reflective few.” Little tradition, also known as “low culture” or “folk culture” refers to traditions of the general populous, otherwise described as the traditions of the “unreflective many.” See Robert Redfield, *Peasant Society and Culture: An Anthropological Approach to Civilization* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1956), 70. However, this is not to say that the great and little traditions do not interact. For example, informed by the great tradition of the Rāmāyana, written in Sanskrit by Valmiki, Tulsidas composed his Rāmcharitmānas in the vernacular Awadhi (a Hindi dialect) which then became accessible to the “low,” popular culture of the masses. See *ibid.* 89-90. Although an ultimate division between great and little traditions has been debunked, and the implicit hierarchical tone has surely been dissected and refuted, there are still reverberations of favoritism towards those elements thought to constitute the great traditions present in notions of religiosity today. However, these biases are being addressed by the approaches included in this section. My project pays significant mind to elements often pegged as part of the little tradition via my engagement with the ground reality of Tiruchengode, Tamil Nadu.

<sup>67</sup> See Narayanan, “Diglossic Hinduism: Liberation and Lentils,” in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 68 no.4 (2000), 763. Clearly feminist approaches are especially helpful in this regard.

<sup>68</sup> Jessica Frazier, “Research Methods: From Manuscripts to Fieldwork,” in *The Bloomsbury Companion to Hindu Studies*, ed. Jessica Frazier, 225. One such recent and alternative take can be found in Wendy Doniger, *The Hindus: An Alternative History* (London: The Penguin Group, 2009)

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.* 226

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.* 241

continuity with the Indus Valley Civilization.<sup>71</sup> In this connection, we may speculate goings-on that were not documented in script. For example, mercantile travel paths may be identified via undocumented material culture, including tools, handicrafts, coins, etc.<sup>72</sup> Moreover, because the Indian subcontinent has long held many interacting cultures, there is evidence that some sites may have once been occupied by a competing group who at present do not inhabit the area. Viewing settlements in this chronologically layered manner has led to ongoing controversial claims of land ownership.<sup>73</sup>

### 1.3.5 Art Historical and Visual Approaches

A keen focus on art history may be telling of the past as well. It is widely held that images predate the presence of texts. Subsequently, texts emerged that offer readings of iconographic symbolism. There are those who interpret such texts as reflective of perspectives that existed much earlier, as indicated by the more antiquated images. However, there are those who argue that meanings have been read back into images; texts that disclose readings of images do not necessarily reflect perspectives historically shared. Yet images may surely reveal theological beliefs, and may also be indicative of religious and/or political allegiances.<sup>74</sup> Types of works and the methods employed in their production are certainly demonstrative of expressiveness at the time of their creation. These artistic techniques may also be subject to analysis. The presence of, and changes to, certain styles of artisanship can prove insightful. For

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid. The Indus Valley civilization is thought to have contained the antecedents of elements found in Hinduism today. For example, *liṅgams* are attributed to Indus Valley culture and are present in the worship of Śiva today. This will be expanded upon in the following chapter as it relates to Ardhanārīśvara. See Yadav, *Ardhanārīśvara in Art and Literature*, 11

<sup>72</sup> Ibid. 240-241

<sup>73</sup> Ibid. 242-243. The author references the search for Hindu temples in areas not inhabited by Muslim residences. However, as the author states, focus on ancient origins as an indicator of ownership is a highly debated perspective.

<sup>74</sup> The idea of images preceding texts is certainly mentioned in the case of Ardhanārīśvara. The visual theology brought up on Ibid. 244 is very applicable in the case of Ardhanārīśvara, whose image is explicitly clad with symbolism, even in the very basic and unrefined cases. Thus, earlier images may be telling of the philosophical climate of the time. It may also demonstrate cult syncretism. Both interpretations have been forwarded.



example, similar techniques found in separate cultures may reflect contact between the communities.<sup>75</sup>

Recent Western scholarship has also taken a corrective approach, recognizing and attempting to rectify past misconceptions. For example, images containing nudity and/or themes of sexuality are no longer dismissed outright as immoral.<sup>76</sup> Also, rather than treating Hindu images as ultimately symbolic, scholars are becoming mindful of concepts such as *mūrti* which may insinuate the invocation and actual embodiment of deity in image.<sup>77</sup> Congruently, there is an increasing focus on the interactive ways that people engage with icons.

### 1.3.6 Anthropological Approaches

The past predominate focus in academia on certain Sanskrit texts, and the perspectives of privileged males, has been met with criticism. In response, anthropological approaches are attempting amendment. Contemporary anthropological approaches acknowledge praxis-oriented elements, yet mind the textual approaches; there is a focus on the interplay between texts and rituals, concepts and practices, and the ideal and real spheres of culture.<sup>78</sup> The main methodologies involve interviewing informants, generally to collect the first-hand accounts of Hindu practitioners, and the use of observations by a scholar who has, to some extent, become a participant or insider.<sup>79</sup> The goals of participant observation are to create a familiarity that reduces unnatural interaction, to minimize hearsay and/or cultural difference, and to bolster the ability for the researcher to speak, as best as possible, from a vantage within the religious community.<sup>80</sup> To counteract philosophical biases, anthropological approaches focus on those lived, popular, and practical elements that are not found in textual sources.<sup>81</sup> Anthropologists

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<sup>75</sup> This sort of analysis need not apply solely to great works, such murals or fine portraiture, but also include simple decorative art and design

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> See Ibid. 244-246. Here the author provides excerpts from the work of Diana Eck and Richard Davis who discuss matters pertaining to studying the *mūrti*.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid. 233

<sup>79</sup> Ibid. 234

<sup>80</sup> Participant observation will be explored more thoroughly in an upcoming section.

<sup>81</sup> The 1985 C.J. Fuller study is an adequate example of this shift and provided on Ibid. 235. I must reiterate an earlier point I made. The move towards this on-the-ground practical and popular Hinduism is not to say that

are also drawing attention to the unique multiplicities of communities that exist under umbrella monikers.<sup>82</sup> In turn, an emphasis on context-sensitive particularism is emerging.

### 1.3.7 Interdisciplinary Approach

Interdisciplinary approaches are in line with the view that Hinduism is pervasive throughout all aspects of life. As Frazier writes, there is no Hindu culture with any remainder.<sup>83</sup> Importantly, these approaches also embody the increasingly popular view that categories such as text, practice, the arts, etc. are deeply interwoven. The divisions we have drawn between categories are just that, *drawn*; they are ultimately arbitrary.<sup>84</sup> Recognizing and exploring the ways in which elements of Hinduism are connected provides a truer view of Hinduism as a living tradition. As such, interdisciplinary approaches are quintessential. For example, an in-depth study of the Rāmnamī people, who cover their bodies with tattoos of the name Rām, may draw from anthropological, textual, and philosophical approaches.<sup>85</sup> Frazier highlights the trend of contemporary approaches to create a picture that represents Hindu life in terms of complexity and fluidity.

The idea that everything is constantly undergoing change implies that conditions are always new and therefore that the subject of study is always unique. Perhaps due to this, I have also noted a tendency towards the specification of regional perspectives.<sup>86</sup> Although these

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philosophy is absent on the ground. It is more to draw attention to the fact that often what is presented as philosophical discourse has not taken into account the goings on of the ground.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid. 252. It is worth mentioning that Emile Durkheim forwarded a sacred-profane dichotomy. This does not equate to a dichotomy between good and evil. Instead, here sacred refers to those elements of life which we have exalted, and to which we have ascribed myths, dogmas, rites, etc. Profane refers to the mundane: those ordinary elements of day to day life which we do not take to be sacred. Durkheim claims that religious beliefs rest upon this dichotomy. See Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (New York: The Free Press, 1965), 52-53. Similarly, Eliade holds that religious life is opposite to the profane, secular life. See Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (New York: World Publishing, 1963), 1. However, in line with the above description Frazier affords Hinduism, my own fieldwork suggests that within the context of Tiruchengode there is no such stark dichotomy between the exalted and the mundane but a seamless and continuous interplay instead.

<sup>84</sup> However, the use of a particular category does have heuristic value as it incites interest for further investigation and establishes a position from which one may explore.

<sup>85</sup> Rām is considered an incarnation of the god, Viṣṇu.

<sup>86</sup> Examples of regional perspectives can be found in Ch.6 of *ibid.* where several are identified so to exemplify Hindu diversity.

regional studies hone in on a more acute area they are still able to incorporate various other disciplines, such as history and language studies, and may also acknowledge influences which have come from outside, such as pilgrimage, migration, and trade routes. It should be noted that there are studies of thematic focus, too. Globalization and HIV epidemics are modern examples.

To summarize, the contemporary approaches overviewed above demonstrate trends towards giving voice to the unheard, exploring overlooked content, treating disciplines as fluid and interconnected, and towards recognizing the uniqueness of particular contexts. I incorporate similar trends in my own work which I will expound in the sections to follow.

#### **1.4 Concepts Relating to Fieldwork**

Before presenting my own fieldwork approach there are a few concepts that need introduction as they are integral to its formation. I will first discuss the concept of power. This will be done because fieldwork involves the observation of occurrences in a particular environment and the concept of power relates to how observable phenomena operate. Power posits a fluid view of reality and thus implies relativity of experience; each experience is clad with a unique measure of contents and conditions. The fieldwork of this thesis infers information regarding the experiences of others. Accordingly, there are issues regarding the concept of experience that must be addressed. Following this, I will provide a description of my own relative position in relation to the project at hand. Subsequently, I will discuss how the aforementioned concepts pertain to fieldwork and then explicate my fieldwork approach.

##### **1.4.1 The Concept of Power**

Power is often thought of in relation to character or in terms of sovereignty; people are described as powerful, or as having power over somebody else. Although the concept of power is certainly at work in matters of influence, it is elusive of ownership as such; it is too pervasive. Power is everything and everywhere.<sup>87</sup> Moreover, power is described as a way in which actions

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<sup>87</sup> Institute of Developmental Studies, University of Sussex, "Foucault: Power is Everywhere," <http://www.powercube.net/other-forms-of-power/foucault-power-is-everywhere/> (accessed Oct. 14, 2015).

modify other actions.<sup>88</sup> In this view, all activity is at once being modified and modifying all else.<sup>89</sup> On this basis it can be said that such activity exists relationally.<sup>90</sup> However, it should be kept in mind that although we may label something as either the modifier or the modified, these are two aspects of a joint process.<sup>91</sup> We simply describe how parts of the whole change as if they are wholes in and of themselves, when in actuality they are not.<sup>92</sup> Importantly, given that power is considered pervasive and is described in terms of action, one may infer that it implies a dynamic view of reality, the fluidity of observable phenomena.

This ongoing process of change is also referential; knowledge of change implies a comparison of before and after. Thus, power may be considered a perceptual matter, as present in the realm of meaning-making.<sup>93</sup> In fact, Foucault writes that there is no knowledge without power relations and, likewise, there are no power relations without a field of knowledge; they imply each other.<sup>94</sup> Foucault describes power as unable to act on the static.<sup>95</sup> If knowledge involves power then concepts themselves cannot be considered static. Rather, concepts are fluid hubs of meaning. Interestingly, and oppositely, our conceptualizations are often presented as closed, static definitions. As a result, we understand and/or treat things as definite. However,

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Foucault describes power relations as present in relations between states and citizens, present in individuals and bodies and present in even more abstract cases, such as attitudes, gestures, and behaviours. See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 27

<sup>88</sup> Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," in *Critical Inquiry* 8, no.4 (Summer, 1982), 788

<sup>89</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, 27. Here Foucault states that no episodes of micro-powers may be inscribed on history except by the effects that it induces on the entire network in which it is caught up. Micro-powers are in reference to cognitive processes, which I will discuss yet. Importantly, though, his point presupposes that there is interconnectivity. Again, this is in line with the thought that power permeates everything. It is also to say that being modified also modifies; a change in the part is a change to the whole.

<sup>90</sup> Relationally in the sense that there is a perceived interplay of observable phenomena.

<sup>91</sup> After all, if power is thought to permeate everything then it may be considered a uniting feature.

<sup>92</sup> This is similar to what Stavrakakis refers to when he discusses the decentralized subject and the Lacanian essential lack; nothing is fixed and there is no core 'essence' to anything. Yannis Stavrakakis, *Lacan and the Political* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 26-27

<sup>93</sup> The implication of this is that everything exists experientially. This is a point that will be addressed in the section to follow.

<sup>94</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, 27

<sup>95</sup> Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," in *Critical Inquiry* 8, no.4 (Summer, 1982), 789

definite and static are concepts that exist within the realm of meaning-making and are therefore still pervaded by power; all thought and its contents are subject to change.<sup>96</sup>

As this section has overviewed, I understand the concept of power to imply an interconnected and dynamic view of reality. As such, everything is always unique; the conditions of each moment differ from the last. Power is also described as present in the intellectual realm of meaning-making. Given the pervasiveness and properties of power, it can be said that every vantage of perception is also unique and constantly changing. The result of which is relative experience.

#### 1.4.2 The Concept of Experience

According to Robert Sharf, the term experience stresses the relative, personal, and private. Consequently, he describes the term as resistant to objective definition.<sup>97</sup> He suggests that the experience of each individual possesses unique rationality and therefore implies distinct subjectivity.<sup>98</sup> This relativity of experience renders its comprehension elusive to the outsider. Yet the concept continues to play a central role in the study of religion; the meanings of texts, practices, and institutions are often described as existing within the realm of experience.<sup>99</sup> For this reason Sharf vies for the importance of the term.

In addition to relativity, two other challenges face the definition of experience: empiricism and cultural pluralism. Empiricism refers to the notion that truth claims must be subject to quantifiable observation and verification. Yet, according to Sharf, experience exists in contrast to the outer, material, and quantifiable world. Rather, experience appears to be an inner, immeasurable dimension that operates in response to the exterior, material, and

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<sup>96</sup> I have suggested that observable phenomena are permeated by the dynamism of power. It should be noted that he discusses notions of power in relation to self and society, and of social, cultural, and political transformations with reference to certain epochs, such as modernity and the Enlightenment. I have made this inference given his language, which, in the cases provided, I find to imply a great inclusivity, fundamentality, and applicability to observable phenomena in general. Foucault does not describe, say, the movement of clouds in terms of power. However, I do think power is at work there too. Moreover, in labelling something both a cloud and moving there is meaning-making present and, as Foucault has described, power is present in knowledge.

<sup>97</sup> Robert Sharf, "Experience," in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 94

<sup>98</sup> Ibid. 105

<sup>99</sup> Ibid. 94

measurable.<sup>100</sup> However, I hesitate to agree with the idea that there are perfect distinctions between inner and outer, or with the perfect measurability of this “outer” world. The elusiveness of experience from quantification is the point with which I agree and care to emphasize.

The second issue Sharf raises concerns cultural pluralism. To illustrate, Sharf provides an example of 20<sup>th</sup> century Christian Theologians who were faced with the presence of non-Christian traditions. In response to these other systems of belief, the Theologians reduced the foreign sensibilities to variations or expressions of one religious experience, of which they claimed expertise.<sup>101</sup> The Theologians failed to concede to the uniqueness of both camps, that each was legitimate in their own right. The problem is that the notion of religion itself is a cultural product. Therefore, the notion of religious experience is also charged by cultural connotations and rationale. Moreover, Sharf points out that many non-Western traditions do not contain an equivalent of the word religion in their vocabulary.<sup>102</sup> Regarding the above example, Sharf emphasizes that definitions of particular *types* of experiences do not always, if ever, properly translate across cultures or languages.

Despite these difficulties, Sharf offers two distinct uses of the term experience which are helpful to the present discussion. The first use is with reference to participating or living through something. He gives two examples: having combat experience, and having experience with diesel engines. The first example seems to have impressionistic implications, in that war may be described as a frightening experience. The second seems to emphasize the accumulation of practical skill or knowledge of a given subject and its subsequent applicability.

The second use of the term experience refers to “directly perceiving,” “observing,” or “being aware of.”<sup>103</sup> However, the reiteration of experience is understood to occur through

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<sup>100</sup> I will add that our quantifying systems are imperfect also. We quantify by an ultimately arbitrary unit of measure. There is an allegory that exemplifies this by saying the sun may be measured by the length of its flames, the reach of its heat, or the stretch of its light. Furthermore, you can keep dividing things forever and therefore never reach perfect measurability.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid. 96

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid. 104. Both uses and their examples are from this page.

conditioned expression. For example, expressions are shaped by linguistic, cultural, and historical influences. Thus, experiences always transcend their expression; one is never presented with the actual experience of someone, but rather a diluted and affected conveyance.<sup>104</sup> It is important, therefore, to keep the distinction between expression and experience in mind.

In this connection, Leela Prasad, in *Text, Tradition, and Imagination*, argues that our normative understanding of a concept draws from its presence in several contexts, such as community, circumstance, and media.<sup>105</sup> The influences that shape our conceptions do not operate statically; they are fluid, subject to change, and are situated in a fluctuating field of power relations.<sup>106</sup> Various dynamics simply coagulate as concepts in experience. The fluidity of the contents of experience point to the relativity of normative experience itself; each vantage contains its own unique measure of contents and conditions. I concede that my own experiences are relative and my own expressions are also subject to conditioning. Given that the project at hand involves fieldwork, it is important I address relativity in relation to it.

### **1.4.3 My Relative Position**

I recognize that my own experiences are unique and that it is ultimately from my own experiences that I speak. If someone were to explain something about their own experience to me, I would only be able to express my experience of their expression. Moreover, my faculties of understanding and means of expression are shaped by many influences, including familial, political, historical, etc.<sup>107</sup> Given these influences, and the inherent restrictions of expression, I will relay some of my own perceived biases and limitations as they relate to my fieldwork in Tiruchengode, Tamil Nadu.

Tamil is by far the most prominent language in Tiruchengode. English is also present, albeit less widespread and often appearing to lack proficiency. Given that I do not speak Tamil,

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid. 114. I say diluted because I believe that in immediate experience there is a fullness that the experiencer is unable to articulate even to themselves.

<sup>105</sup> Leela Prasad, "Text, Tradition, and Imagination: Evoking the Normative in Everyday Hindu Life." *Numen* 53, no.1 (Sept. 2006): 5. <http://www.jstor.org/> (accessed Sept. 11, 2013)

<sup>106</sup> In accordance with the last section.

<sup>107</sup> In saying particular shape I do not mean static form.

this limited the scope of people with whom I could converse. Regarding those I did talk to, this sometimes hampered our capacity to speak with and understand each other. However, even those perspectives that were well articulated I cannot claim to know in full. This is in line with the above discussion on the limitations of expression. Nor can a well communicated expression be taken as wholly representative given the relativity of experience; each perspective is inevitably unique. In addition to those uneducated in English, I was unable to speak to others: the many I simply did not encounter, and those marginalized members of society, such as the *hijra*.<sup>108</sup> Although there were occasions where I did speak with women, it may also be noted that interactions with men far outnumbered these instances.

It suffices to say that the culture of Tiruchengode has many elements unfamiliar to me. Therefore, it should be recognized that I may have not noticed, not understood, or misunderstood certain facets of what I encountered. Additionally, the fact I was there for the purpose of fieldwork surely influenced how I internalized my observations and have chosen to talk about them. I may have paid greater attention to some things that the average insider would not. Conversely, I may have unwittingly omitted elements that could have actually proved useful for my aims. As Catherine Bell states, “scholars cannot see other cultures without the biases, both conscious and unconscious, that their cultural lenses inevitably confer on the reality of others.”<sup>109</sup>

Finally, there is the fact that I am inevitably treated different by virtue of who I am: a privileged, white, male foreigner. For all intents and purposes this was for better or worse as I was generally treated in a very favored manner. I had professors tour the Ardhanārīśvara temple with me, a temple priest visited my guesthouse, I was invited to play on a basketball team, etc. My privileged, white, and foreign status also rendered me anomalous; I only saw one other white person on a single occasion. The sheer rarity of an individual such as myself brought

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<sup>108</sup> Now I suppose I *could* have spoken with *hijra*. I did come across several, and did exchange the odd few words when asking for directions, giving money, etc. However, the contexts did not seem conducive to much conversation. I once politely tried to have a conversation with one individual. However, they did not seem too keen so I let it be. Granted it is my own impression, but I certainly noticed that the *hijra* stuck to themselves mostly and perhaps felt uncomfortable to interact with others due to being ostracized.

<sup>109</sup> Bell, “Paradigms behind (And before) the Modern Concept of Religion,” 39



about ample attention. Generally, there was enthusiastic and curious buzz around my presence. However, I would not be surprised if I was oppositely met with skepticism and was unpopular with others. Either way, I must concede that my presence was unique and that the community certainly responded in kind. Simply put, entering a culture changes how it operates to some degree.<sup>110</sup>

## 1.5 Approach to Fieldwork

### 1.5.1 Rationale for Fieldwork

In light of the theoretical and methodological issues discussed in the sections above, the following will lay out my rationale for, and approach to, fieldwork. The beginning of this chapter examined some factors, namely Orientalism and the ‘world religions paradigm,’ that have been identified as contributive to modern misconceptions of religion in general, and Hinduism specifically. The discussion shed light on the fact that the academic study of religion has a history of downplaying or dismissing ritual, practice, and custom in favour of creed, text, and doctrine. Biases of this nature are especially misleading regarding the study of Hindu traditions. Narayanan, in *Diglossic Hinduism: Liberation and Lentils*, writes firsthand about growing up in a Hindu community. The author argues that Hinduism operates, as the title of the article insinuates, in a diglossic manner, both formally and informally.<sup>111</sup> The philosophical doctrines, the author contends, are a fraction of the big picture.<sup>112</sup> In their experience, the enjoyment of family recipes at festival times was more integral to their understanding of Hinduism than doctrine or philosophy. Moreover, Hinduism is often identified as praxis oriented, not belief centered.<sup>113</sup> In addition to the biases in content listed above, there has also been a historical propensity towards treating elite, male voices as wholly representative while others have gone unheard.<sup>114</sup> Although contemporary approaches are trying to amend these exclusions by

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<sup>110</sup> Frazier, “Research Methods,” in *The Bloomsbury Companion to Hindu Studies*, ed. Jessica Frazier, 238

<sup>111</sup> See Narayanan, “*Diglossic Hinduism: Liberation and Lentils*,” in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 68 no.4 (2000)

<sup>112</sup> Ibid. 764

<sup>113</sup> Ibid. 762. Also see Frazier “Research Methods,” in *The Bloomsbury Companion to Hindu Studies*, ed. Jessica Frazier, 250. Here she writes that Hinduism is more and more being approached in terms of practice.

<sup>114</sup> See Narayanan,, “*Diglossic Hinduism: Liberation and Lentils*,” in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 68 no.4 (2000), 762

recognizing muted voices and devalued content, the biases are still largely present in works that have not yet been re-examined.

The available literature centering on Ardhanārīśvara largely reflects these biases. The content primarily deals with Ardhanārīśvara iconography, mythology, and their philosophical interpretations.<sup>115</sup> There is next to nothing regarding Ardhanārīśvara cults, worship, or dedicated sites. I found this oversight surprising given there is a fairly well known temple in Tiruchengode, Tamil Nadu where Ardhanārīśvara is the presiding deity.<sup>116</sup> Accordingly, fieldwork at this site is beneficial; an examination of this living context contributes towards closing the aforesaid gaps in content. The following sections will describe my approach to the fieldwork itself.

### **1.5.2 Fieldwork and the Dynamism of Observable Phenomena**

Earlier in this chapter I discussed the appropriateness of viewing Hinduism as a family of variegated strains of beliefs and practices. Later on I discussed the fluidity of observable phenomena, including cognitive processes. The question then is how one approaches a tradition, site, or figure given such wild variances of understanding and expression, and the constantly changing nature of life. I believe a viable option is situating the contents under investigation within dynamism, while also incorporating fluidity in my approach to them.

To reiterate, I understand reality to operate in a continuously fluid, transactional manner.<sup>117</sup> This fluidity is also present in the process of meaning making; the world we describe is operating in an aqueous manner, as is our understanding of it. Life does not occur in grids and lines; things do not exist as closed compartments. Yet in academia I have often found

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<sup>115</sup> Philosophical in this sense refers to the metaphysics of reality. There are instances wherein some scholars do attempt to relate Ardhanārīśvara to the goings-on of societal matters. However, they do so in a very hypothetical/theoretical sense and rarely touchdown to actual context. This will be made evident in the literature review and summary in the following chapter.

<sup>116</sup> I say fairly well known because I would not place it in the same league of infamy as other sites, such as the Kālīghāt temple in Kolkata. However, as I spoke with people throughout India, especially in the South, people were aware of its existence. My surprise is that there are scholars who have focused on Ardhanārīśvara in their work and failed to mention this site.

<sup>117</sup> Again, transactional is not to imply that there is ever at any point actual separateness. I mean to say that change implies the simultaneous interplay of influence and potential, just like the act of selling simultaneously implies the act of buying.

information presented as being how things actually, definitely, and fully are. This is certainly the case in much of the work on Ardhanārīśvara. For example, the figure will be described as a symbol of cult syncretism, *period*.<sup>118</sup> Descriptive categories, such as Ardhanārīśvara iconography and mythology, are too often presented as closed, separate compartments that do not interact. In my opinion, these categories should be treated as open and conventional rather than closed and definite. As an example, Foucault suggests that one should analyze institutions from the standpoint of power relations rather than vice versa, meaning that the institution in question is not to be understood as a closed entity.<sup>119</sup> Similarly, I understand the Ardhanārīśvara of Tiruchengode, and all its descriptive categories, as nexuses; they are hubs of processes that are not closed off from each other.

Catherine Bell approached ritual studies in a similar manner. Bell recognizes that the word ritual is usually employed to designate a special act that is set apart from other activity. However, she chooses not to adopt a set of defining features to characterize all instances of ritual.<sup>120</sup> Rather, her focus is on the generation of what we call ritual, which she believes is the result of an ongoing process involving the imposition and integration of ideas.<sup>121</sup> She calls this process ritualization. Accordingly, Bell argues that the category 'ritual' is not to be understood as static. Instead, she considers activity itself as the most suitable framework for understanding ritual, noting the ongoing interplay of power relations in its conceptualization.<sup>122</sup>

I interpret Bell to suggest that we may fruitfully, and more accurately, treat things as dynamic. In this vein, I address the categories used in the literature regarding Ardhanārīśvara (i.e., iconography, mythology, etc.) as fluid in the context of Tiruchengode. As per the discussion earlier, I am also cognizant of previously overlooked categories (i.e., ritualistic and cultural elements). I consider the ways that these categories interact and influence each other. For example, I recognize image in the context of ritual and the influence of mythological narratives

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<sup>118</sup> For example See Dr. Lalit Kumar Shukla, *Study of Hindu Art and Architecture* (Varanasi: Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series Office, 1971), 227

<sup>119</sup> Foucault, "The Subject and Power," in *Critical Inquiry* 8, no.4 (Summer, 1982), 791

<sup>120</sup> Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), ix

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.* 32

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.* 197

on the interpretation of iconographic symbolism. Recognizing the interactivity between categories has proved insightful vis-à-vis Ardhanārīśvara specifically, and regarding our usages of categories in general. All observations will be discussed in subsequent chapters.

### **1.5.3 Fieldwork and Experience**

Bell raised the important point that our categories of description may be thought of as hubs in the process of meaning-making.<sup>123</sup> Importantly, we are necessary actors in this ongoing process of conceptualization. Moreover, it is in the domain of experience that concepts occur. Given that my fieldwork takes place in the living context of Tiruchengode and involves analyzing the activity of people, each immersed in their own experience, the concept of experience is an important topic to address.

Earlier I discussed the relativity of normative experience. I also discussed the inability for expression to fully convey the nuanced fullness of experience. As such, I do not take any expression I have encountered to be wholly representative of all experiences or understandings. Nor will I take any expression to fully convey the experience or understanding being expressed. Therefore, I am not presenting or evaluating the actual experiences of anyone. Any inferences I draw are to be understood strictly as my own impressions as participant observer.

### **1.5.4 Participant Observation**

Contemporary anthropological approaches often incorporate the use of participant observation. Again, the goal of participant observer is to create a familiarity that reduces unnatural interaction, hearsay, cultural differences, and to bolster the ability to speak as best as possible from a place similar to one within the community.<sup>124</sup> I adopted this approach to fieldwork. I attended temple functions, spoke curiously but casually with people and with genuine interest, and was making keen observations from as within the community as I could feasibly be.

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid. 32

<sup>124</sup> Frazier, "Research Methods," in *The Bloomsbury Companion to Hindu Studies*, ed. Jessica Frazier, 234

With that said, I must reiterate that I am still an outsider nonetheless. I have already listed my own perceived shortcomings in relation to my fieldwork in Tamil Nadu, including cultural and linguistic barriers, and my own preconditioned dispositions of which I am both aware and unaware. However, this is hardly to say that fieldwork is all for nought. In fact, there is an argument against the possibility of treating any research about religious traditions as objective truths.<sup>125</sup> Rather, one provides the rationale behind their individual observations and impressions. In this regard, it should be mentioned that I have also been influenced by contemporary interdisciplinary approaches. To reiterate, contemporary interdisciplinary approaches view Hinduism as pervasive throughout all aspects of life and recognize that categories, such as literature, ritual, the arts, etc., are interwoven. Accordingly, my fieldwork observations and impressions were not limited to a single category, such as temple iconography, but instead recognized the context of Tiruchengode and its Ardhanārīśvara temple as alive with many interweaving elements. Similarly, the formation of my impressions have incorporated a myriad of sources, such as temple websites, pamphlets, texts, conversations, silent observation, and my own studies prior, during, and after the fieldwork itself.<sup>126</sup> Again, when discussing my observations and impressions I will provide my rationales and acknowledge the influences which have shaped them.

The aim of these observations is to see the ways in which Ardhanārīśvara, in the context of Tiruchengode, is congruent and incongruent with its presentation in the available literature. To facilitate this comparison, the following chapter will provide a comprehensive review of the scholarship pertaining to Ardhanārīśvara.

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid. 238

<sup>126</sup> This approach is somewhat reminiscent of “the toolbox of pluralism” expounded by Doniger O’Flaherty. see Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty, *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 5-7

## Chapter Two

### Ardhanārīśvara in Contemporary Scholarship: A Literature Review

#### 2.1 Introduction

The preceding chapter raised concerns regarding the academic study of Hinduism. To reiterate, 'religion' as a category is reductionistic; there are parameters of categorization in which certain beliefs and practices are said to fit while others are considered non-religious, or at least not part of "true religiosity."<sup>1</sup> The general category 'religion' emerged using Christianity as the prototype.<sup>2</sup> As a result, Hinduism has often been presented in a convoluted manner, with an emphasis on the textual, creedal, and doctrinal while the ritualistic and customary have been ignored or downplayed. There is considerable scholarship dedicated to acknowledging and rectifying this issue. However, I side with Richard King who claims that both the concepts 'religion' and 'Hinduism' remain engrained with Enlightenment biases.<sup>3</sup> I stated in the introduction to this thesis that the existing works on Ardhanārīśvara reflect the misconceptions and gaps in content purported by those critiquing the academic study of Hinduism; Ardhanārīśvara in living context goes virtually ignored. To substantiate this claim, and to acquaint the reader with Ardhanārīśvara, this chapter will provide a comprehensive overview of the present scholarship concerning the figure and then review the content in light of said issues.

#### 2.2 Introduction to Ardhanārīśvara

The name Ardhanārīśvara combines three words using the Sanskrit grammatical practice, *sandhi*.<sup>4</sup> The three terms are *ardha*, meaning half, *nārī*, meaning woman, and *īśvara*,

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<sup>1</sup> Catherine Bell, "Paradigms behind (And before) the Modern Concept of Religion," in *History and Theory* 45, no. 4 (Dec., 2006): 34

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 29

<sup>3</sup> See Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and 'The Mystic East'* (London: Routledge, 1999), 38

<sup>4</sup> *Sandhi* is the process by which words are fused together.

considered similar to the Western usage of “lord.”<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, Ardhanārīśvara is translated along the lines of “the Lord who is half woman,” or “the half woman Lord.”<sup>6</sup> As such, the figure is depicted as half male and half female. However, it is important to note that *Īśvara* is a term applied primarily to the masculine Śiva.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, although composed of two figures, Śiva and the feminine Śakti, Ardhanārīśvara is predominantly identified as a form of Śiva.<sup>8</sup> In fact, Ardhanārīśvara is one of several popular forms of Śiva, as evidenced by its presence at numerous sites across the Indian subcontinent, its images in Indian marketplaces, and its widespread recognition in books on Hindu iconography.<sup>9</sup> Though I will reserve a more thorough analysis of the figure and its iconographic features for later in this chapter, it is important to acknowledge for the following section that Ardhanārīśvara is a composite figure; it is invariably divided male and female by a central axis, and most often proportionately equal.<sup>10</sup>

### 2.2.1 Conceptual Antecedents

Given the androgynous motif present in the anthropomorphic Ardhanārīśvara, Yadav draws attention to *liṅgam* and *yoni* worship in the ancient Indus valley as potential antecedents for the figure.<sup>11</sup> The ancient cultures of the Indus Valley portrayed masculine and feminine principles by their respective sexual features. Smooth, aniconic stones represented the male principle. Phallic emblems are also present on images of ithyphallic gods found in the region.<sup>12</sup> The most famous of these ancient images is the Mohenjo-Daro seal which is sometimes

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<sup>5</sup> Ellen Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman: Ardhanārīśvara in Indian and Feminist Perspective* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2002), 1. I’ll add here that “lord” in this context is more in line with that of a Supreme Being or of Ultimate reality than in the sense of dominion over some Earthly jurisdiction.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty, *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 317

<sup>8</sup> There are those who grant Śakti, rather than Śiva, the position of primacy. This will be discussed in sections to follow.

<sup>9</sup> For example see Neeta Yadav, *Ardhanārīśvara in Art and Literature* (New Delhi: D.K. Printworld, 2001). Yadav offers 18 coloured images and 70 plates, displaying an incredible amount of examples from across time and space.

<sup>10</sup> Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman: Ardhanārīśvara in Indian and Feminist Perspective*, 12

<sup>11</sup> Yadav, *Ardhanārīśvara in Art and Literature*, 11. The *liṅgam* and *yoni* represent the male and female sexual organs quite literally, and likely masculine and feminine principles more abstractly.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

described as “proto-Śiva,” an early form of Śiva in his *paśupati* form.<sup>13</sup> Along with stone vulviforms, the Indus Valley cultures also depicted the feminine principle through figurines, including numerous buxom terracotta figures found in Harrapa.<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, the *yoni* and *liṅgam* are presently considered symbols of Śiva and Śakti respectively. United *liṅgams* and *yonis* found in both Harrapa and Mohenjo-daro could be the basis for later androgynous motifs. Regardless, the united *yoni-liṅgam* is now widely understood as the non-figurative form of Ardhanārīśvara.<sup>15</sup>

It is argued that some of the symbolic functions and philosophical interpretations of Ardhanārīśvara find their basis in earlier thought. For example, Śiva became associated with the Vedic god, Rudra, and the names are now often used synonymously.<sup>16</sup> There is an etymology of Rudra which associates the name with the concept *rodasi* which means Heaven and Earth.<sup>17</sup> In the *Rg Veda*, *dyaus* (Heaven) and *pṛthivī* (Earth) are presented as being male and female respectively.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, they are presented as being mother and father to creation.<sup>19</sup> According to Yadav, the Vedas present creation as the result of a female principle being brought into union with a male principle.<sup>20</sup> Importantly, the Vedas also present male and female as emblematic of other paired opposites.<sup>21</sup> Likewise, there are those who consider Ardhanārīśvara a symbol of progeny and as representative of all paired opposites.<sup>22</sup> Yadav believes that the

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<sup>13</sup> On this Mohenjo-Daro seal is an ithyphallic figure sitting cross legged and surrounded by animals. Hence, the association with Śiva as *paśupati*, translated as “Lord of animals.” See Anne Marie Gaston, *Śiva in Dance, Myth, and Iconography* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982), 124

<sup>14</sup> Yadav, *Ardhanārīśvara in Art and Literature*, 147. It is widely held that these ancient female figurines were understood as connected to fertility. In support of this theory, Yadav points to an example wherein plants are depicted as growing out of the navel of one of these terracotta women.

<sup>15</sup> Kramrisch, *The Presence of Śiva* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1981), 246. However, it should be noted that in common parlance the united *yoni-liṅgam* is simply referred to as *liṅgam* or *liṅga*; it is afforded male primacy.

<sup>16</sup> Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty. *Asceticism and Eroticism in the Mythology of Śiva* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), 83

<sup>17</sup> Yadav, *Ardhanārīśvara in Art and Literature*, 114

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 113-114

<sup>19</sup> *Dyaus* and *pṛthivī*, are even considered parents of the gods. See Alka Pande, *Ardhanarishvara, the Androgyne: Probing the Gender Within* (New Delhi: Rupa & Co., 2004), 27

<sup>20</sup> Yadav, *Ardhanārīśvara in Art and Literature*, 131

<sup>21</sup> These include *prayati-svadha* (energy, matter), *katamardha-visvardha* (unknown half, world half), *parardha-avarardha* (upper half, lower half), etc. See Ibid. 114

<sup>22</sup> Doniger O’Flaherty, *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts*, 310



Ardhanārīśvara form of Śiva is none other than the Purāṇic formulation of the *rodasi* aspect of Rudra.<sup>23</sup>

As mentioned, the Vedas present the ongoing process of creation as due to male and female principles uniting. However, the male and female principles are described as initially united in the *hiranyagarbha*; the “golden womb,” or “golden egg.” The *R̥g Veda* describes this singular golden womb or egg as the primordial scene; it is a singular principal preceding the presence of duality. The *hiranyagarbha* eventually splits into *dyaus* and *pṛthivī*, male and female.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, there are narratives wherein Ardhanārīśvara is understood to represent the simultaneous and paradoxical encompassment of all opposites. As such, the figure also represents the unknowable, undifferentiated chaos that precedes creation. Accordingly, Ardhanārīśvara has been linked to the Vedic *hiranyagarbha*.<sup>25</sup>

The primordial wholeness associated with the *hiranyagarbha* is similarly attributed to the cosmic person, known as Puruṣa. In addition, Puruṣa also undergoes a primeval split and in doing so yields the discernible universe. Prior to the schism Puruṣa is understood to simultaneously embody paired opposites, including male and female, and has thus been cited as a symbol of androgyny. Ardhanārīśvara has been understood similarly and a link between Ardhanārīśvara and the cosmic Puruṣa has been drawn as a result.<sup>26</sup>

### 2.2.2 Origins and History of the Ardhanārīśvara Image

The oldest known images of Ardhanārīśvara belong to the Kuṣāṇ period (30-375 CE). The earliest is a mid-first century stele, discovered in Mathura, on which Ardhanārīśvara is present alongside three other figures.<sup>27</sup> An elaborate Ardhanārīśvara bust found in Rajghāt also belongs

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<sup>23</sup> Yadav, *Ardhanārīśvara in Art and Literature*, 148

<sup>24</sup> Eliade, *The Two and the One* (London: Harvill Press, 1965), 115

<sup>25</sup> Ardhanārīśvara is also linked to the Vedic Agni. Considered an antecedent of Śiva, one of Agni’s epithets, “the bull who is also a cow,” has explicit androgynous connotations. See Kramrisch, *The Presence of Śiva*, 200

<sup>26</sup> Information in this paragraph is drawn from Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman: Ardhanārīśvara in Indian and Feminist Perspective*, 52. Here Goldberg also references the *puruṣasūkta*, a hymn in the *R̥g Veda* dedicated to Puruṣa. In it Puruṣa begins creation with the origination of Viraj, a primeval being who can be either male or female.

<sup>27</sup> Yadav, *Ardhanārīśvara in Art and Literature*, 13. The three other figures are Viṣṇu, Gajalakṣmī, and Kubera.

to the Kuṣāṇ era.<sup>28</sup> There is a numismatic example of Ardhanārīśvara as well: a coin attributed to the Kuṣāṇ ruler, Kanishka III, depicting Ardhanārīśvara on one side.<sup>29</sup> The Ardhanārīśvara image is also referenced in writing as early as the second century CE. A narrative attributed to Bardaisan describes how in the Western Ghāts the supreme god of the area was a half-male, half-female figure.<sup>30</sup> Although the image of Ardhanārīśvara is presumed to originate during the Kuṣāṇ period, it increased in prevalence during the Gupta period (320-550 CE) alongside a rise in the popularity of Śiva.<sup>31</sup> The presence of Śiva in androgynous form became most pervasive throughout the 5<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> centuries CE, as evidenced by the Ardhanārīśvara images found at Śiva temples built during this time.<sup>32</sup>

### 2.2.3 Ardhanārīśvara Iconography

Ardhanārīśvara is a composite deity; it is divided male and female by a central vertical axis. The figure is found in both sculptural and painted representations. Generally the left half is allotted to Śakti, the female aspect of the divine.<sup>33</sup> The right side is most often afforded to Śiva, the masculine principle. Typically the face is shared, though similarly divided by the central axis. However, there are unique forms that do take exception. First, I will delineate the diagnostic features commonly attributed to Ardhanārīśvara in the contemporary scholarship. Following this I will discuss some of the unique depictions. I will reserve a discussion regarding interpretations of the Ardhanārīśvara figure for a section to follow.

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<sup>28</sup> This bust is housed in the Mathura Museum. It is an oft-cited image in the literature. See the cover of Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman: Ardhanārīśvara in Indian and Feminist Perspective*

<sup>29</sup> See Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman: Ardhanārīśvara in Indian and Feminist Perspective*, 16. Goldberg describes the pose of *Ardhanārīśvara* as *sthānamudra*, standing straight and balanced equally. For an example see page 50.

<sup>30</sup> Yadav, *Ardhanārīśvara in Art and Literature*, 14. The Bardaisan narrative is found in an anthology attributed to Stobaeus, a 5<sup>th</sup> century Macedonian and compiler of extracts of Greek authors. Bardaisan lived from 154-222 and is known to have made contact with “religious” men from India during this time.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. 160

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. 161. Yadav offers maps in the back of *Ardhanārīśvara in Art and Literature* that display where *Ardhanārīśvara* images have been found from “5<sup>th</sup> century and before” – “12<sup>th</sup> century and onward.” The pervasiveness of the image is remarkable; it is located in widespread fashion across the Indian subcontinent.

<sup>33</sup> Śakti denotes the female ‘power’ or ‘energy’ of the Universe. This feminine principal is also addressed as Devī, the Great Goddess. See Gavin Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 175

## 2.3 Iconographic Features of the Male Half of Ardhanārīśvara

The male half of Ardhanārīśvara includes features affiliated with Śiva. The head of Śiva is usually adorned with a *jaṭāmākuta*, a pile of matted hair associated with asceticism. The *jaṭāmākuta* may be ornamented with *nāgas* (snakes), a crescent moon, jewels, and/or the goddess Gangā from which the river Ganges flows.<sup>34</sup> There are three potential earring styles worn by the male half: the *nakra-kunḍala*, *sarpa-kunḍala* (serpent earring), or ordinary *kunḍala*.<sup>35</sup> Disparate earring styles are one of the most applied diagnostic features used to signify male or female presence, used especially on busts and on those images incorporating the Naṭarāja aspect of Śiva.<sup>36</sup> The eye on the right, male half of Ardhanārīśvara may be smaller than the one on the left. Half of a moustache may be present on the male side of the face, as well as half of the “third eye,” located on the forehead.<sup>37</sup> Sometimes the forehead of the male half will also don a Śaivite *tilak*.<sup>38</sup>

The male half of Ardhanārīśvara is depicted with a flatter chest, broader right shoulder, a wider waist, and larger thigh. This half is clothed with traditional male garments, such as the *dhoti*.<sup>39</sup> A tiger skin is usually worn from waist to the knees.<sup>40</sup> However, on sculptural representations the clothing style is not always incorporated and instead relies on other features.<sup>41</sup> Some iconographical canons suggest that the male side be covered in either red colouring or with ashes.<sup>42</sup> There are North Indian images that depict the male side as *ūrdhvareta* (ithyphallic).<sup>43</sup> Ardhanārīśvara figures commonly bear two, three, or four arms. In the cases of

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<sup>34</sup> Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman: Ardhanārīśvara in Indian and Feminist Perspectives*, 12

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. The *nakra-kunḍala* is referred to as the common type. *Sarpa-kunḍala* is not further specified but I believe that *sarpa* is a Sanskrit term referring to serpent or snake.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. Naṭarāja refers to Śiva in his dancing form. This form of Śiva has its own unique attributes and will be discussed at greater length in a section to follow.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. 13. The Śaivite *tilak* denotes allegiance to Śiva. It is composed of *vibhūti*, or sacred ash, and is applied on the forehead in three horizontal lines.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> The tiger skin is associated with accomplished ascetics.

<sup>41</sup> Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman: Ardhanārīśvara in Indian and Feminist Perspectives*, 13

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. However, although these colourings may have been applied temporarily to *Ardhanārīśvara* sculptures, no sculptures have been found where the application remained intact.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. 13

two and four arms they are allocated to the male and female halves equally. When there are three arms the extra arm generally goes to the male half.<sup>44</sup>

When the male half has either three or four arms they are shown divided at the elbows. The front hand is usually held in a *mudrā*. A *mudrā* refers to ritualized or stylized gestures or poses and may involve the whole body but generally incorporate only the hands and fingers.<sup>45</sup> According to Goldberg, *mudrās* are indicative of the state of consciousness, character, or the *bhava* (emotion) of a deity.<sup>46</sup> The front hand of the male half of Ardhanārīśvara is generally held in either the *abhaya mudrā* (gesture of reassurance or fearlessness) or the *varada mudrā* (gesturing the offering of boons).<sup>47</sup> The back arm usually holds a weapon or object associated with Śiva, including the *triśūla* (trident), *khaḍga* (sword), *paśā* (a noose or lasso, sometimes in the form of snake), *vajra* (thunderbolt), *kapāla* (skull), *aṅkuśa* (an elephant goad), *ṭaṅka* (stone mason chisel), or *paraśu* (axe).<sup>48</sup>

The Śiva half of Ardhanārīśvara may be depicted as accompanied by attendant devotees and/or with Nandi, the *vāhana* (vehicle mount) of Śiva.<sup>49</sup> Though it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the significance of each diagnostic feature at length, it should be noted that the imagery present on both the Śiva and Śakti halves of Ardhanārīśvara are symbolically potent, pointing to mythological context and philosophical thought connected to each figure.

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<sup>44</sup> Yadav, *Ardhanārīśvara in Art and Literature*, 121. The connotations of this will be discussed later.

<sup>45</sup> Fredrick Bunce, *A Dictionary of Buddhist and Hindu Iconography: Objectives, Devices, Concepts, Rites, and Related Items* (New Delhi: D.K. Printworld, 1997), 190

<sup>46</sup> Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman: Ardhanārīśvara in Indian and Feminist Perspectives*, 15  
According to Goldberg, the *bhava* of the deity corresponds, more or less, with Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra*.

<sup>47</sup> Yadav, *Ardhanārīśvara in Art and Literature*, 21. Goldberg adds the *cinmudrā*, a gesture where the index finger and thumb touch and the other three fingers are held straight. See Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman: Ardhanārīśvara in Indian and Feminist Perspectives*, 15

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. 13. Some of these items are only found on rare images that exceed four arms.

<sup>49</sup> Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman: Ardhanārīśvara in Indian and Feminist Perspectives*, 20. The *vāhana* are often symbolic of their host deity. Nandi, for example, represents the power and virility of Śiva .

### 2.3.1 Iconographic Features of the Female Half of Ardhanārīśvara

The left side of Ardhanārīśvara is commonly designated by Śakti, the divine feminine principle.<sup>50</sup> The manifestation of Śakti generally used to represent this female half is Pārvatī.<sup>51</sup> Her hair is often worn in a *kāraṇḍamakuta* (beehive-styled crest) and adorned with jewels and other ornamentation.<sup>52</sup> There may be one of several female *kuṇḍala* (earring) styles present.<sup>53</sup> As mentioned in the previous section, differing earring styles are one of the most evident, and sometimes the only, indicator that the figure is Ardhanārīśvara. The forehead may have half a *tilak* or *bindu* and the female eye may be larger and outlined with collyrium.<sup>54</sup>

On the female side of Ardhanārīśvara, one of the most explicit sculptural features is the full, round breast. The hip is more prominent, waist smaller, and the ornamentation is more extravagant; often there are bracelets and *dhamalla* (breast piece with gold and jewels) of intricate design.<sup>55</sup> In painted representations it is common to find the female half draped in a *sari*, with red *lac* (henna) colouring the hand and/or foot.<sup>56</sup> There are iconographical texts that suggest the female half should be coloured either gold or coral, however this is rarely encountered.<sup>57</sup>

Again, the majority of the time that Ardhanārīśvara is depicted with three arms, one is found on the female side.<sup>58</sup> In four-armed images, the two on the female half are divided at the elbows. The front arm is usually held in a *mudrā*, either the *kaṭaka mudrā* (gesture of

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<sup>50</sup> Śakti means “power” and represents the dynamism of creation and/ or consciousness. As such, Śakti is considered *prakṛiti* (nature). Śakti or Devī manifests in various forms, such as Pārvatī, Sarasvatī, Kālī, etc.

<sup>51</sup> Goldberg writes that in some textual sources, such as *Viṣṇudharmottara*, the left side is used in reference to Uma, Sivā, or Gaurī. She presents these as though they are other figures. However, in my understanding they are epithets of Pārvatī. See Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman: Ardhanārīśvara in Indian and Feminist Perspective*, 14. The *Viṣṇudharmottara* is an encyclopedic text considered an appendix to the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*. The third *khanda* deals with image making.

<sup>52</sup> Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman: Ardhanārīśvara in Indian and Feminist Perspective*, 14

<sup>53</sup> See Ibid. The styles listed are: *vāḷīka*, *patra-kuṇḍala*, and *śankha patra kuṇḍala*.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. 14

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. 13. This is not encountered sculpturally. However, there are some instances in paintings. The gold colouring may be in reference to the “Gaurī myth” of *Ardhanārīśvara* that I will discuss in another section.

<sup>58</sup> The connotations of which will be discussed in a following section. There are occurrences where the number of arms is inverted, which will also be discussed later.

fascination or enchantment) or the *kaṭyavalambita* (posture of ease).<sup>59</sup> The back arm holds an object associated with Pārvatī, either a *nīlotpala* (flower), *vīṇā* (stringed instrument), *ghantā* (bell), a parrot, or a *darpaṇa* (mirror).<sup>60</sup> In two-armed Ardhanārīśvara images Pārvatī holds either a *nīlotpala* or *darpaṇa*. In most Ardhanārīśvara images Pārvatī holds a mirror.<sup>61</sup> The mirror is an important attribute of Pārvatī, especially so in the Ardhanārīśvara image, as will be discussed later.

### 2.3.2 Iconographic Features Shared by Male and Female Halves of Ardhanārīśvara

Some of the diagnostic features are shared by both halves of Ardhanārīśvara, lending a sense of continuity or unity to the figure. These may include a navel, ornaments across the chest, *hāra* (necklace), a shared *prabhamaṇḍala* (halo), *mekhula* (belt), and *yajñopavīta* (sacred thread worn by twice-borns).<sup>62</sup> The *trinetra* (third-eye), *bindu* (dot), and/or *tilak* (forehead marking) may also be shared.<sup>63</sup>

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.<sup>64</sup> Ardhanārīśvara is often found in the *sthānamudrā* posture as well. In such cases the figure stands straight and both sides of the body appear weighted proportionately equal.<sup>65</sup> There are instances, albeit less than the aforementioned, where Ardhanārīśvara is found in *padmāsana* (lotus position).<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman: Ardhanārīśvara in Indian and Feminist Perspective*, 14-15

<sup>60</sup> Ibid. The parrot has special significance as it is associated with Kāmadeva, god of love.

<sup>61</sup> Yadav, *Ardhanārīśvara in Art and Literature*, 25-26

<sup>62</sup> Sometimes the *dvijāti* (twice-born) thread may be in the form of a serpent (*nāga yajñopavīta*). There are images whereon the *yajñopavīta* is in *nāga* form on the Śiva side but changes at the central vertical axis into the regular thread and remains as such on the Pārvatī side.

<sup>63</sup> These shared features taken from Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman: Ardhanārīśvara in Indian and Feminist Perspective*, 13

<sup>64</sup> Yadav, *Ardhanārīśvara in Art and Literature*, 21

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

### 2.3.3 Variations in Ardhanārīśvara Iconography

The previous sections delineated features that popularly constitute Ardhanārīśvara images.<sup>67</sup> However, there are representations that deviate from the above. This section will describe several of these portrayals in order to provide a sense of the diverse manner in which Ardhanārīśvara is depicted. For example, whereas Ardhanārīśvara is generally represented with a shared face there are a few instances where there are two separate heads and an example where there are three.<sup>68</sup>

Though the Ardhanārīśvara image usually has two, three, or four arms there are instances where more are present. For example, there is a Kanga painting (dated 1800 CE) that displays four arms on the left, female side and five on the right, male side.<sup>69</sup> Goldberg also makes reference to South Indian depictions of Ardhanārīśvara containing six arms or more.<sup>70</sup>

There are also representations that combine Ardhanārīśvara with the dancing form of Śiva, Naṭarāja. The dancing figures appear primarily in South India, Orissa, and Nepal.<sup>71</sup> Some sculptures show Ardhanārīśvara entirely in *tāṇḍava* dance, others show the Pārvatī half standing while the Śiva half is in *tāṇḍava*, while others depict the Śiva half in *tāṇḍava* and the Pārvatī half in *lāsya*.<sup>72</sup>

The vast majority of the time Ardhanārīśvara is understood and depicted as benevolent, as *saumya* (gentle, pleasant, agreeable) and *śanta* (calm, peaceful, serene).<sup>73</sup> However, there are a few exceptions which are understood to incorporate the terrifying form of Śiva,

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<sup>67</sup> It should be noted that even though these depictions are not described as unordinary or exceptional there is considerable variance amongst them. For visual examples see Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman: Ardhanārīśvara in Indian and Feminist Perspective*, 26-53

<sup>68</sup> Pande, *Ardhanarishvara, the Androgyne: Probing the Gender Within*, 102

<sup>69</sup> Ibid. 99. Pande suggests that this implies the *ashtabhujā*, eight-armed form of the goddess and the *dasabhujā*, ten-armed form of Śiva.

<sup>70</sup> Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman: Ardhanārīśvara in Indian and Feminist Perspective*, 14

<sup>71</sup> Pande, *Ardhanarishvara, the Androgyne: Probing the Gender Within*, 124.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid. 100. Pande writes that texts do not refer to the dancing form of *Ardhanārīśvara* unless indirectly, when they speak of *tāṇḍava* and *lāsya* dances. However, she goes on to say that in sculptural depictions many can be seen. *Tāṇḍava* refers to the destructive dance of Śiva whereas *lāsya* refers to the counterpoised dance of elegance and beauty.

<sup>73</sup> Yadav, *Ardhanārīśvara in Art and Literature*, 178

Bhairava.<sup>74</sup> Yadav references a form where only the right side is terrifying in appearance, with Bhairava face and *khaṭvāṅga* (a club with human skull at the top) in hand.<sup>75</sup> Pande offers another example where Ardhanārīśvara wears a garland composed of heads on the male side which become skulls on the female half.<sup>76</sup>

There are also several examples where Śakti occupies the right side of Ardhanārīśvara and Śiva occupies the left. Goldberg provides an example of a ninth-century rock-cut image from the Vedopusīśvara Temple in Tiruveḍikuḍi, Tamil Nadu.<sup>77</sup> This reversal of male and female positioning is interpreted as placing primacy on the female half.<sup>78</sup> I will save a discussion regarding the implication of this inversion for a later section.

### 2.3.4 Haṭhayoga Iconography

I will offer a brief overview of some thought here as it relates to the special place Ardhanārīśvara has in *haṭhayoga* iconography.<sup>79</sup> *Haṭhayoga* acknowledges a subtle body system: a psycho-spiritual composition that exists in conjunction with the physical, biological body.<sup>80</sup> In it, there are epicenters of energy known as *cakras*. The *cakras* ascend from grossest forms of energy, at the base of the spine, to most sublime, located at or just above the top of the head.<sup>81</sup> There are treatises that provide information on the *cakras*, indicating their location,

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid. 179

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Pande, *Ardhanarishvara, the Androgyne: Probing the Gender Within*, 110. While on the topic of unique forms, I would like to draw attention to a male/female split of Gaṇeśa that Pande shares on 105.

<sup>77</sup> Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman: Ardhanārīśvara in Indian and Feminist Perspective*, 149. For additional examples see Kesava Rajarajan, "Dance of Ardhanārī: A Historiographical Retrospective," in *Glimpses of Indian History and Art: Reflections on the Past, Perspectives for the Future*, ed. Tiziana Lorenzetti and Fabio Scialpi (Italy: Sapienza University of Rome, 2012)

<sup>78</sup> Examples can also be seen in Stella Kramrisch, *The Manifestations of Śiva* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1981), 162 and 164. Kalidos argues that right-side-female figures are not Ardhanārīśvara but a precursor. That may be the case in earlier sculptural representations. However, there is no doubt that in the pictures Kramrisch provides that the figure is composite of Śiva and Śakti. Another unique form can be seen on page 165. Here Ardhanārīśvara is mounted on a Nandi composed of many animals.

<sup>79</sup> I will also reserve a more thorough discussion of *haṭhayoga* philosophy and praxis for a section dedicated to interpretations of the Ardhanārīśvara figure.

<sup>80</sup> Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman: Ardhanārīśvara in Indian and Feminist Perspective*, 69

<sup>81</sup> Robert Svoboda, *Aghora II: Kundalini* (New Delhi: Rupa Publications, 1994), 71



colour, *bīja* (seed syllables), associated element and/or energy, as well as the presiding deity of each *cakra*.<sup>82</sup> Ardhanārīśvara is associated with either the *viśuddha cakra* or the *ājñā cakra*.

### 2.3.5 Viśuddha Cakra

The *viśuddha cakra* is situated at the throat. It is smoky or sky blue in colour and is depicted as a sixteen-petalled lotus, along with sixteen corresponding syllables.<sup>83</sup> The *bīja* syllable *ham* is placed at the center of the *mandala* of the image.<sup>84</sup> The associated element of this *cakra* is space, *ākāśa*, and the quality of the element is *śabda*, sound.<sup>85</sup> Ardhanārīśvara is sometimes placed near this *cakra* or superimposed on it, signifying Ardhanārīśvara as presiding deity.<sup>86</sup>

### 2.3.6 Ājñā Cakra

The *ājñā cakra* is situated either between, or just above, the eyebrows. It is white in colour, consists of two petals, and the corresponding syllables *ha* and *ksa*.<sup>87</sup> A downward facing *trikoṇa* (triangle) is placed in the middle of the circle in which the *aum* symbol is placed, save its *ardhacandra bindu* (half moon and dot). Above the *trikoṇa* is the *ardhacandra bindu* which together with rest of the *aum* symbol beneath complete the seed syllable *aum*.<sup>88</sup> As with the *viśuddha cakra*, Ardhanārīśvara will be placed near the *ājñā*, superimposed upon it, or in some other way incorporated with the image to show it is the presiding deity.

## 2.4 Ardhanārīśvara in Textual Sources

The previous sections discussed Ardhanārīśvara iconography as detailed in present scholarship. This section will look at Ardhanārīśvara in its textual sources: iconographic texts, Purāṇic mythology, and devotional poetry. Here, as with the previous section, I will identify

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<sup>82</sup> Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman: Ardhanārīśvara in Indian and Feminist Perspective*, 69

<sup>83</sup> Ibid. 70. The syllables are: a,a,i,i,u,u,ru,ru,lu,lu,ai,ao,auo,am,ah

<sup>84</sup> Here *mandala* refers to the circular aspect of the image.

<sup>85</sup> Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman: Ardhanārīśvara in Indian and Feminist Perspective*, 70

<sup>86</sup> Ibid. Sometimes another, related, androgynous form of Śiva, Sadā Śiva, will be portrayed as the presiding deity.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid. 71

<sup>88</sup> Ibid. 70-71. Here Goldberg illustrates what I have described above.

instances where Ardhanārīśvara is mentioned in relation to textual sources and save a discussion regarding interpretations for later.

#### 2.4.1 Iconographic Texts

Descriptions of Indian iconography are amply found in literary material, principally in the Sanskrit *śilpaśāstras*, Purāṇas, and Āgamas.<sup>89</sup> These texts present iconographical themes and lay out instructional formulae for image making.<sup>90</sup> This is not to say that the Purāṇas do not also include narratives or that the Āgamas do not also include information about philosophical doctrine and meditative practices, but that they also succinctly include descriptions of deity images and their emblematic features. The *śilpaśāstras* are texts concerned with the science of arts and crafts; they are didactic texts that include instruction on image-making.<sup>91</sup>

Goldberg suggests that the *śilpaśāstra* texts are much like recipes. They serve as a guide to the craftsperson and a reference for the inexperienced; they pass on “secrets of the trade.”<sup>92</sup> It may be noted that they deduce their descriptions from pre-existing images.<sup>93</sup> It is important to acknowledge that as these texts codify images they also maintain and perpetuate tradition.<sup>94</sup> Goldberg acknowledges that the focus of the *śilpaśāstras* is not the social function of the images but that they nonetheless reify traditional norms, specifically that of the dominant social class: the *brāhmaṇical* caste.<sup>95</sup> For example, Ardhanārīśvara is typically presented as a *saumya* and *śanta* (benevolent and peaceful) form of Śiva, also implying it is *saguṇa* (the Absolute with qualities). As such, the image is typified according to a specific frame of understanding.<sup>96</sup> Furthermore, Ardhanārīśvara is listed alongside other orthodox *brāhmaṇical* deities. These texts

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<sup>89</sup> Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman: Ardhanārīśvara in Indian and Feminist Perspective*, 12

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> The *śilpaśāstras* instruct more than just image making; they instruct a wide range of arts and crafts for various professions, including architects, musicians, and artisans.

<sup>92</sup> Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman: Ardhanārīśvara in Indian and Feminist Perspective*, 16-17

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid. 22. This isn't to say that these texts explicate an identical image or preserve identical tradition. Goldberg offers a few variations of texts and the images they describe on pg. 20-22

<sup>95</sup> Ibid. 19

<sup>96</sup> Ibid. 18

situate the figure within *brāhmaṇical* theology and philosophy and thus use Ardhanārīśvara to bolster their tradition.<sup>97</sup>

#### 2.4.2 Ardhanārīśvara in Mythology

Before looking at Purāṇic mythology an important point should be made regarding variants across, and multiforms within, the texts. What is sometimes presented as a singular myth is actually the crystallization of several variations. This is not because all of the related myths are near identical, but because the variations together are able to convey what cannot be explicitly said by any one alone.<sup>98</sup> According to Doniger, sometimes several myths are required to relay even a minute span of the storyline.<sup>99</sup> Another form of variant, multiforms, occur within a singular text. Multiforms refer to the same event taking place in multiple ways in the same text. For example, one Purāṇa offers two different birth stories of Skanda, son of Śiva, consecutively.<sup>100</sup> Therefore, the following sections are not meant to present any myth or content therein as definitive, but rather to acknowledge, isolate, and organize basic themes and motifs as they relate to Ardhanārīśvara.

The scholarship concerning Ardhanārīśvara provides several myths in which the figure is present. The myths generally detail how the male and female halves come together, split apart, and/or may address the function of these occurrences. The myths are rich, diverse, and sometimes paradoxical. Below I have provided the examples of Ardhanārīśvara in Purāṇic mythology, organized thematically according to two dominant motifs acknowledged in present scholarship: cosmogony and devotionalism.

#### 2.4.3 Cosmogonic Themes in Ardhanārīśvara Myths

One series of myths, found in the *Kūrma*, *Viṣṇu*, *Mārkaṇḍeya*, *Padma*, and *Śiva Purāṇas*, focuses on the role Ardhanārīśvara plays in creation. In the narrative Prajāpati/Brahmā made a number of beings who, because there was no difference in their sex, were unable to

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid. 17

<sup>98</sup> Doniger, *Asceticism and Eroticism in the Mythology of Śiva*, 17

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid. 20

procreate.<sup>101</sup> In some versions of the myth Prajāpati/Brahmā, unsure of how to instigate procreation, meditates on Maheśvara which leads to the appearance of Rudra/Śiva in androgynous form.<sup>102</sup> In other variants, this androgynous form is issued from the forehead of Prajāpati/Brahmā as a result of his frustration.<sup>103</sup> In either case the androgynous form is considered Ardhanārīśvara, who appears in order to show Prajāpati/Brahmā why his attempt at creation is erroneous; procreation is possible only with two sexes.<sup>104</sup> In some variants Prajāpati/Brahmā takes on an androgynous form or creates a separate androgyne. In both cases the androgyne splits into male and female parts and then mate.<sup>105</sup> In some variants of the myth Brahmā requests Ardhanārīśvara to divide itself. Replicas of the female half are then created for the purpose of progeny.<sup>106</sup> In the *Vāyu Purāṇa*, the male half divides further into several parts, known as *rudras*.<sup>107</sup> The female half divides into white and black and from there into nurturing forms, such as Lakṣmī and Sarasvatī, and ferocious forms, such as Kālī, etc.<sup>108</sup> In most cases, after procreation is put in motion, the male and female halves that originally split reunite and disappear from the narrative.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Yadav, *Ardhanārīśvara in Art and Literature*, 114. In some versions of the myth these beings were solely male, in others the gender is not specified and are possibly genderless. I have Prajāpati and Brahmā as well as Rudra and Śiva paired together because it is widely held that these figures are transposable; the names are different simply because they came from earlier or later in the myth cycle, respectively. Importantly, the contents of the narrative are otherwise very similar and the figures in each pair are considered interchangeable.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid. It may be noted that there are some, such as the Brahmā Kumārīs, who differentiate between the transcendent aspect of Śiva, Maheśvara, and its manifest aspect, Śaṅkar.

<sup>103</sup> Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman: Ardhanārīśvara in Indian and Feminist Perspective*, 144

<sup>104</sup> Yadav, *Ardhanārīśvara in Art and Literature*, 144. Perhaps also worth noting is that the *Liṅga Purāṇa* describes Ardhanārīśvara as the union of *yoni* and *liṅgam*. The *liṅgam* is described as *jyoti* (light) whereas *yoni* is *tamas*, in this case implying darkness. Yadav thus understands Ardhanārīśvara as a symbol of the combination of darkness and light, the primeval forces that are fundamental for creation. See Yadav, *Ardhanārīśvara in Art and Literature*, 115-116.

<sup>105</sup> Doniger O'Flaherty, *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts*, 312

<sup>106</sup> Ibid. 313-314. The number of *rudras* is often listed as eleven.

<sup>107</sup> Goldeberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman: Ardhanārīśvara in Indian and Feminist Perspective*, 144

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> I have provided a few variants of the myth just to give an idea as to how they differ. However, there are several other variants. For example, in the *Kūrma Purāṇa* Ardhanārīśvara is presented as being terrifying. Brahmā was unable to look at this androgynous form, asked it to split, and then disappeared in fright. See Yadav, *Ardhanārīśvara in Art and Literature*, 123. For some other examples see Doniger O'Flaherty, *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts*, 310-314.

#### 2.4.4 Elements of Devotionalism in Ardhanārīśvara Myths

There are those myths involving Ardhanārīśvara that do not explicitly depict cosmogonic themes. Rather, these narratives focus on the relationship between Śiva and Pārvatī. Generally these narratives describe how Śiva and Pārvatī fuse together. Their coalescence is sometimes a reward Śiva grants Pārvatī for her *bhakti* (devotion) to him. For example, the *Skanda Purāṇa* provides a story wherein Pārvatī worships Śiva with the hopes he will allow her to reside in his body. Impressed with her devotion, he embraces her and she is granted his left half.<sup>110</sup> In another myth Śiva is a beggar yet is unable to beg because he has smoked too much hashish. Pārvatī begs in his place and then feeds and clothes him. Appreciatively, Śiva embraces her and they become one.<sup>111</sup>

In other instances their amalgamation is granted by Śiva in order to placate Pārvatī for some reason. For example, the *Skanda Purāṇa* also provides a narrative where Pārvatī undertakes asceticism because she is jealous that Śiva worships Sandhyā (twilight). To pacify her experience of rejection Śiva causes her to enter the side of his body.<sup>112</sup> Similarly, in the *Matsya Purāṇa* Śiva teases Pārvatī for having a dark complexion. Feeling dejected, Pārvatī undertakes deep asceticism. As a result, Brahmā grants her a golden complexion and a promise that she will occupy half of Śiva.<sup>113</sup>

#### 2.4.5 Ardhanārīśvara in the South Indian Bhringi Myth Series

There is a more ambiguous South Indian series of myths involving Ardhanārīśvara that focuses on a sage, Bhringi, and combines both the cosmogonic and *bhakti* themes. In the narrative there are a number of gods and sages who come to praise Śiva and Pārvatī by circumambulating them. All of them do so, aside Bhringi, who will only worship Śiva. In some

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<sup>110</sup> Yadav, *Ardhanārīśvara in Art and Literature*, 117. Similarly, the *Kālikā Purāṇa* states that Pārvatī expresses her desire to be united with Śiva. Śiva proceeds to test her in many ways. Satisfied by her, Śiva allows her half of his body and from then on accepts no other woman as his wife. See Yadav, *Ardhanārīśvara in Art and Literature*, 119

<sup>111</sup> Doniger O'Flaherty, *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts*, 314

<sup>112</sup> Ibid. 315

<sup>113</sup> Ibid. 315-316. In the *Viṣṇudharmottara* the half-female form of Śiva is identified as Gaurīśvara. Perhaps this epithet is tied to the myth. I have also come across some paintings where the Pārvatī half of Ardhanārīśvara is depicted in golden colour. Again, perhaps this is done purposely with reference to the myth.

variants of the myth Pārvatī presses herself against Śiva in hopes that she will also be circumambulated.<sup>114</sup> Bhringi proceeds to turn into either a snake or insect and wedges between the two. Unimpressed by his refusal to worship her, Pārvatī curses Bhringi to lose all of his flesh and blood, rendering him unable to stand.<sup>115</sup> Śiva, however, grants Bhringi a third leg because of his ardent devotion, allowing him to support himself. In some renditions Pārvatī is further offended by the persistence Bhringi displays, and by the aid Śiva offers him. Consequently, she punishes herself with austerities. In turn, Śiva grants her half of his body.<sup>116</sup> In other versions, after Bhringi refuses to circumambulate Pārvatī, Śiva and Pārvatī assume the form of Ardhanārīśvara to compel the sage to worship them both. Bhringi turns into a bee and gnaws through the deity, still only circumambulating Śiva. Impressed by the devotion, Pārvatī reconciles with the sage.<sup>117</sup> In another variant, after Pārvatī curses Bhringi and Śiva grants him a third leg, Śiva and Pārvatī take on the Ardhanārīśvara form to teach the sage that Śiva and Pārvatī are ultimately one and the same.<sup>118</sup> I have described this myth series as combining both devotional and cosmogonic themes because in addition to demonstrating care for each other Śiva and Pārvatī aim to teach Bhringi about their ultimate singularity, a message with cosmogonic undertones.

#### 2.4.6 Ardhanārīśvara in Devotional Poetry

Ardhanārīśvara is also the subject of a considerable amount of devotional poetry. As with some of the aforementioned mythological narratives, the poetry is often focused on the relationship between Śiva and Pārvatī. One of the motifs that emerge in these poems is conjugal love. This is a theme explored by the famous Sanskrit poet and playwright, Kālidāsa (376-454).<sup>119</sup> In his epic poem, *Kumārasambhava*, Kālidāsa describes a situation wherein Pārvatī is blessed by her elders to receive the love of Śiva. However, she exceeds their blessing and

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<sup>114</sup> Doniger O'Flaherty, *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts*, 316

<sup>115</sup> It is believed that the nerves and bones are granted from the masculine principle and that flesh and blood are granted from the feminine principle. By losing her favour, Bhringi also loses the female-identified elements of his constitution.

<sup>116</sup> Doniger O'Flaherty, *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts*, 316

<sup>117</sup> Ibid. 317

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Yadav, *Ardhanārīśvara in Art and Literature*, 120

occupies half his body instead.<sup>120</sup> In his first play, *Mālavikāgnimitram*, Kālidāsa describes Śiva as sharing his body with his beloved.<sup>121</sup> In the *Rājatarangiṇī* Kalhana describes Ardhanārīśvara as a form of Śiva where Pārvatī occupies half the body because of her intense love for him.<sup>122</sup> The *Subhāṣita Ratna* erotically describes the sandal paste of the left breast as being wet from amorous sweating.<sup>123</sup> The *Ardhanārīnaṭeśvara Stotra* of Ādi Śaṅkara concludes by describing Ardhanārīśvara as the mutual embrace of Śiva and Pārvatī.<sup>124</sup> However, sometimes the androgynous form is undertaken not out of passionate romance but as a means of stopping the philandering of Śiva.<sup>125</sup>

Another theme that emerges with regards to their relationship is *viraha* (lovers in separation).<sup>126</sup> However, here *viraha* is equated with the eternal union of the androgynous form. As such, the fusion of Pārvatī and Śiva is non-erotic; they are unable to enjoy each other in their oneness. Accordingly, a feeling of sadness and longing is evoked.<sup>127</sup>

*Bhakti* poetry sometimes operates as “verbal iconography,” employing metaphors and similes that relay imagery congruent with images of Ardhanārīśvara in sacred art.<sup>128</sup> The hymns are often based on descriptions that compare the male and female halves.<sup>129</sup> This is very apparent in the famous *Ardhanārīnaṭeśvara Stotra* by Ādi Śaṅkara which oscillates line by line between descriptions of male and female features. Other times the emphasis is on female descriptors only, such as “soft young breasts,” “slim waist,” and “teeth as white as jasmine” so to specify the form of Śiva.<sup>130</sup> Vidyāpati, via juxtaposition, describes contrasting features, such as the right side of Ardhanārīśvara being smeared with ashes and having a bare chest, and the

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid. 121

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid. 122

<sup>123</sup> Ibid. 124

<sup>124</sup> Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman: Ardhanārīśvara in Indian and Feminist Perspective*, 105. Note that Ardhanārīśvara here is called Ardhanārīnaṭeśvara which means the Lord of the Dance who is half woman. The Stotra describes both the *lasya* and *tāṇḍava* dances and attributes them to Pārvatī and Śiva respectively.

<sup>125</sup> Doniger O’Flaherty, *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts*, 325

<sup>126</sup> Doniger O’Flaherty provides an example from the *Subhāṣitaratnakoṣa*. See Ibid., 319

<sup>127</sup> See ibid. 105. “Śiva’s heart must grieve to think your glance cannot be seen by him.”

<sup>128</sup> Ibid. 91

<sup>129</sup> Ibid. 100

<sup>130</sup> Ibid. Often there will solely be mention of an earring in the left ear so to immediately invoke the female presence. See Ibid. 99

left as covered in sandal paste and having a swelling bust.<sup>131</sup> However, despite toggling between male and female descriptors, it is clear that the intention behind these poems is to relay the ultimate singularity of Śiva and Pārvatī.<sup>132</sup> Sometimes knowledge of their unification is relayed via the recognition of their oneness by other figures, such as when Skanda asks Gaṇeśa where the other halves of their mother and father go when they become a single body.<sup>133</sup>

Some poems also describe the male and female halves of Ardhanārīśvara in terms of more abstract characteristics, including personality traits and cosmogonic function. For example, Vidyāpati, the Maithili poet, describes the male aspect of Ardhanārīśvara as an ascetic *yogi* and the female half as the more indulgent *bhogi*.<sup>134</sup> In his epic poem, *Raghuvamśa*, Kālidāsa describes Śiva as *puruṣa*, Pārvatī as *prakṛti*, and their oneness as similar to the inseparability of words and meaning.<sup>135</sup> The *Ardhanārīnāṭeśvara Stotra* of Ādi Śaṅkara describes Śiva as taking part in the vigorous *tāṇḍava* dance and Pārvatī in the graceful *lāsya* dance.<sup>136</sup>

## 2.5 Ardhanārīśvara in the Performing Arts

Ardhanārīśvara is also portrayed in dance. In the Andhra Nāṭyam dance form, the male and female halves of Ardhanārīśvara are depicted with the help of a veil that covers half the face.<sup>137</sup> When the dancer embodies the female aspect they expose the half of the face that appears feminine and undertake the *lāsya* dance. Conversely, when embodying the male aspect the side of the face that appears masculine is exposed and the dancer performs the *tāṇḍava*

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<sup>131</sup> Yadav, *Ardhanārīśvara in Art and Literature*, 122

<sup>132</sup> According to Goldberg the poems illustrate the concept of *bhedābheda* (unity in difference). See Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman: Ardhanārīśvara in Indian and Feminist Perspective*, 104

<sup>133</sup> Ibid. 102. Sometimes the male and female halves are divided by their actions. For example, the male half has been described as chanting the melodies of the ritual Veda while the female half gently smiles. See Ibid. 94

<sup>134</sup> Yadav, *Ardhanārīśvara in Art and Literature*, 122

<sup>135</sup> Yadav, *Ardhanārīśvara in Art and Literature*, 121. *Puruṣa* refers to consciousness and *prakṛti* as observable nature. These concepts are understood in a variety of ways.

<sup>136</sup> Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman: Ardhanārīśvara in Indian and Feminist Perspective*, 105.

Important to note is that these dances have cosmogonic connotations. The *tāṇḍava* dance represents the dynamic cycle of cosmic creation, preservation, and destruction. Sometimes it is described in quite violent terms. The *lāsya* dance, on the other hand, is described oppositely as tender, happy, and beautiful. I will also make note that there are a few instances where Śiva is mocked for having androgynous form. Doniger provides an example wherein Dakṣa is dismissive of Śiva for being an androgyne. See Doniger O'Flaherty, *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts*, 323

<sup>137</sup> The Andhra Nāṭyam is considered a mix of the Bharata Nāṭyam and Kuchipudi dance forms. See Pande, *Ardhanarishvara, the Androgyne: Probing the Gender Within*, 123



dance.<sup>138</sup> Similarly, in other dance forms, such as the Yakṣagāna, costumes are divided vertically: right side male and left side female.<sup>139</sup> Other traditions, such as the Bharata Nāṭyam, rely more heavily on hand gestures to suggest the male and female aspects of Ardhanārīśvara.<sup>140</sup>

## 2.6 Conceptualizations of Ardhanārīśvara

### 2.6.1 Cosmogonic/Philosophical Interpretations

Pande acknowledges that Ardhanārīśvara is widely interpreted as a symbolic representation of theological norms and doctrines.<sup>141</sup> The scholarship often presents Ardhanārīśvara as symbolic of the nature of reality and/or the process of creation. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the many different theories of creation, its processes, and how Ardhanārīśvara may relate. Rather, I will share the ways in which the scholarship explicitly associates Ardhanārīśvara with the subject.

Goldberg suggests that given the theological and philosophical presuppositions of Śaivism, and the non-dual metaphysics linked with Ardhanārīśvara, that it is necessary to discuss some theoretical ideas that are associated with the figure, particularly its relationship to formlessness and form, *arūpa* and *rūpa*.<sup>142</sup> Goldberg situates Ardhanārīśvara within an unfolding tripartite process that explains, in theological terms, the stages in which the formless manifests into the material form.<sup>143</sup> Para Śiva (or *niskala*) is the name given to the formless or unmanifest, considered beyond *guṇas* (attributes) such as *kālā* (time), *ākāśa* (space), *karma* (action), and *nāma-rūpa* (name and form).<sup>144</sup> Sadā Śiva (*sakala-niskala*), or the subtle form of god, is represented as the aniconic *yoni-liṅgaṃ*. Finally, there is Maheśvara (*sakala, rūpa, murti*) which

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<sup>138</sup> Anne Marie-Gaston, *Śiva in Dance, Myth, and Iconography*, 139

<sup>139</sup> Pande, *Ardhanarishvara, the Androgyne: Probing the Gender Within*, 123. Goldberg describes the *tāṇḍava* dance as rigorous and the *lāsya* dance as tender. See Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman: Ardhanārīśvara in Indian and Feminist Perspective*, 110.

<sup>140</sup> Gaston, *Śiva in Dance, Myth, and Iconography*, 139. I will also note that Pande references a *yoni-liṅgaṃ mudrā* in the worship of Śiva. See Pande, *Ardhanarishvara, the Androgyne: Probing the Gender Within*, 201

<sup>141</sup> Pande, *Ardhanarishvara, the Androgyne: Probing the Gender Within*, 27

<sup>142</sup> Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman: Ardhanārīśvara in Indian and Feminist Perspective*, 8-9. In other words, *arūpa* refers to transcendence and *rūpa* to immanence. Important to note is that Goldberg describes Śaivism as an umbrella term under which is a constellation of diverse theological teachings

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid. In Śaivite theology Para Śiva is similar to *nirguṇa* Brahman.

is fully manifest.<sup>145</sup> Here the process of creation is presented as one that moves from the transcendent to immanent, an emanation from subtle to gross. With regards to this process, Ardhanārīśvara is recognized in the canons of Indian iconography (such as the *Viṣṇudharmottara*) as a fully manifest, anthropomorphic form of Śiva aligned with the third stage of evolutionary descent. However, Ardhanārīśvara is also referred to as a symbol of the *isana* (invisible) form of Sadā Śiva in *haṭhayoga* and iconographical sources.<sup>146</sup>

Ardhanārīśvara is often interpreted as a symbol *coincidentia oppositorum*, described as two opposites that must have something in common in order to be opposed and united.<sup>147</sup> In other words, Ardhanārīśvara is interpreted as a symbol of paradox and/or complementarity. This philosophical interpretation considers Ardhanārīśvara as representative of the ultimate unity of all paired opposites.<sup>148</sup> Doniger and Kramrisch both provide studies of myths wherein Śiva embodies paradoxical tendencies outside of his composite, androgynous form. For example, sometimes Śiva exhibits disciplined asceticism and excessive eroticism in the same narrative.<sup>149</sup> Thus, Ardhanārīśvara is considered a symbol of the paradoxical nature of Śiva, a quality attributed to him whether in composite form or otherwise.

Ardhanārīśvara is elsewhere understood as representative of a stage in the process of creative emanation. Yadav describes the primeval scene as a neutral, unitary, uncreative substratum.<sup>150</sup> He explains the process of creation as one that moves from unity to differentiation. Ardhanārīśvara is presented as a symbol of this fission, given that one can differentiate between the male and female halves of its body.<sup>151</sup> In this view, creation is the result of a split into apparent duality; something exists in its being known, which occurs in

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<sup>145</sup> However, this view is not shared by all. I have met a group, known as the Brahmā Kumārīs, who consider Maheśvara to denote Śiva beyond attributes and call its manifest aspect Śaṅkar.

<sup>146</sup> Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman: Ardhanārīśvara in Indian and Feminist Perspective*, 8-9

<sup>147</sup> Doniger O'Flaherty, *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts*, 296. Doniger takes this definition from Mircea Eliade, *The Two and the One*.

<sup>148</sup> Yadav, *Ardhanārīśvara in Art and Literature*, 134-135

<sup>149</sup> This view is echoed somewhat by Pande who describes Śiva in both ascetic and sexual terms. See Pande, *Ardhanārīśvara, the Androgyne : Probing the Gender Within*, 94

<sup>150</sup> Yadav, *Ardhanārīśvara in Art Literature*, 132. I feel that this neutral substratum is more in lines with Advaita Vedānta. In Kashmir Śaivism, for example, the ultimate reality would be seen as dynamic

<sup>151</sup> Ibid. 113. This understanding is shared by others. For example, See Ganga Somany, *Shiva and Shakti: Mythology and Art* (New Delhi: Ravikumar Publisher, 2002), 21. Also, according to Yadav, creation as a split from undifferentiated unity is fundamental to Ṛg Vedic and Purāṇic cosmology. See *Ardhanārīśvara in Art Literature*, 132

reference to what it is not.<sup>152</sup> However, in *advaita* (non-dual) schools this is understood to be a matter of perception. Separate existence is merely an appearance. Observable reality, *māyā*, is unified in that it always exists in consciousness, Brahman, as heat exists in fire.<sup>153</sup> In this view, consciousness and its contents are inseparable. Similarly, the underlying union of Śiva and Śakti in the Ardhanārīśvara image is also taken to symbolize an ultimately non-dual reality.<sup>154</sup>

As a symbol of non-duality Ardhanārīśvara holds a special place in Kashmir Śaivism. Kashmir Śaivism is a school of thought similar to Advaita Vedānta. Both understand there to be nothing outside of the realm of consciousness. However, they differ in one significant respect. Whereas Advaita Vedānta sees *māyā* as the superimposition of illusory nature onto a neutral Brahman, Kashmir Śaivism considers *māyā* the ability of Śiva to project self limitation.<sup>155</sup> Therefore, one of the defining characteristics of Kashmir Śaivism is that pure consciousness, or ultimate reality, is understood as dynamic. This dynamism is represented by Śakti.<sup>156</sup> Śakti is a way of understanding the nature of Śiva, or consciousness; they are connotatively different but actually one.<sup>157</sup> The Ardhanārīśvara image is afforded special status in Kashmir Śaivism as a symbol that represents this understanding.

The iconography of Ardhanārīśvara also relates to the Kashmir Śaivism concept *pratyabhijñā*, or cognition through recognition.<sup>158</sup> To reiterate, in Kashmir Śaivism Śiva is understood as *prakāśa* (luminosity) and Śakti as *vimarśa*, its dynamic aspect. In many depictions

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<sup>152</sup> Here creation is considered a differentiable split. However, procreation is the result of an ongoing pattern of splitting and fusing; males and females unite in mating and the child splits from the mother. The unification of male and female have led some to see Ardhanārīśvara as a symbol of lust. Ibid. 132

<sup>153</sup> Yadav, *Ardhanārīśvara in Art and Literature*, 132. Here ultimate reality, or Brahman is similar to Śiva and *māyā* may be understood in much the same way as Śakti.

<sup>154</sup> Richard Davis, *Gods in Print* (California: Mandala Publishing, 2012), 107

<sup>155</sup> See Kamalakar Mishra, *Kashmir Śaivism* (Varanasi: Indica Books, 2011), 447-450. Brahman, like Śiva, is considered ultimate reality. I say limitation here because creation is the realm of limitation. Again, we identify what something is in reference to what it is not and therefore our identification creates parameters.

<sup>156</sup> I must clarify that this dynamism is described as actionless action; it is without volition or need and occurs in a naturally effortless and spontaneous manner.

<sup>157</sup> Kamalakar Mishra, *Kashmir Śaivism*, 164

<sup>158</sup> Yadav, *Ardhanārīśvara in Art and Literature*, 134-135. The *pratyabhijñā* school was founded by Somananda

of Ardhanārīśvara, Pārvatī holds a *darpaṇa* (mirror).<sup>159</sup> This is interpreted as symbolizing the ability for consciousness to recognize itself within the world it witnesses; Śiva may see himself in Śakti and realize their unity. Kramrisch further elucidates how this iconographical representation relays the concept of *pratyabhijñā* by describing that the objects seen in the mirror are neither separate from each other, nor from the mirror.<sup>160</sup>

Due to the discernible halves of Ardhanārīśvara, and the simultaneous unification of these halves by a singular body, the figure has also been cited as a symbol of *bhedābheda* (difference and non-difference).<sup>161</sup>

## 2.6.2 Interpretation of Ardhanārīśvara as a Symbol of Devotionalism

Another way of understanding Ardhanārīśvara is as a symbol representing themes associated with *bhakti* (devotion). This interpretation is often supported by the aforementioned devotional poems and Purāṇic myths. The myths generally narrate how Śiva and Pārvatī fuse together. Often their fusion is a reward Śiva grants Pārvatī for her impressive devotion and/or asceticism.<sup>162</sup> In this connection, Pande understands the Ardhanārīśvara figure as one that symbolizes the guru-disciple relationship.<sup>163</sup> She interprets Śiva as the perfect guru who observes the ideal devotee, Pārvatī, through various stages of *sādhana* (spiritual practice) until she becomes fully realized, symbolized by their merge.<sup>164</sup>

Devotional poetry describes Ardhanārīśvara in terms of the conjugal love of Śiva and Pārvatī, bordering on eroticism. Accordingly, Ardhanārīśvara has been considered a symbol of sexual enjoyment.<sup>165</sup> Ardhanārīśvara is also understood as a symbol of two different interpretations of *viraha* (lovers longing in separation). One interpretation describes the

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<sup>159</sup> Yadav, *Ardhanārīśvara in Art and Literature*, 35-26. Yadav actually goes on to say that there are hardly any images without the mirror. Goldberg corroborates the prevalence of the mirror. See Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman: Ardhanārīśvara in Indian and Feminist Perspective*, 14

<sup>160</sup> This description by Kramrisch taken from Yadav, *Ardhanārīśvara in Art and Literature*, 134-135

<sup>161</sup> Ibid. 134-135

<sup>162</sup> See above sections on Ardhanārīśvara in textual sources. It should also be noted, again, that sometimes their fusion occurs because Śiva is placating Pārvatī for some other reason, such as jealousy.

<sup>163</sup> Pande, *Ardhanarishvara, the Androgyne: Probing the Gender Within*, 94

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

<sup>165</sup> See Ibid. 71 and Doniger O'Flaherty, *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts*, 332

composite figure as a symbol of complete satiation, the termination of separation.<sup>166</sup> The other interpretation sees Ardhanārīśvara as a symbol of *viraha* itself; the close proximity does not render Śiva or Pārvatī able to enjoy each other.<sup>167</sup> Another theme related to *bhakti* found in the scholarship is the purported special resonance that some *hijra* devotees have with Ardhanārīśvara.<sup>168</sup>

### 2.6.3 Interpretation of Ardhanārīśvara as a Symbol of Cult Syncretism

There is another interpretation of Ardhanārīśvara as a symbol of cult syncretism.<sup>169</sup> There are a few hypotheses put forward in support of this possibility. According to Yadav, composite images may reflect the reconciliation and amalgamation of rival creeds, something that may be traced back to the Vedic period.<sup>170</sup> Furthermore, Yadav argues that because of philosophical thought found in the Upaniṣads, various sects could agree their different gods were various forms of an overarching unity, resulting in the Ardhanārīśvara image.<sup>171</sup> Though the Ardhanārīśvara aspect of Śiva is said to have originated in the Kuṣāṇ age, it gained popularity in the Gupta period.<sup>172</sup> According to Yadav, at this time temples were not built for a single deity, but included an assortment of deities associated with various people of a particular cult. With this in mind, Yadav argues that the rise in popularity of the Ardhanārīśvara image at this time may have been the result of intercaste marriage.<sup>173</sup> There is also the argument that Śaivism appropriated many tribal goddesses into its fold and that the Ardhanārīśvara image may

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<sup>166</sup> Ibid. 332

<sup>167</sup> Ibid. 319

<sup>168</sup> See Pande, *Ardhanarishvara, the Androgyne: Probing the Gender Within*, 50. Here it does not talk about actual experiences of Ardhanārīśvara but implies a special connection. This will be expanded on in a section to follow. In India, transsexuals, hermaphrodites, and transvestites are collectively known as *hijra*.

<sup>169</sup> For example See Dr. Lalit Kumar Shukla, *Study of Hindu Art and Architecture* (Varanasi: Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series Office, 1971), 227

<sup>170</sup> Yadav, *Ardhanārīśvara in Art and Literature*, 12. However, the examples given are Ardhanārīśvara and Hari-Hara which surface considerably later.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid. It is unclear what the philosophical thought is. Perhaps she's referring to some form of *bhedābheda*.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid. 160. To reiterate, the Kuṣāṇ Empire is from around 30-375 CE and the Gupta from around 320-550 CE.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid. 161

be representative of that.<sup>174</sup> Despite the historicity of the composite figure, it does include the strongly associated principle cult deities Śiva and Śakti, lending itself well currently to syncretism as an interpretation.<sup>175</sup>

#### 2.6.4 Feminist Interpretations of Ardhanārīśvara

Goldberg and Doniger both offer feminist takes on Ardhanārīśvara, arguing that the image is wrought with androcentric associations. Goldberg concludes that the image is a by-product of patriarchal discourse, pointing to the subordinate left position that the female half generally occupies.<sup>176</sup> In conjunction, she notes that the male half is often emphasized through various emblematic features, such as a greater number of arms.<sup>177</sup> She also argues that the *śilpa* tradition, responsible for image-making instruction, has codified iconographic images in accordance with cultural norms legitimated by the priestly, male elite.<sup>178</sup> Doniger points to the fact that in mythology Śiva and Pārvatī often merge into a singular figure because Śiva either rewards Pārvatī for her devotionism or pacifies one of her weaker emotions, such as jealousy or anger.<sup>179</sup> In either case, Śiva is afforded primacy. There are also several examples of poetry where Pārvatī appears to take on a subordinate role.<sup>180</sup> Though both Goldberg and Doniger acknowledge that Ardhanārīśvara is often understood as a symbol of equality, harmony, and wholeness, they consider the figure representative of, and perpetually reifying, historical inequalities.<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>174</sup> Ibid. 154-155. It may be of interest to note that both *yoni* and *liṅgam* worship have existed alongside each other since the Indus-Valley civilization. Perhaps, the anthropomorphic Ardhanārīśvara in some way reflects this history.

<sup>175</sup> In Śakta traditions Śiva is the consort of Durgā, Pārvatī, Kālī etc. In Śaivism Śiva's consort is generally depicted as one of those as well.

<sup>176</sup> Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman: Ardhanārīśvara in Indian and Feminist Perspective*, 117

<sup>177</sup> Ibid. 118

<sup>178</sup> Ibid. 19

<sup>179</sup> Doniger O'Flaherty, *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts*, 314

<sup>180</sup> For example, see the *Ardhanārīnāṭeśvara Stotra* in Golberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman: Ardhanārīśvara in Indian and Feminist Perspective*, 105. Here Śiva is described as the Lord of all and She is described as "not."

<sup>181</sup> Goldberg does, however, also point to empowering aspects of Pārvatī in what she calls a new interpretation (although I feel she makes no new argument). See Ibid. 153

## 2.7 Associations of Ardhanārīśvara with Tantra

Ardhanārīśvara is also presented as having special significance in Tantra. In scholarship Tantra is afforded numerous definitions. David Gordon White traces the term ‘tantra’ to the pre-fifth century *śrauta-sūtras*: ritual instructions for Vedic specialists.<sup>182</sup> White references the *Āśvalāyana Śrauta Sūtra* as presenting ‘tantra’ to mean ritual framework or the “interweaving of rites.”<sup>183</sup> White describes Tantra as ritual practice and the Tantras as a group of texts dedicated to this ritualism. White also offers a tautological definition: Tantra is the subject matter of works that call themselves “Tantras.”<sup>184</sup> Prem Saran describes Tantra as permanent counter culture within the Indic civilisation.<sup>185</sup> Johari describes Tantra as the study of the macrocosm through man as microcosm.<sup>186</sup> With regards to the variance of definition, Urban writes that Tantra as a unified, singular concept is largely the product of modern scholarship.<sup>187</sup> In light of this, Urban suggests that the notion of asserting a single definition of Tantra has largely been abandoned.<sup>188</sup> With this in mind, I do not aim to put forward a definition of Tantra. Rather, I will highlight however the scholarship has associated Ardhanārīśvara with even the word ‘tantra,’ whatever the connotations may be.

### 2.7.1 Ardhanārīśvara and Tantra: Mysticism

Ardhanārīśvara has a special place within Tantric mysticism. Śaiva and Śakta schools of Tantric thought generally propose the ultimate singularity of Śiva and Śakti, consciousness and observable reality.<sup>189</sup> Whereas the process of creation is one of evolution or emanation, the

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<sup>182</sup> David Gordon White, *Kiss of the Yoginī: “Tantric Sex” in its South Asian Contexts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 16

<sup>183</sup> Ibid.

<sup>184</sup> White, *Kiss of the Yoginī: “Tantric Sex” in its South Asian Contexts*, 17. However, not all works that call themselves Tantras are ritual texts and other works by different names, such as Āgamas have content that closely resembles the ritual focus of the Tantras. According to Gavin Flood, the group of texts known as the Tantras cannot be dated before 600 CE at the earliest, with most considered as from the 8<sup>th</sup> CE onwards. See Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*, 158

<sup>185</sup> Saran, *Yoga, Bhoga, and Ardhanariswara*, 212-213

<sup>186</sup> Johari, *Tools for Tantra* (Vermont: Destiny Books, 1986), 2

<sup>187</sup> Urban, *Tantra: Sex, Secrecy, Politics and Power in the Study of Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 5

<sup>188</sup> Ibid.

<sup>189</sup> There are also Buddhist Tantras and Vaishnava Tantras. However, I am only covering the Śaiva and Śakta varieties given their association with Ardhanārīśvara.

goal of mysticism is involution; the aim is to experientially synthesize with the pure consciousness that transcends and includes all else.<sup>190</sup> The subtle body system proposed by *haṭhayoga* and Śaiva and Śakta Tantric treatises is considered a microcosm of the universe. The subtle body has within it focal points of energy, known as *cakras*, which ascend from grossest to most subtle.<sup>191</sup> The five lower *cakras* correspond with the five elements.<sup>192</sup> The last of these is the *viśuddha cakra*, associated with *ākāśa* (space or ether) and *śabda* (sound).<sup>193</sup> Following the *viśuddha* is the *ājñā cakra*, located between and sometimes just above the eyebrows, and considered the seat of the mind. Lastly, the *sahasrāra cakra*, representing pure consciousness, is located at or just above the crown of the head.<sup>194</sup> 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 the transcendent Śiva located at the *sahasrāra cakra*. To do so is to enter *samādhi*.<sup>195</sup> Each *cakra* is allocated a corresponding sound, element or essence, as well as a presiding deity. Ardhanārīśvara is generally designated to either the *viśuddha* or *ājñā cakras* and thus represents a stage *en route* to mystical union.<sup>196</sup>

## 2.7.2 Ardhanārīśvara and Tantra: Inversion of Normative

One definition describes Tantra as inverting the normative. White describes this as a highly orchestrated, controlled, and careful inversion. He writes that one is expected to first embody and even exaggerate purity norms; the inversion of the taboo is as subject to rules as the taboo itself.<sup>197</sup> Given the widespread primacy afforded to male gods, especially Śiva and Viṣṇu, across the Indian subcontinent there are those that dub traditions wherein primacy is

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<sup>190</sup> Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman: Ardhanārīśvara in Indian and Feminist Perspective*, 67

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.* 83

<sup>192</sup> Included are earth, water, fire, air, and space

<sup>193</sup> Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman: Ardhanārīśvara in Indian and Feminist Perspective*, 70

<sup>194</sup> There are schools of thought that list alternate numbers of *cakras*. For example, See Svoboda, *Aghora II: Kundalini*, 71

<sup>195</sup> *Samadhi* is described numerous ways despite near unanimous agreement that it is beyond description. It is often characterized as a mystical, blissful state of consciousness, as an experiential synthesis with Absolute reality.

<sup>196</sup> Although Ardhanārīśvara is a symbol of the union of Śiva and Śakti one can still discern the forms of each. At the *sahasrāra*, however, there is only *śūnyatā*, indiscernible formlessness. Goldberg describes the stage Ardhanārīśvara marks as *sabīja samadhi*, the penultimate stage of mysticism, and thus still within the realm of discernability. See Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman: Ardhanārīśvara in Indian and Feminist Perspective*, 77

<sup>197</sup> White, *Kiss of the Yoginī: "Tantric Sex" in its South Asian Contexts*, 73



placed on the feminine as Tantric.<sup>198</sup> Most often Ardhanārīśvara images have the male half on the right side, considered the hierarchically privileged position.<sup>199</sup> However, there are images where this normative design is inverted. This has been interpreted as placing emphasis on the female and therefore as having special significance in the Śakta and/or Tantric traditions.<sup>200</sup> This inverted version of the image may exist in conjunction with mythological narratives. For example, in the *Devī Gītā*, the Goddess splits herself into two for the sake of her own pleasure or sport. One half of her body becomes Śiva, demonstrating her superiority to all the male gods.<sup>201</sup>

### 2.7.3 Ardhanārīśvara and Tantra: Miscellaneous Information

There are a few other miscellaneous references I have found that associate Ardhanārīśvara with Tantra. According to Doniger, Tantrism proposes that sexuality is an instrument of liberation; *moksa* is achieved through *bhoga* (enjoyment) of which Ardhanārīśvara is a symbol.<sup>202</sup> This is corroborated by Saran who describes Tantra as *bhoga* and Ardhanārīśvara as an appropriate representation.<sup>203</sup> Doniger describes Ardhanārīśvara as a Tantric symbol of the satiation of desire. She quotes Alan Watts as describing this satiation as “a state of consciousness where the erotic no longer has to be pursued because it is always

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<sup>198</sup> This is, of course, misleading. There are Śakta traditions which would not identify as Tantric and *tantrikas* that may identify primarily with a male god.

<sup>199</sup> For example, see Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman: Ardhanārīśvara in Indian and Feminist Perspective*, 55

<sup>200</sup> For examples, see Kramrisch, *Manifestations of Śiva*, 163-165 and Pande, *Ardhanarishvara, the Androgyne: Probing the Gender Within*, 91

<sup>201</sup> Mackenzie Brown, *The Devī Gītā, The Song of the Goddess: A Translation, Annotation, and Commentary* (New York: Statue University of New York Press, 1998), see pages 2 and 65. Goldberg, referencing the work of Kalidos, argues that figures with the singular right-breast should not be considered Ardhanārīśvara, but rather identifies the figure as Ardhanārī, argues for its independent basis within the Devī based tradition, and for its later assimilation into the Śiva-centered Ardhanārīśvara tradition. See Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman: Ardhanārīśvara in Indian and Feminist Perspective*, 150. However, despite these South Indian figures in question Rajaran references a dancing Ardhanārī figure that is explicitly an inverted version of Ardhanārīśvara. See Kesava Rajaran, “Dance of Ardhanārī: A Histroical Retrospection,” in *Glimpses of Indian History and Art: Reflections on the Past, Perspectives for the Future* (Rome: Spienza Universita Editrice, 2012), 233. Other examples can be seen in Kramrisch, *Manifestations of Siva*, 163-165 and Pande, *Ardhanarishvara, the Androgyne: Probing the Gender Within*, 91. These latter two references indicate that, at least currently, there are images associated with Ardhanārīśvara where Pārvaṭī undertakes the right side, and Śiva the left.

<sup>202</sup> Doniger O’Flaherty, *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts*, 332

<sup>203</sup> Saran, *Yoga, Bhoga and Ardhanarishvara: Individuality, Wellbeing and Gender in Tantra*, 140

present in its totality.”<sup>204</sup> Another mention of Ardhanārīśvara in association with Tantra comes from Danielou who references a Tantric understanding of the *hijra* people as embodied “images” of Ardhanārīśvara.<sup>205</sup>

## 2.8 Ardhanārīśvara in Practice

Ardhanārīśvara has been described as symbolizing the reconciliation of apparent dualities in a state that the *yogin/ī* achieves through *sāadhanā*, involving various practices and techniques. Here Ardhanārīśvara is described as representing a state of consciousness that is the by-product of practices rather than being explicitly involved in the practices themselves. The specifics of the practices are not divulged and are usually described as esoteric.<sup>206</sup> Other than this, Ardhanārīśvara in practice receives very little attention. There are examples of the figure represented in dance, as mentioned earlier, and Pande also relates Ardhanārīśvara to a *yonilīṅgaṃ mudrā*.<sup>207</sup>

### 2.8.1 Ardhanārīśvara in the Lives of Devotees

A few authors reference the lives of actual people in their work regarding Ardhanārīśvara. Prem Saran gathered life-history data regarding gender mutuality in South Asia. He provides examples of informants who interweave male and female principles and incorporate androgynous symbolism into their worldviews. However, he admittedly relates their expressions to the Ardhanārīśvara figure without explicit mention of the figure by the people themselves.<sup>208</sup>

Goldberg references a *haṭhayoga swāmī* who describes Ardhanārīśvara as the symbolization of a stage of meditation. Accordingly, he says that the Ardhanārīśvara symbol

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<sup>204</sup> Doniger O’Flaherty, *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts*, 319. It should be noted, however, that Watts does not actually mention Tantra specifically when discussing this metaphor of hermaphroditic imagery. See Watts, *The Two Hands of God*, 204-205

<sup>205</sup> Danielou, *Shiva and the Primordial Tradition: From the Tantras to the Science of Dreams* (Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions, 2007), 42

<sup>206</sup> See Goldberg, *The Lord who is Half Woman: Ardhanārīśvara in Indian and Feminist Perspective*, 87-88. Yet on page 63 she discloses that *dhyāna*, *āsana*, *mudrā*, and *prāṇāyāma* are employed.

<sup>207</sup> Pande, *Ardhanarishvara, the Androgyne: Probing the Gender Within*, 201

<sup>208</sup> Saran, *Yoga, Bhoga, and Ardhanarishvara: Individuality, Wellbeing, and Gender in Tantra*, 199-200

helps the yogic aspirant understand their stage of *sāadhanā*.<sup>209</sup> It is important to note, however, that both Goldberg and Saran spoke with developed practitioners of *haṭhayoga* and Tantric traditions, people who perhaps do not reflect average conceptualizations.<sup>210</sup>

Lastly, Pande implies that the *hijra* have a special resonance with Ardhanārīśvara. The author does so by describing the *hijra* as an obvious embodiment of the continuum of life, a spectrum represented by the diverse Hindu pantheon and explicitly depicted in the Ardhanārīśvara image.<sup>211</sup> However, the author infers a unique relationship between the *hijra* and Ardhanārīśvara without actually talking to *hijra* about it.

## 2.9 Concluding Remarks

This chapter dealt with Ardhanārīśvara as presented in contemporary scholarship. This included an overview of potential antecedents, the history of the image, the presence of Ardhanārīśvara in iconography, textual sources, and performative art, as well as conceptualizations of the figure. These interpretations weighed heavily towards cosmogony and devotionalism, although there are now feminist readings of Ardhanārīśvara offered by Doniger and Goldberg. I then included information about Ardhanārīśvara in practice and its place in the lives of devotees. It is evident that content about customary, ritualistic, and experiential aspects relating to Ardhanārīśvara is considerably lacking.<sup>212</sup> There is the mention of Ardhanārīśvara as representing a state of consciousness exclusively experienced by yogic adepts, and experiences and understandings of Ardhanārīśvara inferred by the authors themselves. There are also social implications that Goldberg deduces in light of her feminist reading of the figure. However, she does not reference any actual events or experiences when arguing the figure reifies patriarchal notions. In fact, Ardhanārīśvara in living context goes virtually ignored altogether. Again, this is surprising given there are temples in India where Ardhanārīśvara is the presiding deity. The next chapter will focus on Ardhanārīśvara at one such site and investigate how the deity operates

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<sup>209</sup> Goldberg, *The Lord who is Half Woman: Ardhanārīśvara in Indian and Feminist Perspective*, 74

<sup>210</sup> Furthermore, for the most part Saran's informants identified as Newar Buddhist *tantrikas* from Nepal.

<sup>211</sup> Pande, *Ardhanarishvara, the Androgyne: Probing the Gender Within*, 50

<sup>212</sup> In line with the discussion in chapter one, this is not to claim that the experiences of devotees can be made fully known. Rather, it is to say that the expressed perspectives of actual devotees have gone largely overlooked.

and is understood within this context and compare the findings with the Ardhanārīśvara presented in the scholarship.

## Chapter Three

### Ardhanārīśvara in Tiruchengode: Town, Temple, and Devotional Practices

#### 3.1 Introduction

Chapter one addressed theoretical and methodological issues pertaining to the project at hand. It was brought to attention that the study of religion has displayed a history of bias towards creed, text, and doctrine, identifying the loci of *true* religion within these spheres. This occurred at the expense of other elements, such as custom, practice, and ritual, which have been downplayed in comparison. It was also highlighted that the perspectives of elite Brāhmin Sanskritists have often been taken as wholly representative, while the views of the remaining Hindu populace go unrecognized. I provided an overview of contemporary approaches that demonstrate tendencies towards giving voice to the otherwise ignored, exploring content that has been overlooked, and treating disciplines as interconnected rather than disparate. The recognition of previously unconsidered voices and content is proving valuable; a fuller view of Hinduism as a living tradition is coming into view. However, there remain gaps in the scholarship and residual biases that need correcting.

The second chapter acquainted the reader with Ardhanārīśvara by presenting a comprehensive review of its place in the present scholarship. The content therein focuses principally, and often solely, on iconography, mythological narratives, and their philosophical interpretations. Accordingly, the scholarship often presents, in a definitive manner, a select few ways that Ardhanārīśvara may be interpreted. These interpretations rely heavily on textual sources and iconographic representations, and generally focus on themes related to cosmogony and devotionism. The same information and interpretations seem to be consistently reproduced throughout the literature in some form or measure.<sup>1</sup> Yet the content largely ignores life on the ground. As a result, related information on ritual, custom, and local understandings

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<sup>1</sup> Contemporary feminist readings are the exception.

of Ardhanārīśvara are largely missing in the scholarship, as are works on sites of worship.<sup>2</sup> In other words, the scholarship omits Ardhanārīśvara in living context. Hence, there appears to be gaps in content similar to those discussed in the first chapter.

To address these gaps this chapter will focus on the living context of Tiruchengode, Tamil Nadu, due to its hilltop temple where Ardhanārīśvara serves as presiding deity. In the first chapter I stressed the fluidity of observable phenomena and the ultimate blurriness of categorical parameters. It may seem incongruous then to use distinct and traditional categories of description when analyzing Ardhanārīśvara in Tiruchengode, instead of opting to discuss my observations in a more open and free flowing manner. Yet I have chosen to include conventional headings (iconography, narratives, etc.) for easy contrast and comparison with current academic scholarship. However, I do stress the actual openness and relatedness of categories and attempt to make this evident in my work. Accordingly, I have provided some hybrid categories, such as icon in worship.<sup>3</sup> Although this may result in some overlap in content, I have tried to avoid redundancy by simply including a note on such relatedness once under a single heading. It should also be kept in mind that the inherent interconnectivity implies that any category may be used as a departure point from which all other categories become subsumed.

The following will delineate my fieldwork findings. This will include descriptions of the city, temple complex, local representations of Ardhanārīśvara, relevant mythological narratives, and related temple and town activity. Throughout the chapter I interweave my own observations and impressions. However, a more thorough analysis of this information, assessed in relation to the thesis as a whole, will be reserved for the concluding chapter.

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<sup>2</sup> There are thorough studies on the Ardhanārīśvara image appearing at sites of worship but no information about how Ardhanārīśvara operates in these contexts. For a list of sites containing the Ardhanārīśvara image see Neeta Yadav, *Ardhanārīśvara in Art and Literature* (New Delhi: D.K. Printworld, 2001), 191-195

<sup>3</sup> The fluidity between categories will be expanded upon thoroughly in the concluding chapter to follow.

## 3.2 Information Regarding Fieldwork Location

### 3.2.1 City of Tiruchengode

This section will familiarize the reader with Tiruchengode, location of the fieldwork currently under review. As of the 2011 census, the population of Tiruchengode was 99,335.<sup>4</sup> With past censuses demonstrating a trend of population growth, it may be reasonably inferred that at the time of fieldwork the population was considerably upwards of 100,000 people.<sup>5</sup> Tiruchengode is located in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu, which stretches down to the southernmost tip of India. Scholarship often demarcates between North and South India for various reasons. South India is sometimes characterized topographically by the peninsular Deccan plateau.<sup>6</sup> North and South India are also differentiated by language group. North Indian languages are primarily of Sanskritic influence whereas languages of Dravidian origin predominate the South.<sup>7</sup> In addition to linguistic variation, North and South India are also differentiated culturally, for example, by cuisine and architecture.<sup>8</sup> India has primarily drawn its state lines by language group.<sup>9</sup> Thus, as with the rest of Tamil Nadu, the language most spoken in Tiruchengode is Tamil.

The city itself is rather condensed; the buildings are close together and overall there is little green space within the city limits. There are some parks, however, which serve as popular cricket grounds, especially in the temperate hours of early morning and evening.<sup>10</sup> Tiruchengode has no major rail station or airport, so its main transportation hub is a lively bus station situated in the city center. The inner city is otherwise packed with various businesses:

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<sup>4</sup> Government of India, "Tiruchengode Census Information," <http://censusindia.gov.in/pca/SearchDetails.aspx?ld=6877515> (accessed Jan. 6, 2015)

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. The fieldwork took place in the spring of 2014.

<sup>6</sup> K.A. Nilakanta Sastri, *A History of South India: From Prehistoric Times to Fall of Vijayanagar* (New York: Oxford University Press), 2

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 2

<sup>8</sup> This is not to say that there are uniform North and South Indian cultures, but that there are certain trends noted. For example, Southern India features widespread Dravidian architecture and particular dishes, such as *idli*. It has happened often in my experiences of India where people from both North and South have mentioned this supposed schism.

<sup>9</sup> Herman Kulke and Dietmar Rothermund, *A History of India: Third Edition* (London: Routledge, 1998), 300-302

<sup>10</sup> Cricket is one of, if not the singular, most popular sport in India overall. It should also be noted that I was in Tiruchengode in February and March where temperatures average between mid-high thirties (in Celsius).

pharmacies, restaurants, retail outlets, etc. Throughout the day there is an ample amount of bustle in the streets. There is a steady flow of interweaving cars, motorbikes, pedestrians, and bulls, with painted horns, hauling goods. The quieter, residential areas are tucked away from this commercial core. Grade schools are close by with scores of uniformed children occupying the schoolyards. Tiruchengode becomes increasingly industrious towards its perimeter where there is an abundance of machine-shops, many relating to the borewell industry for which Tiruchengode is known.<sup>11</sup>

It appears as though the most pervasive religion in Tiruchengode is Hinduism. Although Catholicism and Islam are present, as evidenced by at least two Catholic churches and a mosque, there are numerous Hindu temples and shrines and countless images of the Hindu pantheon throughout the city. Śiva temples seem to be of particular abundance, outnumbering that of any other deity. Moreover, the presiding deities of many other temples and shrines are of familial relation to Śiva.<sup>12</sup> There is a temple for Murugan, son of Śiva and Pārvatī, at the base of the hill on which the Ardhanārīśvara temple sits.<sup>13</sup> There is a shrine for Gaṇeśa, another of their sons, further up the hill from the Ardhanārīśvara temple. Also at the base of the hill is a temple for Durgā, considered a consort to Śiva. Pārvatī, the consort of Śiva whose iconographic features often inspire the female half of Ardhanārīśvara, has her own dedicated temple elsewhere in Tiruchengode. There is even a temple for Ayyappan, son of Śiva with the female incarnation of Viṣṇu, Mohinī.<sup>14</sup> As a testament to the Hindu predominance, and popularity of Śiva in Tiruchengode, the Ardhanārīśvara temple majestically overlooks the city.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Borewell refers to drill rigs.

<sup>12</sup> Although the words shrine and temple are sometimes used interchangeably, here I have differentiated them. By temple I refer to a place of worship that one may generally enter. Here shrine will be used in reference to the receptacle that contains the focal point of devotional attention. As such, a temple may include a shrine.

<sup>13</sup> Murugan is also known as Kārttikēya

<sup>14</sup> Viṣṇu appeared before Śiva in the form of the enchantress Mohinī. Śiva became passionate and embraced her. As a result they merged into the composite form, Hari-Hara. Hari-Hara is depicted similarly to Ardhanārīśvara; the right half of the figure is allotted to Śiva while Viṣṇu occupies the left half of the body. From this union Ayyappan was born. See Diana Eck, *India: A Sacred Geography* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2012), 462. For information on a pilgrimage to Ayyappan in Kerala see pages 13-14

<sup>15</sup> The alternative spelling, Arthanārēswarar, is sometimes used locally, but I have chosen to only use Ardhanārīśvara here to avoid confusion.



### 3.2.2 The Ardhanārīśvara Temple

The most prominent landmark of the city is the looming Ardhanārīśvara temple. The temple is located atop the 650 ft. Nāgagiri Hill towards the southern limits of the city. Visitors may reach the temple by taking 1206 steps that zigzag up the hillside. Throughout the climb there are four *maṇḍapams*, providing shade and respite for those who traverse in this manner.<sup>16</sup> Along one stretch of stairs there is a 60 ft. carving of a snake, reinforcing the Nāgagiri title.<sup>17</sup> In modern times a road was constructed so that vehicles may also access the temple. Each day packed buses take devotees to the temple from the city center sporadically throughout the afternoon. It should be noted that what is commonly referred to as the Ardhanārīśvara temple is more accurately an Ardhanārīśvara temple complex. Although the primary shrine is occupied by Ardhanārīśvara, there are several other shrines and areas for visitors to reprieve, all enclosed within four giant walls. These walls designate the temple grounds, demarcating where things operate in a unique and sacred manner.<sup>18</sup> Just outside of the walls are shops, food stalls, and a community dining hall.

The date of initial temple construction is unclear. I was given a myriad of dates by temple patrons and priests. According to the temple website, there are inscriptions that suggest the temple is around two thousand years old.<sup>19</sup> Another site suggests the temple dates back to the Sangam period (the early centuries of the Common Era).<sup>20</sup> In part, the temple origins are difficult to discern because of several renovations and expansions made across centuries,

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<sup>16</sup> A *maṇḍapam* is a hall-like structure. See V.V. Subba Reddy, *Temples of South India* (New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 2009), 229. In the case of these hillside *maṇḍapams*, the roofs are supported by pillars and the walls are otherwise open. The names of the four located on this hill are Senguthat Mudaliyar Maṇḍapam, Kalathi Maṇḍapam, Thirumudiyar Maṇḍapam, and Thyli Maṇḍapam

<sup>17</sup> Nāgagiri translates to “snake hill,” or “snake mountain.”

<sup>18</sup> David Shulman, *Tamil Temple Myths: Sacrifice and Divine Marriage in the South Indian Śaiva Tradition*. (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980), 75

<sup>19</sup> Muthukumar Murugesan, “Arulmegu Arthanareeswarar Temple,” [www.arthanareeswarar.com/English.asp](http://www.arthanareeswarar.com/English.asp) (accessed June 2, 2015)

<sup>20</sup> The site which claims this is Tiruchengode Beta, “Tiruchengode Ardhanareswarar Temple Details,” [http://www.tiruchengode.in/tiruchengode\\_ardhanareeswarar\\_temple.html](http://www.tiruchengode.in/tiruchengode_ardhanareeswarar_temple.html) (accessed Jan. 8, 2015) The period provided is from P. Shanmugam, “Before the Common Era: Beginnings of South Indian History” in *A Concise History of South India*, ed. Noboru Karashima (United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2014), 20

including the installation of *gopurams*.<sup>21</sup> The temple website claims that the foundation for the Thirumalai *gopuram* was laid in 1512 by Krishnadevaraya, ruler of the Vijayanagara Empire from 1509-1529.<sup>22</sup> It goes on to say that a later Vijayanagara ruler, Sadā-Śiva Maharayar, laid the foundation for the north-facing Rajagopuram which was completed in 1522.<sup>23</sup> Lastly, it mentions a renovation in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, which would have occurred during the Nayaka Empire.<sup>24</sup> Popular pilgrimage sites were consistently renovated and elaborated throughout the Vijayanagara and Nayaka periods.<sup>25</sup> The Dravidian style architecture apparent in the *gopurams* and *maṇḍapas* of the Ardhanārīśvara temple complex are typical of this time.<sup>26</sup>

Although Ardhanārīśvara is comprised of both Śiva and Pārvatī, the Ardhanārīśvara temple of Tiruchengode is a Śiva temple first and foremost. The name Śiva is twice hung on the outer walls of the temple complex in giant Tamil script. Within the temple complex the ancillary shrines further emphasize Śiva. There are shrines for two sons of Śiva, Gaṇeśa and Murugan, and featured depictions of two other forms of Śiva, Naṭarāja and Bhairava. One of the main shrines of the site is dedicated to Viṣṇu. However, here Viṣṇu is considered brother to Pārvatī,

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<sup>21</sup> *Gopurams*, literally “cow-gates,” are towering gateway entrances to temple complexes of South India. Sengar writes that *gopurams* were erected to emphasize the importance of the temple without altering the form of the temple itself. See Shailendra Sengar, *Encyclopedia of Indian Architecture* (New Delhi: Anmol Publications Pvt. Ltd., 2007), 129. There is the implication here that *gopurams* are later additions to the temple complex. This may certainly be the case in Tiruchengode given that their *gopurams* and *maṇḍapas* are attributed to Vijayanagara and Nayaka rulers renowned for refurbishing and expanding already existent temples and that the temple itself is often cited as being of older origin.

<sup>22</sup> Burton Stein, *Vijayanagara* (Great Britain: University of Cambridge Press, 1989), 29. Thirumalai, the name assigned to this *gopuram*, may simply mean “Holy Place.” It may also mean “Abode of Veṅkaṭeśvara.” This is interesting because Veṅkaṭeśvara is in reference to Viṣṇu and this is a Śiva temple. *Gopurams*, literally “cow-gates,” are towering gateway entrances to temple complexes of South India. Sengar writes that *gopurams* were erected to emphasize the importance of the temple without altering the form of the temple itself. See Shailendra Sengar, *Encyclopedia of Indian Architecture* (New Delhi: Anmol Publications Pvt. Ltd., 2007), 129. There is the implication here that *gopurams* are later additions to the temple complex. This may certainly be the case in Tiruchengode given that their *gopurams* and *maṇḍapas* are attributed to Vijayanagara and Nayaka rulers renowned for refurbishing and expanding already existent temples and that the temple itself is often cited as being of older origin.

<sup>23</sup> Tiruchengode Beta, “Tiruchengode Ardhanareeswarar Temple Details,” [http://www.tiruchengode.in/tiruchengode\\_ardhanareeswarar\\_temple.html](http://www.tiruchengode.in/tiruchengode_ardhanareeswarar_temple.html) (accessed Jan. 8, 2015 )

<sup>24</sup> The Nayaka dynasties emerged at the dissolution of the Vijayanagara Empire. The Madurai Nayakas, whose jurisdiction covered most of modern day Tamil Nadu, ruled from around 1529-1736.

<sup>25</sup> George Michell, *Architecture and art of Southern India: Vijayanagara and the successor states* (Great Britain: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 73

<sup>26</sup> See Ibid.

brother-in-law to Śiva, and is therefore included in the Śiva family fold.<sup>27</sup> Towards the northwest of the site is a Devī shrine, beside which is the temple tree, *sthalavṛkṣa*.<sup>28</sup> Along the inside of the southern complex wall are small statues of the Nyānmārs: sixty-three Tamil poet-saints renowned for their devotion to Śiva.<sup>29</sup> Along the inner west wall are five Śiva *liṅgaṃs*, representing earth, water, fire, air, and space.<sup>30</sup> The temple grounds also contain a flagstaff, known as *dhvajasthambā*; the *navagraha*, representing cosmic bodies; and an installation of Nandi, the *vāhana* of Śiva, which faces the main Ardhanārīśvara shrine.<sup>31</sup> Inclusion of the Nyānmārs, five elemental *liṅgaṃs*, Devī shrine, *sthalavṛkṣa*, *dhvajasthambā*, *navagraha*, and Nandi installation is typical of South Indian Śiva temples, emphasizing the prominence of Śiva all the more.<sup>32</sup> This primacy afforded to Śiva will be analyzed in the following chapter in consideration of the feminist readings of Ardhanārīśvara reviewed in chapter two.

However, in and around the temple the Ardhanārīśvara form is definitely highlighted. For example, compared to *gopurams* that I saw elsewhere in Tamil Nadu those at this temple contain a greater amount of Ardhanārīśvara figures. Also, there are several archways present throughout the hillside stairway that are ornamented with Ardhanārīśvara sculptures. The focus on Ardhanārīśvara is great and will be made evident in the following sections as I further explore local mythological narratives, temple iconography, and its place in worship.

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<sup>27</sup> This was told to me by patrons of the Ardhanārīśvara temple.

<sup>28</sup> In this case the temple tree is of the Iluppai variety.

<sup>29</sup> See Indira Viswanathan Peterson, *Poems to Śiva: The Hymns of the Tamil Saints* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989), 17. Of these, there are three considered most prominent. They are Sambandar, Appar, and Sundarar

<sup>30</sup> These five elements together are known as *panchatanmatras*. See Fredrick Bunce, *A Dictionary of Buddhist and Hindu Iconography: Objectives, Devices, Concepts, Rites, and Related Items* (New Delhi: D.K. Printworld, 1997), 220. Each of these may be referred to as a *mahābhūta*, a great element.

<sup>31</sup> The nine cosmic bodies represented by the *navagraha* are Mars, Jupiter, Mercury, Venus, Saturn, the Sun and Moon, as well as Rahu and Ketu, which are ascending and descending lunar nodes respectively. For more information on the *navagraha* see Ibid. 201. *Vāhana* refers to the iconographic vehicle mount of Hindu deities, often depicted as an animal. The *vāhana* of Śiva is the bull Nandi. For definition of *vāhana* see Ibid. 323. For information on Nandi see Ibid. 199. For information regarding *sthalavṛkṣa* see Ibid. 341. For definition of *dhvajasthambā* see Ibid. 83.

<sup>32</sup> See N.R. Bhatt, *Shaivism in the Light of Epics, Purāṇas and Āgamas* (Varanasi: Indica Books, 2008), 459

### 3.3 Mythological Narratives

#### 3.3.1 Mythological Narratives: Site Origin

Tamil myths are part and parcel of the vast, wild web of Hindu mythology. The characters within them and the content of their narratives are often similar to those found elsewhere on the subcontinent.<sup>33</sup> Yet there is also a propensity in Tamil culture towards the localization of myths.<sup>34</sup> Local shrines are tied to narratives that depict the extraordinary formation or discovery of the site.<sup>35</sup> It is common for the shrine to boast itself as superior to others, list a number of benefits to be gained from worship there, and/or offer a boon unique to that site.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, the site will often be described as the center of the universe, locus of creation, and the single spot where salvation is offered.<sup>37</sup> Thus, the shrine may develop a reputation that attracts ritual pilgrimage, *tīrtha-yātrā*.

The site of the Ardhanārīśvara temple is tied to one such origin myth. This narrative was shared with me on numerous occasions and is also included in a booklet sold at the temple market. The story goes 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.<sup>38</sup> During the battle Ādi Śeṣa braced Mount Meru by covering it with the hoods of its five heads. 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 being

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<sup>33</sup> David Shulman, *Tamil Temple Myths: Sacrifice and Divine Marriage in the South Indian Śaiva Tradition* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980), 4

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. 40

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. 17

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. 17

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. 18

<sup>38</sup> Descriptions of Vāyu and Ādi Śeṣa are found in Rachel Storm, *Indian Mythology: Legends of India, Tibet, and Sri Lanka* (New Delhi: Anness Publishing, 2006), 84-85

the piece of Meru.<sup>39</sup> Thus, Tiruchengode and the Ardhanārīśvara temple are associated with Mount Meru, center of the Universe in Hindu cosmology.<sup>40</sup>

### 3.3.2 Mythological Narratives: Temple Deities

There are many mythological narratives associated with figures present at the Ardhanārīśvara temple. The *gopurams* are literally covered in characters and scenes from Hindu mythology. Likewise, the inner complex is entwined with figurative engravings. For example, the ten avatars of Viṣṇu are represented across an archway framing the Adhikesava Perumal shrine.<sup>41</sup> The 63 Nyānmārs are depicted as statuettes in the temple grounds and each has their own story, too. For the purposes of this paper it will suffice to only cover the local mythologies of the three deities for whom there are major shrines in the temple complex: Ardhanārīśvara, Murugan, and Viṣṇu.

This first narrative involves Viṣṇu, popularly known as Perumal or Thirumal in Tamil Nadu, and one of his ardent followers.<sup>42</sup> According to Shulman, it is typical for a temple in Tamil Nadu to boast a myth involving the exploits of a devotee who is benefited by worshipping there.<sup>43</sup> This is one such myth, while also serving the purpose of associating Viṣṇu with the location. It is said that there was a great devotee of Viṣṇu, called Mandukarna Rishi, who made an arduous trek to Tirupati to receive *darśan* once every month.<sup>44</sup> However, when the devotee became old he was unfortunately unable to do so. To make *darśan* easier for Mandukarna Rishi,

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<sup>39</sup> In fact, the reddish colouring of the Nāgagiri hill is said to be caused by the blood of this battle.

<sup>40</sup> Storm, *Indian Mythology: Myths and Legends of India, Tibet, and Sri Lanka*, 21

<sup>41</sup> Adhikesava Perumal is an epithet/title associated with Viṣṇu. See Nanditha Krishna, *The Art and Iconography of Vishnu-Narayana* (Bombay: D.B Taraporevala Sons & Co. Private Ltd., 1980), 13. In connection, it may be noted that there is an Adhikesava Perumal temple in Thiruvattar, Tamil Nadu that showcases Viṣṇu sleeping on Ādi Śeṣa. The presence of Viṣṇu here corroborates the work by Will Sweetman, highlighted in chapter one, who holds that devotees of Viṣṇu and Śiva have long held mutual recognition. See Sweetman, "Unity and Plurality: Hinduism and the religions of India in early European Scholarship" in *Defining Hinduism: A Reader*, ed. J.E. Llewellyn (New York: Routledge, 2005), 91

<sup>42</sup> The three myths of this section were shared with me by locals and may also be found on the temple website. See Murugesan, "Arulmegu Arthanareeswarar Temple," [www.arthanareeswarar.com/English.asp](http://www.arthanareeswarar.com/English.asp) (accessed June 2, 2015)

<sup>43</sup> Shulman, *Tamil Temple Myths: Sacrifice and Divine Marriage in the South Indian Śaiva Tradition*, 17

<sup>44</sup> *Darśan* refers to both seeing and being seen by a deity, guru, or other holy figure. It is considered a beneficial exchange. Tirupati is in Andhra Pradesh. This myth implies that the Nāgagiri hill of Tiruchengode was of much more convenient proximity.

Viṣṇu promised to appear at the hill temple of Tiruchengode daily. The devotee visited the temple and Viṣṇu appeared to him in the *tulsi*.<sup>45</sup> It concludes by saying that to this day Viṣṇu is found at this site, providing salvation to all.<sup>46</sup>

Ardhanārīśvara and Murugan are also present in a myth involving Tiruchengode. In it, Murugan was unable to obtain a divine fruit from his parents, Śiva and Pārvatī, and became upset. In response, Murugan left their home on Mount Kailash and went to South India. The departure of their son saddened Pārvatī greatly. To alleviate Pārvatī, Śiva took her to a garden. There she felt better and playfully covered the eyes of Śiva.<sup>47</sup> As a result, the Universe plunged into darkness and the sages could not perform their rituals. Unimpressed, Śiva banished Pārvatī. In turn, Pārvatī undertook severe penances, prompting Śiva to appear before her. She begged Śiva to merge with her and form a single body. Śiva instructed her to first reunite with Murugan and proceed to the Nāgagiri hill in Tiruchengode. There, on a lotus, she again took penance. Śiva was pleased, rewarded Pārvatī with half of his body, and the sages and Devas all gathered to celebrate their singular divine form.<sup>48</sup> Again, this mythological narrative effectively localizes Murugan, Śiva, and Pārvatī, while also connecting the origin of Ardhanārīśvara to the site.

Although the above story connects Ardhanārīśvara to Tiruchengode, it is not the most prominent narrative about Ardhanārīśvara at the temple or throughout the city. By far the most prevalent story is a variant of the Ardhanārīśvara myth involving the sage Bhṛngi. This narrative was shared most often with me by devotees. It is included in an informational pamphlet sold at the temple market and is available on the temple website as well.<sup>49</sup> The majority of Ardhanārīśvara depictions around Tiruchengode pay homage to this myth by including an image

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<sup>45</sup> *Tulsi*, also known as holy basil, is an adaptogen used in Ayurveda and which is particularly associated with Viṣṇu and used in its ritual worship. *Tulsi* is sometimes considered a manifestation of Lakṣmī, consort of Viṣṇu. See Shakti Gupta, *Vishnu and His Incarnations* (Bombay: Somaiya Publications Pvt. Ltd., 1974), 6 and 55-59

<sup>46</sup> It should be noted that Viṣṇu is an ancillary deity of the site. The actual names used for Viṣṇu are Venkatachalapathi and Adhikesava Perumal. See Murugesan, "Arulmegu Arthanareeswarar Temple," [www.arthanareeswarar.com/English.asp](http://www.arthanareeswarar.com/English.asp) (accessed June 2, 2015)

<sup>47</sup> Pārvatī covering the eyes of Śiva is a recurring theme in their mythologies. For example, see Alf Hiltebeitel *The Cult of Draupadī*, vol.1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 447. Here the author even relates the myth to Tiruchengode.

<sup>48</sup> Details regarding this narrative are drawn from conversations and information on the temple website. See *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> For the temple website see above. Pamphlet: Temple Administration, *Welcome to Arthanareeswarar Temple*, trans. D. Thirunavukarasu.

of the sage, Bhṛṅgi, beside the composite deity. Also, on the upper walls of the *ardha-maṇḍapa*, there is a mural depicting the story.<sup>50</sup> It should be noted that the narrative was shared with me numerous times and in a variety of ways. An overall approximation of the story is as follows:

A number of devotees gathered to worship Śiva and Pārvatī on Mount Kailash. Everyone in attendance was willing to worship both Śiva and Pārvatī, except for the sage Bhṛṅgi; he solely circumambulated Śiva.<sup>51</sup> Pārvatī requested the sage to worship her too, but he refused. To demonstrate their actual oneness, and so that Pārvatī would also be circumambulated, Śiva and Pārvatī united as Ardhanārīśvara. However, Bhṛṅgi took the form of an insect and gnawed through the vertical axis of the figure, still circumambulating Śiva alone. Pārvatī cursed the sage to lose all bodily fluids, leaving him a pile of skin and bones.<sup>52</sup> Yet Śiva was sympathetic towards his ardent devotion and granted him a third leg, allowing him to stand. Following this, Bhṛṅgi became aware of the importance of both Śiva and Pārvatī.

Mythological narratives are intimately associated with visual representations. For example, when one sees a picture of baby Kṛṣṇa with his hand in a butter jar his mischievous butter-thief narrative comes to mind. Similarly, if there is an image of Kṛṣṇa in a temple with no specific narrative explicitly alluded to, yet the temple community regularly recounts his exploits with the *gopīs*, then his image may very well evoke that narrative when looked upon. The local mythologies of Ardhanārīśvara involve the creation of the deity: the merging of Śiva and Pārvatī. Throughout Tiruchengode Ardhanārīśvara is depicted as split vertically, male and female. In this way the images and narratives correspond. Thus, the narratives may influence how the image is understood. Likewise, the Ardhanārīśvara image may influence how one visualizes the

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<sup>50</sup> The *garbhagrha* is the sanctum sanctorum of the temple. The chamber in front of it is known as the *ardha-maṇḍapa*. See Reddy, *Temples of South India*, 225

<sup>51</sup> Circumambulation of a deity, holy person, or place, is an expression of devotion, known as *parikrama*.

<sup>52</sup> The belief here is that the fluids of the body come from the mother and the rigid bones and nerves are of the father. To lose bodily fluids is to lose those parts granted by the mother. This was emphasized by some devotees and omitted by others. This notion of the rigid parts coming from the father and the fluid parts from mother is also found in an informational pamphlet sold at the temple market. In artistic rendition, Bhṛṅgi will often be presented skeletally because of this curse. Temple Administration, *Welcome to Arthanareeswarar Temple*, trans. D. Thirunavukarasu.

narratives.<sup>53</sup> The fluidity between iconography and mythology will be analyzed further in the following chapter. Yet with this connection in mind, the following section will discuss the different iconographic representations of Ardhanārīśvara, and their various contexts, in Tiruchengode.

### 3.4 Iconography of Ardhanārīśvara in Tiruchengode

#### 3.4.1 The Ardhanārīśvara Icons

McCallum suggests that the word image resonates as neutral whereas icon reflects the sacred dimension of an image.<sup>54</sup> In this section I have used image and icon rather interchangeably. However, I draw attention to this point and note that my usage is not to discredit any sacred status. This is true for the various contexts that Ardhanārīśvara images are present, whether in the temple complex or on billboards. To reiterate a point from chapter one, Hinduism is often thought to pervade all aspects of life.<sup>55</sup> Therefore, it is not my intent to differentiate between sacred and otherwise. Below I will address the different iconographic representations of Ardhanārīśvara present in Tiruchengode, their various contexts, and ways the icon may be understood.

Ardhanārīśvara is depicted in several ways throughout Tiruchengode. The most prominent representation is one that I have not encountered in any book that includes Ardhanārīśvara iconography. It is an illustrated rendition of the Ardhanārīśvara icon found in the temple *garbhagrha*.<sup>56</sup> The figure stands in *tribhaṅga* pose, adorned with a golden headpiece, arm bangles, and necklaces.<sup>57</sup> The left side is female and the right is male. The right arm holds a

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<sup>53</sup> A similar idea is suggested by Nanditha Krishna who suggests that to understand Hindu iconography one must analyze the myths associated with each icon in depth. See Krishna, *The Art and Iconography of Vishnu-Narayana*, 1

<sup>54</sup> Donald McCallum, *Zenkōji and its Icon* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994), 180. Icon may refer to both 2D and 3D depictions.

<sup>55</sup> Jessica Frazier, "Research Methods: From Manuscripts to Fieldwork," in *The Bloomsbury Companion to Hindu Studies*, ed. Jessica Frazier (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2011), 252

<sup>56</sup> The *garbhagrha* is the "womb chamber," the place within the temple where the *mūrti* resides. In most Śiva temples, Śiva is represented by a lingam in the *garbhagrha*. In the case of the Tiruchengode temple, Ardhanārīśvara is depicted in the *garbhagrha* in its full anthropomorphic form.

<sup>57</sup> To reiterate, *tribhaṅga* is in reference to being curved in three places: head, waist, and knee. See Yadav, *Ardhanārīśvara in Art and Literature* (New Delhi: D.K. Printworld, 2001), 21



sceptre, and the left hand is placed on the protruded hip.<sup>58</sup> The figure is uniformly flesh coloured or white.<sup>59</sup> The leggings are divided by colour down the middle; the female half is green and the male half is red. Besides this, the only demarcation of male and female halves is an exposed female breast on the left half of the figure. The three-legged Bhringi is included beside Śiva, and the figures are sometimes framed by a decorative archway.<sup>60</sup>

This image is found on merchandise in the temple market, including booklets and reusable bags, as stickers on vehicle windows, posters in city shops, on the sides of buses that transport patrons to and from the hilltop temple, even on the sign of the local Yamaha dealership.<sup>61</sup> This rendition of Ardhanārīśvara is certainly affiliated with the temple, the most prominent and popular landmark of Tiruchengode. Yet its pervasiveness and usage is such that it also appears to serve as a symbol of the city itself, in much the same way that the Statue of Liberty may be associated with the city of New York.

Another depiction of Ardhanārīśvara found regularly in Tiruchengode is one that I noticed often throughout the rest of India as well. This popular image has been catalogued in works concerning Ardhanārīśvara iconography.<sup>62</sup> In it Ardhanārīśvara is taking the *sthānamudrā* posture; the figure is standing straight, front-facing, with both sides of the body weighted proportionately equal.<sup>63</sup> The figure is four-armed. The posterior arm of Śiva holds a *triśūla* and his front hand is in *abhaya mudrā*.<sup>64</sup> The posterior arm of Pārvatī is holding a *nīlotpala* and her front hand is taking *kaṭyavalambita*.<sup>65</sup> I came across this depiction less frequently than the one

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<sup>58</sup> It should be noted that the sceptre is also held upside down. No one was able to tell me what the sceptre represents. However, it bears resemblance to the *gadā* (mace) of Hanuman. When Hanuman's *gadā* is held upside down it signifies orderliness and contentment in society. Perhaps there is a similar meaning to this feature of Ardhanārīśvara.

<sup>59</sup> This is common among Tamil depictions of the gods. One will find Murugan, Viṣṇu, Ayyappan, etc. also in flesh tones.

<sup>60</sup> See images 1-8

<sup>61</sup> For reusable bag see image 7. For bus see image 8. For Yamaha dealership see image 6.

<sup>62</sup> Ellen Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman: Ardhanārīśvara in Indian and Feminist Perspective* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2002), 50

<sup>63</sup> Neeta Yadav, *Ardhanārīśvara in Art and Literature*, 21

<sup>64</sup> The *triśūla* (trident) and *abhaya mudrā* (gesture of reassurance) are typical iconographic features of Śiva in the Ardhanārīśvara image. See *Ibid.* 21-15.

<sup>65</sup> See Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman: Ardhanārīśvara in Indian and Feminist Perspective* 14-15. The *nīlotpala* (flower) and *kaṭyavalambita* (posture of ease) are standard fare for Pārvatī in Ardhanārīśvara images.

described prior. Nonetheless, it could also be found in the same types of places: markets, business shrines, stickered on vehicles, etc.

Whereas the above images may be found in every corner of public life, there are certain forms of the icon reserved for specific spaces and occasions. I already mentioned the Ardhanārīśvara sculptures embedded in archways throughout the hillside staircase and roadway, and the considerable amount of Ardhanārīśvara sculptures present on the temple *gopurams*.<sup>66</sup> There are also a few places on the temple grounds where *yoni-liṅgam* images are displayed, showcasing Śiva and Śakti united in non-figurative, rather than anthropomorphic, form.<sup>67</sup> The Ardhanārīśvara images in these instances seem to highlight the uniqueness of this temple by emphasizing the Ardhanārīśvara form of Śiva present in the primary shrine.

In the actual Ardhanārīśvara shrine there are both *mūlamūrti* and *utsavar* icons. *Mūlamūrti* refers to the fixed icon within the *garbhagrha*, the innermost sanctum of the temple complex.<sup>68</sup> Only the temple priests may access the *mūlamūrti* and do so in order to perform special rituals, including *abhiṣekam* and *ārti*, which I will discuss in a section to follow. The *mūlamūrti* of most Śiva temples is in the form of a *liṅgam*. However, the *mūlamūrti* of the Tiruchengode temple is a 6 ft., anthropomorphic Ardhanārīśvara. The figure is made of stone, holds a sceptre in its right hand, while the left hand rests on the fuller, female hip. The female breast is also prominent on the left half. The figure is generally clothed, female garments on the left side while the right is draped with male attire.<sup>69</sup> There is a much smaller, and moveable, statue of Bhṛṅgi that accompanies Ardhanārīśvara in the *garbhagrha*. Several devotees described the *mūlamūrti* of this temple as *svayambhū*: naturally and miraculously occurring, not the product of artisanship.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> For hillside staircase and roadway see images 9-12. For *gopurams* see 13-16. For *yoni-liṅgam* see image 17. Images 18 and 19 are of Ardhanārīśvara images in the temple complex. Image 20 shows an Ardhanārīśvara in the window of a vehicle

<sup>67</sup> For reference as their iconic form see Kramrisch, *The Presence of Śiva* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1981), 246

<sup>68</sup> This temple is unique in that the *garbhagrha* faces west.

<sup>69</sup> There are instances where the clothing is removed, for example, during *abhiṣekam* ceremonies. I will cover this at greater length in a section on the icons and worship.

<sup>70</sup> Eck, *Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 107

*Utsavar* refers to the icon of the temple used for public procession, especially festivals.<sup>71</sup> The *utsavar* of the Ardhanārīśvara temple resembles the anthropomorphic form found in the *garbhagrha*. However, it is much smaller, perhaps a few feet high, and is composed of a five metal alloy, *panchaloha*.<sup>72</sup> The Ardhanārīśvara *utsavar* is adorned with garlands of flowers and dressed in clothing that demarcates its male and female halves. When inside the Tiruchengode temple, the *utsavar* is kept in a holding cage within the *ardha-maṇḍapa*, a chamber connected to the *sanctum sanctorum*.<sup>73</sup> The *utsavar* is carried on a palanquin and taken around the temple premises during certain *pūjā* times.<sup>74</sup> The Ardhanārīśvara *utsavar* is also taken into town for the annual “car-festival” during the Tamil month, Vaikasi.<sup>75</sup> I will expand on this and other usages of the temple icons in an upcoming section about icons in worship.

### 3.5 Local Expressions Regarding Ardhanārīśvara

#### 3.5.1 Conceptualizations of the Ardhanārīśvara Icons

There is little doubt that all of the above representations would be determined Ardhanārīśvara by the average devotee in Tiruchengode. As McCallum notes, stylistic variations rarely hinder identification.<sup>76</sup> However, the different “types” of Ardhanārīśvara images certainly appear to be treated differently. For example, pilgrims journey to observe the Ardhanārīśvara icon of the *garbhagrha* while the Ardhanārīśvara image in a storefront window may receive comparatively little attention by passing pedestrians. This largely depends on iconicity, a term referring to the different forms of resonance one may have with an icon.<sup>77</sup> For example, a temple icon is commonly referred to as a *mūrti*. The connotations of *mūrti* range from being the

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<sup>71</sup> Eck, *Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*, 57. Bhatt further distinguishes two types of *utsavar* icons, *nitya* and *naimittika*, referring to their use daily and on fixed festival dates respectively. See Bhatt, *Shaivism in the Light of Epics, Purāṇas and Āgamas*, 398

<sup>72</sup> This is most often the case with *utsavar* compositions. Included are gold, silver, copper, iron and either zinc, lead or tin. It is a composition laid down by the *silpāsāstras* discussed in chapter two.

<sup>73</sup> V.V. Subba Reddy, *Temples of South India* (New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 2009), 225

<sup>74</sup> There is also something called the Golden Chariot procession which, according to the temple website, is available for a cost. I had trouble understanding exactly what this entailed. Either the purchaser is able to ride in the chariot alongside an Ardhanārīśvara icon, or take part in its private procession. I am unsure if the icon is the *utsavar* or a different one altogether but the event itself is considered efficacious.

<sup>75</sup> Vaikasi occurs around mid-May to mid-June. This is interesting because Vaikasa Visarga is actually a festival centering on Murugan, although Ardhanārīśvara does get the grandest chariot in procession.

<sup>76</sup> McCallum, *Zenkōji and its Icon* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994), 183

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.* 180

likeness of a deity to being the actual embodiment, incarnation, and/or manifestation of the deity itself.<sup>78</sup> The implications of these definitions vary considerably. This section will analyze the various ways that the image of a deity may be understood using the work of Donald McCallum and the expressions of informants in Tiruchengode.

In *Zenkōji and its Icon*, Donald McCallum calls for a broader generalization and theoretical explication of icons, through which specific icons may be analyzed.<sup>79</sup> He attempts to provide such a framework and suggests that icons may be conceived of in three ways. The first conception of icon he proposes is icon as representing the likeness of the deity; the icon, in a literal way, looks like the prototype.<sup>80</sup> Second, McCallum proposes that an icon may be considered a symbol of the deity; it is not depicted in a literal sense but is represented symbolically for the purposes of the devotee.<sup>81</sup> According to McCallum, this perspective is in line with the thought that the deity is unable to be represented literally. However, one can argue that the deity may be represented both literally and symbolically. Third, he suggests that an icon may be understood as the deity itself. According to McCallum, this third interpretation necessarily includes the first category.<sup>82</sup> However, this does not necessarily mean the icon is believed to be the deity in an absolute sense. After all, there are deities with multiple forms. For example, Lakṣmī and Kālī may be conceived as respectively embodying the nurturing and terrifying aspects of Devī.<sup>83</sup> Moreover, one may conceive of a deity able to incarnate in divergent forms, at different locations, simultaneously.<sup>84</sup> Importantly, McCallum acknowledges that the three conceptions of icon he provides may overlap. He also recognizes that a single icon

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<sup>78</sup> In her glossary of terms, Eck describes *mūrti* as “likeness or form.” See Eck, *Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*, 105. In her actual text, Eck describes the *mūrti* as “embodiment, incarnation, manifestation,” the deity itself taking “form.” See page 38

<sup>79</sup> McCallum, *Zenkōji and its Icon*, 179. It should be noted that in this work McCallum is focusing on a single Japanese icon.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid. 181. The icon in this view is much like realist portraiture.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid. 182

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Krishna Dharma, *Beauty, Power, and Grace: The Book of Hindu Goddesses* (California: Mandala Publishing, 2004), 7

<sup>84</sup> After all this is implied by the concept of henotheism, which will be expanded upon later in the thesis, which is defined as the worship of a particular god without discounting others, while considering the god being presently addressed as supreme. See Eck, *Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*, 26

can be conceptualized differently by various people, and that even a single individual may conceptualize the same icon differently one time to the next.

On a few occasions, Tiruchengode locals shared with me the ways they believe a temple *mūrti* may be understood.<sup>85</sup> The conceptualizations correspond roughly with the work of McCallum yet differ in some respects. First, it was presented that some believe god is in the *mūrti*. This is potentially different than asserting the icon is the deity itself, in an absolute sense. For example, images constructed for temples undergo consecration rites, *prāṇa pratistha*, that are meant to invoke the presence of the deity.<sup>86</sup> This implies that prior to such rites the image is not equatable with the deity. Furthermore, there are also rites for inviting the deity into an image, *āvāhana*, and for its dismissal, *visarjana*. Thus, in some instances the god is present in the image only for a window of time, not always.<sup>87</sup> Second, it was explained that some believe the deity is not in the image but is somewhere else entirely. This gave me the impression that there are those who reject the use of images.<sup>88</sup> In such cases devotees prefer to conceptualize the divine as *nirguṇa*, beyond the ascription of qualities, rather than *saguṇa*, describable with qualities, attributes, and adjectives.<sup>89</sup> Third, it was relayed that there are those who believe god is everywhere, both all-pervasive and uniquely present in the *mūrti*. This view seems to simultaneously recognize the possibility of both *nirguṇa* and *saguṇa* conceptions of the divine.<sup>90</sup> I am unclear in what sense this perspective believes the *mūrti* holds a special presence of god.

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<sup>85</sup> The list I have provided here was shared identically with me by three individuals: once by a professor of a nearby college, another time by the person who runs the temple website, and once by a member of my basketball team who works as a dog trainer for the India government. However, in other conversations the same points were brought up, albeit not listed as presented above.

<sup>86</sup> Eck, *Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*, 54

<sup>87</sup> Ibid. 49-51

<sup>88</sup> Hinduism does, after all, have a history wherein the use of icons is rejected. For example, the Brahma Samaj and Satya Mahima Dharma are schools denouncing idols. For information regarding the Brahma Samaj in relation to idolatry see Romain Rolland, *The Life of Ramakrishna* (Delhi: Advaita Ashrama, 2012), 66

<sup>89</sup> Eck, *Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*, 106-107

<sup>90</sup> My impression is that such a conceptualization holds that the divine is beyond confinement and yet is also present in the knowable particularities of life. To reiterate, *nirguṇa* refers to conceptualizing the divine as actually beyond qualities and description, whereas *saguṇa* refers to the opposite: the divine as knowable and with qualities.

Perhaps the *mūrti* is considered a particularly potent conduit that is significantly receptive to prayers and/or more freely offers boons, or that its worship is especially merited.<sup>91</sup>

### 3.5.2 General Conceptualizations of Ardhanārīśvara

Many insightful conversations occurred with the people I met in Tiruchengode. More often than not it felt as though the people providing their perspectives were as eager to share as I was to hear; the discussions felt comfortable, natural, and honest. The next two sections will relay the content of these exchanges as they relate to conceptualizations of Ardhanārīśvara. Again, I must reiterate a point made in the first chapter. The information shared here is not to be understood as perfectly capturing the experiences and/or understandings of any informant.<sup>92</sup> Ultimately these are my own impressions and interpretations of the expressions I encountered.

The Tiruchengode Ardhanārīśvara temple was regularly described as the only Ardhanārīśvara temple in all of India. This was expressed by many locals, and also by pilgrims who made the journey to Tiruchengode for this very reason. However, I was also informed of another Ardhanārīśvara temple in Rishivandiyam, Tamil Nadu. I ended up visiting this temple and can verify its existence. I also went to an Ardhanārīśvara temple in Mandi, Himachal Pradesh.<sup>93</sup> Regardless of the factuality of the claim that Tiruchengode houses the only

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<sup>91</sup> I was assured that there are many devotees of each variety listed here. However, I can think of some nuances that are unaddressed by the above. First, there are surely those with uncertain beliefs, and those who do not think much of the *mūrti* at all. There are people of other faiths, and those who identify with no particular faith for that matter. Second, the icon can mean things to people outside of their belief in its sacredness, per se. For example, a temple icon is also connected to the financial livelihood of temple priests and the artisans who provide such images. Third, what is implied by the sacred status of the *mūrti*? Devotees visit the Ardhanārīśvara temple in hopes of improving their financial situation, overcoming illnesses, childlessness, for peace of mind, etc. It appears to me that the sacred status of the *mūrti* is directly related to how one believes it may influence their lives; it is understood in terms of what it is able to *do*. Along these lines, the conception of the temple *mūrti* relates to its place in ritual, a point on which I will expand upon later in the chapter.

<sup>92</sup> For a more detailed exposition of the reasoning behind this refer to chapter one.

<sup>93</sup> Furthermore, I have learnt of another in Chennai and those mentioned by Hildebeitel. Hildebeitel has acknowledged five Ardhanārīśvara temples in the Kallakurichi Taluk in South Arcot, also in Tamil Nadu. See Alf Hildebeitel, *The Cult of Draupadī*, vol.1, 447. Tiruvannamalai is also noted as an important site for Ardhanārīśvara. See Shulman, *Tamil Temple Myths: Sacrifice and Divine Marriage in the South Indian Śaiva Tradition*, 351. For an article chronicling the re-establishment of an Ardhanārīśvara temple in Chennai see “Re-establishment of the Ancient Ardhanārīśvara Temple in Chennai” <http://isha.sadhguru.org/blog/yoga-meditation/science-of-temples/re-establishing-ancient-ardhanarishvara-temple-chennai/> (accessed Jan. 31, 2016)

Ardhanārīśvara temple, it is considered the case by many residents of Tiruchengode. In this regard, the Ardhanārīśvara temple was discussed in such a manner that it seemed like a source of local pride and identity.

Ardhanārīśvara was often described to me as representing male and female equality. More specifically, men and women were described as created equal. This point was sometimes supported with reference to the proportionately equal male and female halves of Ardhanārīśvara iconography.<sup>94</sup> Ardhanārīśvara was also commonly described in terms of the significance of family. Again, its iconography was cited in support; the union of male and female halves was referred to as indicative of marriage. On several occasions, identification of their marriage was followed by listing Gaṇeśa and Murugan as their children. One of the epithets of Ardhanārīśvara used in Tiruchengode is *ammaiappa* which in Tamil means “mother-father,” again reaffirming familial associations.<sup>95</sup> In this connection, I had several people tell me that they visit the temple and take part in Ardhanārīśvara devotional acts because their family and/or culture do. It will be expanded upon in the following chapter, but I will note here that the conceptualizations of Ardhanārīśvara relating to gender and family appear to reflect ethical ideals rooted in human experience.

Many devotees seemed focused on the pragmatism of interacting with the figure. On a handful of occasions at the Tiruchengode temple Ardhanārīśvara was described as being particularly efficacious regarding family matters, including helping couples conceive children, helping single people find partners, and for helping new marriages to run smoothly. When I

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<sup>94</sup> It should be acknowledged that this view was only relayed by men. This is not to say that I detected an opposing view from the women I spoke with. However, it is perhaps worth noting nonetheless, given that gender in India is an ongoing and contentious issue. For example, after conducting a quick library search on gender in India, the following books were listed: Pierre Richard, Agénor, *Gender Equality and Economic Growth in India: A Quantitative Framework* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2015), Yani Djamba and Sitawa Kimuna, ed. *Gender Based Violence: Perspectives from Africa, the Middle East, and India* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2015), and Elizabeth Armstrong, *Gender and Neo-Liberalism: The All India Democratic Women's Association and Globalization Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

<sup>95</sup> It is also worth mentioning that in an informational pamphlet available in the temple market (that I had translated) Ardhanārīśvara is described as father and mother in one form. It also describes that just as the husband and wife seem separate outside the home but are actually one inside of it (and that a good family life hinges on this union), devotion will allow Śiva and Śakti to be seen as actually one. The descriptions used to relay the oneness of Śiva and Śakti make use of family-based metaphors rather than emphasizing explicit metaphysics. Temple Administration, *Welcome to Arthanareeswarar Temple*, trans. D. Thirunavukarasu.

visited the Ardhanārīśvara temple in Rishivandiyam, Tamil Nadu the same reputation of Ardhanārīśvara assisting new marriages was shared with me.<sup>96</sup> It is worth noting that in such cases Ardhanārīśvara appeared understood mainly in terms of its impact on the lives of devotees, a notion that will be analyzed in the concluding chapter.

It is also worth noting that the above emphasis on family and practical concerns is at variance with the presentation of Ardhanārīśvara in the literature review of chapter two. Moreover, in most conversations I had in Tiruchengode there was virtually no mention of Ardhanārīśvara as symbolic of a yogic state, no descriptions of the figure as representing an emanative stage in the process of creation, no mention of Śiva as representative of consciousness and Śakti of dynamism, and, aside one discussion, no association of Ardhanārīśvara with the *ājñā cakra* in the subtle body system; these are common ways in which the figure is presented in scholarship.<sup>97</sup> I had one discussion with a visiting *sannyāsin* who described Ardhanārīśvara as presiding deity of the *ājñā cakra*.<sup>98</sup> He closed our discussion by saying that the average person would not know about such things. Of course this is not sweepingly the case, but his words did ring true in my experience. In fact, to be knowledgeable of scholarly things appeared quite beside the point, bonus but unnecessary knowledge for the aims of the devotees.

### 3.6 Ritual Activity Involving Ardhanārīśvara Icons

#### 3.6.1 A Note on Ritual

This section will focus on how people in Tiruchengode ritually interact with the Ardhanārīśvara temple icons. Before doing so it is important to describe what is meant here by ritual. In the first chapter I touched upon the treatment of ritual in the work of Catherine Bell.

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<sup>96</sup> The person I met in Rishivandiyam was visiting the Ardhanārīśvara temple there from Pondicherry because he was about to get married and believed Ardhanārīśvara has a reputation for helping such matters along. In fact, the myth present at this Ardhanārīśvara temple involves the actual marriage of Śiva and Pārvatī. One may argue that it more explicitly deals with familial relations than the Tiruchengode temple myth.

<sup>97</sup> However, I did meet a few people who granted me information about the temple and regarding interpretations of icons who struck me as quite well-versed in an array of avenues. In fact, their talk of icon-interpretations did have metaphysical underpinnings

<sup>98</sup> *Sannyāsin* refers to an ascetic renunciate. See Eck, *Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*, 107



Bell offered various definitions of ritual to illustrate that there is no singular concept.<sup>99</sup> However, she recognizes that the word ritual is usually employed to designate a special act that is set apart from other activity, a process she terms ritualization. It is important to note that her definition of ritual denotes activity. However, she cautions that the actions of the participant should not be understood as acted out, as one would in a drama.<sup>100</sup> For when one acts in a play there is the sense that, at a level, it is make-believe and not real. Conversely, a ritual may be genuinely acted out, in full accord with the beliefs of the participant.<sup>101</sup> As such, she suggests that the ritualized actions undertaken by the devotee integrates a worldview.<sup>102</sup>

This thesis also adopts the notion of ritualized activity. More specifically, this refers to the physical activity of devotees relating to Ardhanārīśvara. In concordance with Bell, the actions undertaken by devotees in Tiruchengode adhere, more or less, to systems and procedures indicative of the broader Hindu tradition.<sup>103</sup> In this connection, there is an inherent notion that these ritual efforts are transactional; the activities of the devotee prompt reciprocal benefit.<sup>104</sup> Bell suggests that rituals involve an internal component. However, as chapter one indicated, the realm of experience is elusive to the outsider; it is distinctly subjective.<sup>105</sup> Thus, the observations and impressions made in this coming section do not claim full comprehension of the experiences of devotees; these observations and impressions are simply inferences drawn from their expressions.

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<sup>99</sup> Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), vii-viii: J.Z. Smith presenting ritual as work, Durkhiem presents ritual as a formal object of theoretical and comparative analysis, Geertz presenting ritual as a text to be read (symbolic).

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.* 43-44. Of course actors often adopt internal changes in their acting. Moreover, actors are acting; there is one level in which it is make-believe, not real. Conversely, the ritual may be acted out in a very real sense.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.* 182

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.* 31

<sup>103</sup> This is to say that devotees are integrating their worldview.

<sup>104</sup> These themes will be explored in greater detail later in the thesis.

<sup>105</sup> Robert Sharf, "Experience," in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 94

### 3.6.2 Daily Pūjās

*Pūjā* refers to the worship of the deity and generally involves the use of offerings, known as *upacāras*.<sup>106</sup> The Ardhanārīśvara temple provides three *pūjā* times daily.<sup>107</sup> Each of these *pūjās* involves the worship of the Ardhanārīśvara icon in the temple *garbhagrha* and are conducted by *pūjāris*, the temple priests responsible for worship of the deity.<sup>108</sup> The morning and evening *pūjās* make use of *ārtī*. *Ārtī* is a rite during which the *pūjāri* circularly waves a burning lamp before the *mūrti* as an *upacāra*.<sup>109</sup> The flame is understood to acquire the power of the deity and is brought around to the devotees who place their hands over the fire and then motion their hands over their own heads to receive the blessing.

During the daily noon *pūjā*, *abhiṣekam* is performed. *Abhiṣekam* is a ritual in which the temple priests remove the clothing of the Ardhanārīśvara icon and pour libations over it.<sup>110</sup> *Abhiṣekam* is an act of veneration that confirms the divine status of the object involved.<sup>111</sup> It is also understood to mobilize the powers of the object or figure.<sup>112</sup> My attendance of these *pūjās*, alongside various conversations with devotees, led to the impression that people

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<sup>106</sup> Eck, *Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*, 106

<sup>107</sup> Although there is also an early morning and night-time *pūjā* done by the priests. I believe they are bidding and dismissal rites. The three times mentioned above are listed on the temple website and available to the public.

<sup>108</sup> Eck, *Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*, 106

<sup>109</sup> Ibid. 48

<sup>110</sup> I was told that the temple priests are comprised of the men of five families. *Abhiṣekam* is common to Buddhism and Jainism as well. See Sushil Jain, "On the Indian Ritual of Abhiṣeka and Mahāmastakābhiṣeka of Bāhubali," in *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute*, Vol.78, No.1/4 (1997): 62 <http://www.jstor.org/> (accessed Feb. 16, 2015). Page 70 states the libation is usually composed of *pañcāmṛta*, the five nectars: honey, sugar, milk, yogurt, ghee. This is a variation of the *pañcagavaya*, which used 5 products of cow, including urine and dung. These ingredients are often now replaced in the temple setting. There are variations to the *pañcāmṛta* recipe. Various *abhiṣekam* ingredients were listed to me as being used at the Ardhanārīśvara temple. These were: rose water, curd, sugar cane water, coconut water, and honey. I was also told that *vibhūti*, sandal powder, and mixed fruits were offered during the ritual. It was unclear if they were being offered to be blessed, as a gift, or if these were also a part of the libation recipe.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid. 68

<sup>112</sup> Ibid. 69. The article references an example wherein it's understood that the ongoing consecration of the image is related to land fertility.

participate in them both out of an attitude of reverent affection and for the acquisition of some manner of benefit.<sup>113</sup>

The *abhiṣekam* of Ardhanārīśvara draws attention to the uniqueness of its form. This particular *mūlamūrti* is anthropomorphic. Thus, the androgyny of the Ardhanārīśvara figure is exposed when the *mūlamūrti* is undressed. When the icon is again clothed its hermaphroditic nature is again emphasized. The wardrobe is split into traditional male and female garments, reaffirming its distinctive androgyny. Evidently, a significant amount of emphasis is paid to the composite form of Ardhanārīśvara throughout the whole *abhiṣekam* ceremony.

### 3.6.3 Darśan

Perhaps the most prominent activity I witnessed at the temple was ritual *darśan*. *Darśan* refers to the visual perception of the sacred, in this case the Ardhanārīśvara *mūrti*.<sup>114</sup> Throughout the day devotees continuously jostled with each other in order to have a glimpse of the *mūlamūrti* icon of the *garbhagrha*. However, it was explained to me that the importance of *darśan* also lies in the deity seeing you; this is how it confers blessings.<sup>115</sup> *Darśan* is sometimes described as provided by the deity; people go to take or receive their *darśan*.<sup>116</sup> Diana Eck describes two primary attitudes motivating devotees to undertake *darśan*. In one perspective the icon is utilized as a devotional tool; it is thought of as symbolically representative of an abstract divine.<sup>117</sup> In the second perspective the icon is considered the actual embodiment of

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid. 68. This article references the history of anointing kings so to declare them sacred. As far as benefits go, the article mentions the relationship between consecration and land fertility. It also mentions that it has been done to ensure continuity of life to the extent of immortality.

<sup>114</sup> Diana Eck, *Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*, 3

<sup>115</sup> Ibid. 7. The notion of the deity seeing the worshipper is supported by Eck as well. As an aside, Eck argues that the Hindu traditions place an emphasis on eyes, particularly the importance of the gods keeping their eyes open. An example of this motif can be found in the series of myth where Pārvatī playfully closes the eyes of Śiva and the Universe plummets into darkness.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid. 6 People will also go to receive *darśan* from *sadhus* and other holy people

<sup>117</sup> Ibid. 45

the deity; it is charged with the presence of the divine.<sup>118</sup> As such, the icon is understood to confer blessings, boons, grant miracles, etc.<sup>119</sup>

There are also instances where an Ardhanārīśvara icon is taken around the temple grounds on a palanquin.<sup>120</sup> People gather around the procession and use this as an additional opportunity for *darśan*. For a pre-determined ritual fee one may also rent out the temple grounds and take part in the procession of an Ardhanārīśvara icon in a golden chariot. My impression is that this is considered especially auspicious and/or effective in procuring benefits. As Reader and Tanabe suggest, without some expectation that their wishes may be fulfilled it is unlikely that people would spend time and money on such activities.<sup>121</sup>

There is an annual festival, known as the “car festival,” lasting fifteen days in the Tamil month of Vaikasi where the *utsavar* icons of the principle temple deities are paraded around the streets.<sup>122</sup> Each icon has its own chariot, with the most elaborate belonging to Ardhanārīśvara. The idea behind this, as explained by a resident of Tiruchengode, is that once per year god comes down to the city and provides *darśan* without the devotee needing to make the trek up to the hilltop temple.

One could argue that in the context of Tiruchengode the practice of *darśan* is particularly magnified.<sup>123</sup> After all, it is at the tips of many local tongues that Tiruchengode contains the rarely enshrined, anthropomorphic Ardhanārīśvara *mūrti*. It seems as though many residents feel that this puts Tiruchengode on the map. Accordingly, outsiders visiting Tiruchengode, such as myself, are advised that going to the Ardhanārīśvara temple and receiving *darśan* from its icon is a must. Furthermore, people journey from far and wide with the specific purpose of

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<sup>118</sup> Eck argues that this stance towards images emerged with the devotional, *bhakti*, movement which cherishes the personal lord “with qualities,” *saguṇa*. See *Ibid*.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid*. 7. What Eck actually says is that the gaze of the god is in some way profitable.

<sup>120</sup> I am uncertain if this is the *utsavar* of the *ardha-maṇḍapa*.

<sup>121</sup> Ian Reader and George Tanabe Jr., *Practically Religious: Worldly Benefits and the Common Religion of Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1998), 180. It should be noted that gestures such as these may be undertaken in thanks for the fulfillment of previous desires. In this connection, Eck lists answered prayers as one of the reasons that pilgrims undertake pilgrimage. See Eck, *India: A Sacred Geography*, 9

<sup>122</sup> These are: Murugan, Gaṇeśa, Viṣṇu, and Ardhanārīśvara

<sup>123</sup> I say this given that *darśan* is practiced widely across the Indian subcontinent.

witnessing this distinct form of god. This also relates to reputations associated with Ardhanārīśvara, and with ritual pilgrimage, both discussed below.

### 3.6.4 Pilgrimage

India is covered with sites considered sacred to the Hindu traditions and there is a long history of ritual pilgrimage, *tīrtha-yātrā*, to them.<sup>124</sup> Mythological narratives are often linked with the land. Thus, many pilgrimage destinations have their basis within Hindu mythology. For example, in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, the Govardhana hill near Vrindavana was lifted up by Kṛṣṇa in his defeat of the Vedic god, Indra, and is now popular among pilgrims as a result.<sup>125</sup> Other sites are famous for containing items associated with sacred people or deities. For example, many people travel to Puri to view a small square cloth believed to be from the robe of the Vaishnavite saint, Caitanya.<sup>126</sup> Natural features are also venerated. The Ganges River is frequented by millions every year and is personified as the goddess, Gangā.<sup>127</sup> As Eck writes, the entire land of India is sacred geography.<sup>128</sup> This perspective is shared by those in Tiruchengode with regards to their city. Earlier in the chapter a mythological narrative describing the sacred origins of the Ardhanārīśvara temple site was presented. This certainly contributes to the sense of sacredness associated with the location. However, the people of Tiruchengode usually cited the Ardhanārīśvara temple as its distinguishing feature, and one gets the impression that the sacredness of the area is most often felt due to association with the Ardhanārīśvara icon.

According to *Tamil Temple Myths*, the Tamil region is full of sacred sites to which devotees make *tīrtha-yātrā*. Given the density of sacred sites in the region, each site tries to justify pilgrimage to its shrine.<sup>129</sup> Pilgrimage is considered an act of devotion, *bhakti*, and is generally undertaken with the idea that it will benefit the devotee in some way.<sup>130</sup> Often the

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<sup>124</sup> Eck, *Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*, 64

<sup>125</sup> For the story see Benjamin Precadio-Solis, *The Kṛṣṇa Cycle in the Purāṇas : Themes and Motifs in a Heroic Saga* (Delhi: Shri Jainendra Press, 1984)

<sup>126</sup> Allan Morinis, *Pilgrimage in the Hindu Tradition* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984), 280. There are some Vaishnavites who even consider him an avatar of Viṣṇu

<sup>127</sup> David Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 193-194

<sup>128</sup> Eck, *Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*, 65

<sup>129</sup> Shulman, *Tamil Temple Myths: Sacrifice and Divine Marriage in the South Indian Śaiva Tradition*, 17

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.* 20

pilgrim is concerned with the specific powers and individual features that have given the site its sacred status.<sup>131</sup> The benefits offered at the site are usually inscribed somewhere on the temple and the boons listed are similar from temple to temple.<sup>132</sup> Temples generally offer *mukti*, referring to liberation from *saṃsāra* (the cycle of death and rebirth). However, Shulman stresses the pragmatic aspects of ritual pilgrimage; *tīrtha-yātrā* is most often concerned with benefiting life in this world.<sup>133</sup> Interestingly, each site boasts itself at the expense of the others. This is even the case within the Ardhanārīśvara temple complex. In fact, both the Murugan shrine and the Ardhanārīśvara shrine have inscriptions claiming that their sole worship will bring about all manners of benefit. Although this may seem conflicting, it is not at variance with perspectives akin to pantheistic monism.<sup>134</sup>

Some temples have a reputation for being especially efficacious in some regard. I met several devotees who felt Ardhanārīśvara specialized in assisting family matters, from marital strife to childlessness. On one occasion a large group of single women from neighboring villages came to the temple in the hope that doing so may secure marriage in their future. While in Tiruchengode I learned of another Ardhanārīśvara temple in Rishivandiyam, Tamil Nadu. One day I went there and met a devotee visiting from Pondicherry. He told me that he travelled to this temple because he was about to get married and that visiting Ardhanārīśvara helps marriages unfold without problem. This encounter reaffirmed the reputation of Ardhanārīśvara for being tied to familial activities.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid. 18. There appears to be almost a standardized list of rewards: freedom from ignorance, cures for diseases, and *bhukti* (enjoyment). However, the boons offered are not always present at the site. The boons may also have their basis in scripture, local legends, word of mouth, etc.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid. 17

<sup>134</sup> Pantheistic monism is a worldview often associated with Hinduism and discussed in terms of henotheism. This will be analyzed further in the following chapter, yet it is worth noting that henotheism refers to the worship of a particular god without discounting others, while considering the god being presently addressed as supreme. See Eck, *Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*, 26

<sup>135</sup> However, Shulman describes the androgyne in Tamil lore as a symbol of tension, even inherent violence in the divine marriage. See Shulman, *Tamil Temple Myths: Sacrifice and Divine Marriage in the South Indian Śaiva Tradition*, 351

There are pilgrimage sites that are associated more with the particular image of a deity than with the geographical location or affiliated mythological narratives.<sup>136</sup> This is certainly the case regarding the Tiruchengode Ardhanārīśvara temple. As noted earlier, I met many people, both locals and outsiders, who claimed that the Tiruchengode temple was the only Ardhanārīśvara temple in India.<sup>137</sup> For residents of Tiruchengode this appeared to be a point of local pride and for the outsiders this apparent uniqueness seemed, in part, to be what drew them to the site.

### 3.6.5 Circumambulation

Circumambulation is a prevalent expression of devotion within Hindu traditional belief and practice. It is known as *parikrama* (the path surrounding something) or *pradakṣiṇā* (to the right), in reference to the clockwise direction one takes around the focal point of devotion.<sup>138</sup> Circumambulation may be done around sacred cities, sites, presiding temple deities, ancillary deities, and even sacred plants like the *pipal* tree or *tulsi*. Where there is a hilltop temple, such as the Ardhanārīśvara temple of Tiruchengode, pilgrims will circumambulate the entire hill.<sup>139</sup> Circumambulation of the Nāgagiri hill in Tiruchengode is known as *girivalam*. Local lore claims that circling the hill just once will destroy the *karma* of ten million births and form a path to the divine.<sup>140</sup> This practice is especially popular on full-moon nights, during which thousands upon thousands of people take part.

On non-full moon days, the number of devotees circumambulating the hill is markedly less. However, daily inside the temple complex people circumambulate the various ancillary deities of the site. Circumambulation was also done around the grounds, centering on the

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<sup>136</sup> Eck, *Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*, 69

<sup>137</sup> The others are in Mandi, Himachal Pradesh and Rishivandiyam, Tamil Nadu.

<sup>138</sup> Shulman, *Tamil Temple Myths: Sacrifice and Divine Marriage in the South Indian Śaiva Tradition*, 19.

When circumambulating the perimeter of many Śiva temples, devotees go clockwise until reaching the *gomukhi*, the outlet for the *abhiṣekam* water. At this point the devotee goes counter-clockwise until reaching the other side of the *gomukhi* in order to complete the circumambulation.

<sup>139</sup> Eck, *Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*, 63

<sup>140</sup> Murugesan, "Arulmegu Arthanareeswarar Temple," [www.arthanareeswarar.com/English.asp](http://www.arthanareeswarar.com/English.asp) (accessed June 2, 2015) The site says that by the first step the devotee will get equal benefit of Yagam, for the second foot they will achieve benefit of Raja suya Yagam, and third foot he will receive Aswamedha Yagam, and those who continue will receive benefits of all Yagam. Yagam is an alternative of *yajna*, sacrifice.

*garbhagr̥ha* chamber of the Ardhanārīśvara icon. I was provided a myriad of reasons why this is done, such as paying respect to the deity by recognizing its centrality, attaining beneficial energy from the iconic object, the absolution of sins, and, in the case of *girivalam*, simply for exercise.

It should be noted that there is an instance where circumambulation adopts a unique feature in the context of Tiruchengode. During a full-moon *girivalam*, I was informed that from one perspective the Nāgagiri hill is male, and from another it is female. By completing full circumambulation of the hill one experiences both its male and female viewpoints. The androgynous motif present here is understood in clear association with the Ardhanārīśvara icon.

### 3.6.6 *Prasād*

Eck describes *pūjā* as rites of worship and honour.<sup>141</sup> As such, the Hindu worshipper will offer an attitude of adoration and affection in their *pūjā*. It has been described that devotees treat the main deity of the temple as a guest; devotees, provide clothing for the deity, offerings are made to delight its senses, etc.<sup>142</sup> Afterwards, some of these offerings are distributed to devotees for consumption and are known as *prasād*.<sup>143</sup> Usually *prasād* comes in the form of edible foodstuffs that were first offered to, and blessed by, the deity.<sup>144</sup> During the offering the edibles are considered *bhogya*, which refers to enjoyment or delight. After being blessed by the deity the sanctified food becomes *prasād* and is presented to devotees.<sup>145</sup> However, *prasād* may come in alternative forms.<sup>146</sup> Such is the case at the Ardhanārīśvara temple in Tiruchengode. At the feet of the *garbhagr̥ha mūlamūrti* there is a natural spring. The water from this spring is distributed to devotees as *prasād*.<sup>147</sup> Reception of the *prasād* is said to do many things, such as destroy all pain, cure diseases, erase wrongdoings, instil peace of mind,

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<sup>141</sup> Eck, *Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*, 47.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid. 106

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> For example, at the end of the Ambubachi Mela at the Kamakhya temple in Guwahati, Assam devotees flock for the unique *prasād*: a piece of cloth believed to have been soaked in the menses of the Goddess. See Nihar Manjan Mishra, *Kamakhya: A Socio-Cultural Study* (Delhi: D.K. Printworld Ltd., 2004), 54

<sup>147</sup> Murugesan, "Arulmegu Arthanareeswarar Temple," [www.arthanareeswarar.com/English.asp](http://www.arthanareeswarar.com/English.asp) (accessed June 2, 2015)



etc. It is evident in the sections above that each ritual practice is undertaken with the belief that doing so may procure some manner of benefit. This notion will be explored further when delineating expressed understandings of Ardhanārīśvara.

### 3.7 Related Temple and Town Activity and Information

#### 3.7.1 Miscellaneous Observations Regarding the Ardhanārīśvara Temple

I was told that the *Tēvāram* and the *Tiruvācakam* are important to the temple.<sup>148</sup> Both of these texts are voluminous collections of Tamil hymns by poet-saints. They are characterized by emotionality and devotion, *bhakti*. The presence of *bhakti* is extremely prevalent at the temple, as evidenced by the interactions between devotees and the temple deities. This is typical of Śaiva Siddhānta at large, to which the temple adheres, known for its emphasis on *bhakti*.<sup>149</sup>

In addition to the explicit ritual activity discussed above there are other happenings at the site worth noting. For instance, the temple also provides free lunches daily. The lunches take place in a hall just outside of the temple complex walls and are open to anyone. The hall was packed with people when I ate there. The majority of these people did not enter the temple grounds afterwards. Similarly, there are people who visit the temple for no religious purpose, per se. I met people who said they climbed the steps of the Nāgagiri hill to the Ardhanārīśvara temple every day simply for exercise. I also met groups of friends, couples, and families who visited the temple as a nice way to spend the day, in much the same way as one may take a stroll by the river. In fact, this often seemed to be the case. Although ritual activities, such as *darśan*, and *parikrama*, were certainly apparent there were also lots of people who seemed to walk around, or sit and visit with their company, in a much more leisurely manner. In part, one may attribute this to the lack of green space within Tiruchengode. The Nāgagiri hill fulfills an inclination towards natural beauty; it is a welcomed respite from the concrete and air pollution

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<sup>148</sup> This was told to me by professors of a college near Tiruchengode. The *Tēvāram* is attributed to the three most prominent Nyānmārs. The *Tiruvācakam* is attributed to Māṅkkavācakar, a Tamil poet-saint who is not listed as a Nyānmār. These two texts are well known among Tamil Śaivas. See Indira Viswanathan Peterson, *Poems to Śiva: The Hymns of the Tamil Saints* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989), 18

<sup>149</sup> According to the temple priests, the Ardhanārīśvara temple adheres to Śaiva Siddhānta. Śaiva Siddhānta is considered a dualistic or pluralistic Śaivite tradition and is popular in South India. Śaiva Siddhānta will be analyzed in greater detail in the following chapter.

of the city below. However, it may also be recognized that Hinduism is often noted to not strictly demarcate between religious life and day to day activities.<sup>150</sup> To reiterate a point made by Frazier, there is no Hindu culture with any remainder.<sup>151</sup>

Near this lunch hall are vending stalls selling various items, ranging from bottled drinks, to toys, to framed pictures of various Hindu deities. Pictures of Ardhanārīśvara easily outnumber those of any other figure. It is typical for temple markets to reinforce the prominence of its presiding deity through sales of their image.<sup>152</sup> There are similar markets near the base of the Nāgagiri hill. As one moves towards the hill images of Ardhanārīśvara grow in concentration. In turn, sales of these images disseminate throughout the town and pepper the city with reaffirmations of the salient Ardhanārīśvara icon.

Special calendar dates are also celebrated at the Ardhanārīśvara temple. For example, while I was in Tiruchengode an important festival centering on Śiva, Śivarātri, occurred and was celebrated elaborately at the temple.<sup>153</sup> Throughout the day, and overnight, hymns were sung continuously. The celebrations were led by a priest brought in from Chennai and were conducted before a densely populated temple complex. On another occasion, the temple was once again fully occupied. This time everyone gathered for a special *pūjā* focusing on Gaṇeśa. In part, the *pūjā* consisted of each person forming a Gaṇeśa out of turmeric, red *kumkuma* powder, and grass on a banana leaf.<sup>154</sup> These events demonstrate that this Ardhanārīśvara temple connects to practices and figures associated with broader Hindu traditions.<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> See Vasudha Narayanan, "Diglossic Hinduism: Liberation and Lentils," in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 68 no.4 (2000) <http://jstor.org/> (accessed Sept. 11, 2013), 764. Here Narayanan describes Hinduism as wildly inclusive. As the title insinuates, the author describes how, in their experience, household meals were perhaps of greater emphasis than loftier, philosophical concepts.

<sup>151</sup> Jessica Frazier, "Research Methods: From Manuscripts to Fieldwork," in *The Bloomsbury Companion to Hindu Studies*, ed. Jessica Frazier (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, Plc, 2011), 252

<sup>152</sup> For example, the markets outside of the famous Kālīghāt temple in Kolkata sell pictures of the unique form of Kālī in the adjacent temple.

<sup>153</sup> Śivarātri is the "night of Śiva." Śivarātri commemorates the marriage of Śiva and Pārvatī. As such, it relates to the familial emphasis so present in Tiruchengode. Moreover, it is believed that those who perform their observances well on this day will receive a good husband or wife. Śivarātri is characterized by all day fasting, followed by all night festivities. It is celebrated widely throughout India and is considered the most important day of worship by many devotees of Śiva.

<sup>154</sup> *Kumkuma* may also have turmeric as its base and be mixed with other substances to make a variety of colours. There are various colours and various contexts in which *kumkuma* are used in Hinduism. I was told that this

Although these events do not focus on Ardhanārīśvara specifically, I must remind the reader that Ardhanārīśvara is clearly emphasized, as evidenced by the presence of its image in the site decor and its prominence in the market. Furthermore, there is general fervor regarding the figure within the complex walls. During one visit, a patron approached me whose forehead was adorned with red and white powder.<sup>156</sup> He described this red and white powder as representing Śakti and Śiva respectively, while pointing to a picture of Ardhanārīśvara for reference.<sup>157</sup>

### 3.7.2 Store Shrines for Ardhanārīśvara in Tiruchengode, Tamil Nadu

While in Tiruchengode I entered many restaurants and stores of various kinds that had shrines within them. In many of these shrines Ardhanārīśvara appeared preeminent. In several modest countertop shrines, a small Ardhanārīśvara picture was the sole image displayed. In other larger shrines, often mounted on a wall in a cabinet fixture, Ardhanārīśvara was placed centrally and the image was notably larger than the others included.<sup>158</sup> Sweets, flowers, and/or burning incense often accompanied the images. These shrines were tended to, at the very least, at the start and end of each work day. Observances of these shrines by the storeowners and

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Gaṇeśa *pūjā* is called Ragu Kala *pūjā*. However, when searching for more information about Ragu Kala *pūjā*, I generally find information regarding the goddess Durgā.

<sup>155</sup> However, it should be noted that these were the only such events I attended at this temple and that Śiva and Gaṇeśa are of familial relation, father and son respectively. Moreover, it is a Śiva temple first and foremost. Thus, it is unclear to what extent, for example, Vaishnava dates are celebrated; with Vaishnava denoting a focus on Viṣṇu.

<sup>156</sup> Likely this white powder was *vibhūti* (sacred ash) with the red likely being dyed *kumkuma*. Devotees of Śiva generally place three horizontal lines of *vibhūti* as their *tilak* (forehead marking) as a mark of allegiance. Sometimes a central red *bindhu* (dot) is also included. However, in this case the red and white powders were applied in simple dashes.

<sup>157</sup> In his work on Tamil culture Dennis McGilvray notes this association of red and white with females and males. See Dennis McGilvray, *Symbolic Heat: Gender, Health & Worship among the Tamils of South India and Sri Lanka* (Ahmedabad: Mapin Publishing Pvt. Ltd., 1998), 23. Furthermore, he presents red as associated with heat and white with cooling. He goes on to say that these female/hot and male/cool motifs permeate much of the Tamil worldview. For example, foods are understood as heating or cooling (see page 25), as are notions surrounding health. For example, phlegm is considered cool and bile is considered hot (see page 33). The white and red stripes on temple walls symbolise a balance of these forces (see page 55). It is my impression that a balance of these forces is generally taken to be ideal, and that this balance is pursued in several avenues, including emotionality, diet, and devotional practices. Although not expressed to me in Tiruchengode, one may reasonably infer that Ardhanārīśvara serves as a symbolic of this far-reaching equilibrium ideal.

<sup>158</sup> There were, of course, many other store-shrines that did not grant primacy to Ardhanārīśvara. However, given the many places I have travelled in India, those granting primacy to Ardhanārīśvara were certainly present in Tiruchengode in a meaningfully high volume.

staff were reminiscent of the veneration noted at the Ardhanārīśvara temple. Accordingly, and in line with the earlier discussion on *pūjā*, the shrines have been constructed and are honoured out of both an attitude of reverence and for the acquisition of benefit.

### 3.8 A Note on Hegemony

Personal observations, alongside perspectives shared with me, led to the conclusion that there are some unique hegemonic relationships involving Ardhanārīśvara present at the Tiruchengode temple. Hegemony here refers to influence or power held over others, yielding hierarchical relations. Inherent within the ritual activity of the temple is a hegemonic system. One such relationship is found between the temple priests and the laypeople; there is a visibly different relationship that the temple priests have with the icon. For example, only temple priests may enter the *garbhagrha* and interact with the *mūlamūrti* icon, performing ritual acts such as *abhiṣekam* and providing the opportunity for the public to engage in *ārti* and *darśan*.<sup>159</sup> Conversely, the lay devotees are dependent on the temple priests to facilitate such acts and the blessings that ensue as a result.

It was described earlier that, for a cost, one may participate in a private procession around the temple grounds with Ardhanārīśvara in a golden chariot. Given that there is a required fee involved, it may be inferred that this ritual act, considered very efficacious, is more easily accessed by those with disposable income. Thus, disparity in finances may also create hierarchical dissonance regarding the ability to engage in certain ritual activities at the temple.<sup>160</sup>

In an earlier section of this chapter I relayed the ways that a temple icon may be understood, as described by people in Tiruchengode: that god is in the statue, that god is somewhere else altogether, and that god is everywhere while present in the statue in a unique

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<sup>159</sup> I was told that the priests abide by the *Kāmikā Āgama* and the *Kāraṇa Āgama* for ritual activity. I discuss them more in the following chapter.

<sup>160</sup> This is indicative of class structure in broader Indian society and reinforced by temple management and ritual specialists. Interestingly, I met some locals who not only did not feel disadvantaged by their inability to pay the required amount, but who actually scoffed at the thought of monetary expenditure being tied to ritual.

way.<sup>161</sup> Interestingly, these various understandings were presented to me in a hierarchical manner. The locals who presented me the above interpretations seemed to belittle those who believe the icon is special in any way and demonstrated favouritism towards those who believe god is somewhere else entirely.

It is worth noting that Gilles Tarabout, in *Images in Asian Religions: Texts and Contexts*, describes condescension towards perceived image worshippers as being quite prevalent; this view holds that the poor, uneducated, and/or inferior are easily convinced by anthropomorphic images while the wise and educated elite are not.<sup>162</sup> However, he argues this perspective is largely based on misconceptions that he goes on to debunk. He provides an example wherein poor and “uneducated” people from Kerala bring together sticks and coconuts to serve as deity in the absence of an anthropomorphic form.<sup>163</sup> According to Tarabout, this demonstrates their lack of attachment to a particular form and displays inventiveness when it comes to creating a focal point for devotion to an otherwise invisible god.<sup>164</sup> He also provides examples wherein renowned thinkers, such as Abhinavagupta, extol the use of iconographic imagery, demonstrating that images are not used solely by the “weak-minded.”<sup>165</sup> Furthermore, he argues that the rich, educated, and high caste appear more involved in the utilization of images, often elaborate, because they do not as often find themselves in a position where they must use a painted pebble instead.<sup>166</sup> However, my intention is to not argue for or against the use of images in worship. My point, to echo Eck, is that nobody thinks of themselves as a dismissive idolater.<sup>167</sup>

However, although there are certainly diverse forms of practice and beliefs at play, a diversity embraced by many, there are those in Tiruchengode who view these variations in a stratified manner; they demonstrate clear preference for certain interpretations of the

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<sup>161</sup> As that section went on to say, there are certainly other ways of understanding an icon, and overlap that may take place, and different understandings that may occur at different times.

<sup>162</sup> Gilles Tarabout, “Theology as History: Divine Images, Imagination, and Rituals in India,” in *Images in Asian Religions: Texts and Contexts*, ed. Phyllis Granoff and Koichi Shinohara (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2004), 56-60

<sup>163</sup> Ibid. 62

<sup>164</sup> Ibid. 66

<sup>165</sup> Ibid. 71

<sup>166</sup> Ibid. 66

<sup>167</sup> Eck, *Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*, 17

Ardhanārīśvara icon at the expense of others. I am uncertain in what measure these sorts of attitudes exist, but there is a presence.

### **3.9 Concluding Remarks**

This chapter began by pointing out that scholarship has largely omitted information regarding Ardhanārīśvara in living context. To address these gaps this chapter focused on Ardhanārīśvara in Tiruchengode, Tamil Nadu and included observations, impressions, and insights from my time there.

The reader was familiarized with the city of Tiruchengode and was given descriptions of the Ardhanārīśvara temple and surrounding site. Local mythological narratives were presented regarding site origins and the primary temple deities. The various iconographic depictions of Ardhanārīśvara present in Tiruchengode were also discussed. Conceptualizations of the Ardhanārīśvara icons and of Ardhanārīśvara in general, as expressed to me by devotees in Tiruchengode, were relayed. Additionally, information about related temple and town activity, including ritual acts present at the temple, was provided.

Much of the fieldwork information provided in this chapter adds to the body of scholarly work on Ardhanārīśvara, contributing to a more robust treatment of the figure. This will be made evident in the following chapter which will analyze and evaluate these observations, impressions, and insights in relation to the thesis as a whole.

## Chapter Four

### Deity, Devotees, and Religious Topography

#### 4.1 Introduction

The first chapter offered a discussion of theoretical and methodological issues relevant to the current project. It included an overview of critiques highlighting the biases, misconceptions, and gaps in content relating to the academic study of Hinduism. Scholars have argued there is a tendency in the study of religion towards identifying creed, text, and doctrine as *true* religiosity while ritual, custom, and practice are contentiously downplayed.<sup>1</sup> The available academic works on Ardhanārīśvara appear to reflect this tendency. Content about Ardhanārīśvara in living context is largely omitted, including information about sites of worship and related orthopraxy.<sup>2</sup> Subsequently, the role of Ardhanārīśvara in ritual, socio-cultural dynamics involving Ardhanārīśvara, and local conceptions of the figure have gone widely ignored.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, contemporary approaches in the study of Hinduism are now incorporating both theological and anthropological approaches, recognizing each stream as rich and relevant.<sup>4</sup> This suggests that the scholarship on Ardhanārīśvara could gain from a study about the figure in living context. Accordingly, I argued for the importance of fieldwork and suggested Tiruchengode, Tamil Nadu as a suitable location because of its elaborate Ardhanārīśvara temple

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<sup>1</sup> Ian Reader and George Tanabe Jr., *Practically Religious: Worldly Benefits and the Common Religion of Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1998), 6

<sup>2</sup> This is especially contentious regarding Hinduism as there are many who actually describe Hinduism in terms of orthopraxy versus orthodoxy. See Vasudha Narayanan, "Diglossic Hinduism: Liberation and Lentils," in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 68 no.4 (2000) <http://jstor.org/> (accessed Sept. 11, 2013)

<sup>3</sup> In the literature review I do note instances where actual people have either been spoken to or been referenced in relation to Ardhanārīśvara. However, Goldberg and Saran only spoke with developed practitioners of *haṭhayoga* and Tantric traditions, and with Saran's informants never explicitly mentioning Ardhanārīśvara. Pande infers a special resonance between Ardhanārīśvara and the *hijra* but does not actually speak with them about it.

<sup>4</sup> See Jessica Frazier, "Research Methods: From Manuscripts to Fieldwork," in *The Bloomsbury Companion to Hindu Studies*, ed. Jessica Frazier (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2011)

and connected cult. I concluded the first chapter by elucidating my understanding of the field and subsequently presenting my fieldwork approach.

To reiterate, the first chapter acknowledges arguments suggesting there are biases, misconceptions, and gaps in the academic study of Hinduism and I contend that some of these issues are pertinent to the work on Ardhanārīśvara. To substantiate this proposition the second chapter provides a comprehensive review of the figure in the available literature. The reader is introduced to Ardhanārīśvara as a composite form of Śiva and Śakti.<sup>5</sup> The chapter goes on to cover conceptual antecedents of the figure, the history of the image, various iconographic representations, its place in textual sources, related thought, and its place in religious practice. I note that information regarding Ardhanārīśvara in practice is lacking considerably. Data on customary, ritualistic, and on-the-ground understandings of Ardhanārīśvara are missing, as are works on dedicated sites.

The third chapter focuses on my fieldwork observations and impressions in Tiruchengode, Tamil Nadu. In this chapter the reader is provided with information about the city: its demographics, geography, and culture. The Ardhanārīśvara temple complex is emphasized and observations regarding its history, location, architecture, decorative features, and devotional activities are given. Alongside general descriptions of Tiruchengode there is an added focus on the role of Ardhanārīśvara in the happenings of the city. Various visual depictions of Ardhanārīśvara are examined in terms of their features, locations, and unique circumstances. Mythological narratives involving the city, temple site, and associated figures are also disclosed. Additionally, there is a section regarding thoughts relevant to the aims of this thesis, expressed to me by the public of Tiruchengode. Throughout the chapter I incorporate my own observations and impressions and acknowledge the influences that have shaped their formation.

This concluding chapter will analyze my fieldwork observations and impressions. Two types of contributions will be presented as a result of this analysis. The first relates to areas of

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<sup>5</sup> Śakti is most often represented as Pārvatī, especially in paintings and in mythological narratives. However, some sculptural works lack the iconographic features of Pārvatī. In these cases the female half may be read as a more ambiguous Devī or Śakti, the divine feminine principal.



previous scholastic focus regarding Ardhanārīśvara. The content of this section is organized thematically, in line with the categories used in the existing scholarship on Ardhanārīśvara. By doing so I demonstrate that those areas of previous scholarly focus concerning Ardhanārīśvara are incomplete; new information is provided on Ardhanārīśvara iconography, narratives, and regarding interpretations of the figure. The second type of contribution involves unexplored content, including information on this particular site of worship and related ritualistic and customary elements. Such provisions reaffirm the significance of these overlooked areas and create a more robust treatment of the figure.

An examination of the above information yields a fundamentally different conceptualization of Ardhanārīśvara than its presentation in current scholarship. I discuss the actual fluidity of the categories often used to describe Ardhanārīśvara in closed, definite parameters. Ardhanārīśvara is described as a concept formed in the experiences of people, each idiosyncratic and relative. I also elucidate the ways people engage with Ardhanārīśvara in a transactional manner. Accordingly, I argue that to situate Ardhanārīśvara in living context is to situate Ardhanārīśvara in a field of dynamism. This perspective also renders Ardhanārīśvara part and parcel of the city dynamics. Subsequently it is argued that the figure be understood in terms of activity. In this connection, it is argued that the city of Tiruchengode may be considered an Ardhanārīśvara temple in itself; the perimeter of the city demarcates sacred space relating to the *mūlamūrti* Ardhanārīśvara icon, albeit of a different style and scope than the temple complex or *garbhagrha*.<sup>6</sup> Using the example of Ardhanārīśvara I provide a reframed approach to subject matter in general. I argue that this approach is applicable elsewhere and that contributions similar to those made by this thesis may occur in other studies. Moreover, I identify directions that future projects may take considering the insights yielded by the above discussions. I conclude this thesis with a summary of my findings and an analysis of the implications as they relate to the thesis as a whole.

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<sup>6</sup> To reiterate, the *mūlamūrti* icon refers to the fixed icon within the *garbhagrha*, or *sanctum sanctorum* of the temple.

## 4.2 Analysis of Observations Relating to Prior Scholarly Focus

### 4.2.1 Iconography

Within academia Ardhanārīśvara has primarily been studied in terms of its iconography. As a result there is extensive documentation, from the presence of conceptual antecedents, such as *yoni-liṅgam* images, to the first Ardhanārīśvara images dating to the Kuṣāṇ period.<sup>7</sup> Many volumes on general Śiva iconography highlight the Ardhanārīśvara form and there have also been works focused solely on Ardhanārīśvara iconography.<sup>8</sup> These works have documented a wide variety of both two-dimensional and three-dimensional forms.<sup>9</sup> Two images included in these texts are notably present in Tiruchengode.

First, there are non-figurative *yoni-liṅgam* images present on archways stretching over the hillside staircase to the Ardhanārīśvara temple, as well as at the main site.<sup>10</sup> It should be noted that although the *yoni-liṅgam* has been identified as a conceptual antecedent to Ardhanārīśvara it is also a symbol widely connected with Ardhanārīśvara at present.<sup>11</sup> At this site the *yoni-liṅgam* images are used in explicit association with Ardhanārīśvara. For example, inside the temple complex there is a map depicting the route to the *garbhagrha*. Although the *garbhagrha* contains an anthropomorphized Ardhanārīśvara icon, the map instead shows a *yoni-liṅgam* image in its place.

The other image notably present from catalogues on Ardhanārīśvara iconography is a popular “contemporary poster-art” depiction.<sup>12</sup> The image shows Ardhanārīśvara squarely facing forward, with weight distributed equally between male and female halves, and is painted in vivid colour. Although this image is commonly found throughout India, Tiruchengode has a potent concentration, especially in its temple markets. Although primacy is granted to Śiva at

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<sup>7</sup> Ellen Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman: Ardhanārīśvara in Indian and Feminist Perspective* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2002), 26-27

<sup>8</sup> See Yadav, *Ardhanārīśvara in Art and Literature* (New Delhi: D.K. Printworld, 2001)

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. For example, Yadav offers 18 coloured images and 70 plates

<sup>10</sup> To reiterate information contained in chapter two, the *liṅgam* and *yoni* represent the male and female sexual organs quite literally, and the masculine and feminine principles more abstractly.

<sup>11</sup> Ellen Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman: Ardhanārīśvara in Indian and Feminist Perspective*, 8

<sup>12</sup> An example may be found on Ibid. 50

the site, as evidenced by the name Śiva twice hung on the outer wall of the temple complex in giant Tamil script, it is clear that the Ardhanārīśvara form is of significant focus. The presence of both the *yoni-liṅgam* images and the contemporary poster-art depiction serve to emphasize this form of Śiva and bolster the reputation of the temple for containing this rarely enshrined form.

By far the most prominent depiction of Ardhanārīśvara in Tiruchengode is one that I have not encountered in any book on its iconography. As described in the third chapter, it is an illustrated rendition reminiscent of the icon found in the temple *garbhagrha*.<sup>13</sup> The image shows Ardhanārīśvara standing in *tribhaṅga* pose and wearing a golden headpiece, arm bangles, and necklaces.<sup>14</sup> The right, male half holds a sceptre while the left, female half has an exposed breast and rests its hand on a pronounced hip.<sup>15</sup> The figure is flesh coloured or uniformly white. The trousers are green on the left half and red on the right. This depiction of Ardhanārīśvara usually includes the sage Bhringi beside the Śiva half of Ardhanārīśvara.<sup>16</sup> The inclusion of Bhringi connects the image to a specific mythological narrative which will be addressed in the following section. Due to their similarity, this illustration of Ardhanārīśvara also draws attention to the *garbhagrha* icon, reaffirming this distinctive feature of Tiruchengode. As noted in chapter three, this image may be found in all areas of public life, from storefront windows, to the sides of buses, to reusable bags. Evidently, throughout Tiruchengode there is widespread identification with the salient Ardhanārīśvara temple; it is a fundamental constituent of local identity.

In addition to this widespread depiction, one encounters other versions of Ardhanārīśvara at the temple complex that I have not seen in any texts. The *gopuram*

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<sup>13</sup> The *garbhagrha* is the “womb chamber,” and the place within the temple where the *mūrti* resides. As mentioned in the third chapter, in most Śiva temples Śiva is represented by a *liṅgam* in the *garbhagrha*. In the case of the Tiruchengode temple, Ardhanārīśvara is depicted in anthropomorphic form.

<sup>14</sup> Again, *tribhaṅga* refers to a posture where the figure is bent in three places: head, waist, and knee

<sup>15</sup> This sceptre may very well be a *gadā* (mace), seen popularly in the iconography of Hanuman.

<sup>16</sup> The inclusion of Bhringi alone is not unique. Goldberg provides an example of a sandstone rock relief from the Badami Caves of Karnataka. See Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman: Ardhanārīśvara in Indian and Feminist Perspective*, 35

entranceways feature an ample amount of vibrant, sculpted Ardhanārīśvara figures.<sup>17</sup> Over a road to the temple there is an archway also adorned with sculpted Ardhanārīśvara figures. As with the depictions discussed above, these *gopuram* images serve to reinforce that Ardhanārīśvara is the presiding deity of this site.

The *mūlamūrti* icon, fixed in the *garbhagrha*, is a six foot tall Ardhanārīśvara made of stone.<sup>18</sup> Female garments drape the left half of the figure while the right side is adorned with male garments. Its posture and other features match the illustrated version of it described above. In most Śiva temples the *mūlamūrti* is in the form of a *liṅgaṃ*. The rarity of this unique, anthropomorphic Ardhanārīśvara *mūlamūrti* is central to the importance of the site and is a huge draw for locals and pilgrims alike. Moreover, it is considered by many to be *svayambhū*, which refers to its spontaneous and miraculous origin.<sup>19</sup>

Finally, there is the *utsavar* icon, which is the icon used for public processions.<sup>20</sup> The *utsavar* stands a few feet tall, is also demarcated by male and female clothing, and is composed of a five metal alloy.<sup>21</sup> As mentioned in the third chapter, it is carried on a palanquin when taken around the temple premises during certain *pūjā* times, and through the streets of the town during the annual “car-festival.”<sup>22</sup>

The above demonstrates that Tiruchengode and its Ardhanārīśvara temple contain compelling iconography that has not been featured in iconographic catalogues thus far; the *yoni-liṅgaṃ* and Ardhanārīśvara images decorating the site, the *gopuram* sculptures, the *utsavar* and *mūlamūrti* images, as well as the widespread illustrated version reminiscent of the latter, are not documented in such collections. Beyond contributing to iconographic

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<sup>17</sup> I should mention that there are Ardhanārīśvara sculptures on the *gopurams* of other temples which have also been overlooked, as far as I know. I have seen Ardhanārīśvara on *gopurams* of other Tiruchengode temples and other temples around Tamil Nadu.

<sup>18</sup> See Bunce, Fredrick, *A Dictionary of Buddhist and Hindu Iconography: Objects, Devices, Concepts, Rites and Related Terms* (New Delhi: D.K. Printworld, 1997), 192

<sup>19</sup> See Ibid. 294

<sup>20</sup> Definition provided under synonym *utsavamūrti*. See Ibid. 321

<sup>21</sup> As mentioned in the third chapter, this is often the case with *utsavar* compositions. Included are gold, silver, copper, iron and either zinc, lead or tin. It is a composition laid down by the *silpāśāstras*. See Ibid. 219

<sup>22</sup> See chapter three, specifically the section on the icon in worship.

compilations, the *mūlamūrti* and *utsavar* icons relate to unexplored ritual contexts regarding Ardhanārīśvara. These contexts will be analyzed in greater detail in an upcoming section.

#### 4.2.2 Mythological Narratives

The most prominent mythological narrative in Tiruchengode was also provided in the literature review: a variant of the Ardhanārīśvara myth involving the sage Bhringi. In the narrative, Bhringi is adamant that he only circumambulate Śiva, at the exclusion of Pārvatī. In order that Pārvatī may also be circumambulated, and to convey their ultimate oneness, Śiva and Pārvatī merged into the Ardhanārīśvara form. Although Bhringi maintains his insistence, he eventually comes around to understand the message of oneness implied by their Ardhanārīśvara form and in turn appreciates both Śiva and Pārvatī. Scenes from the narrative are painted within the *ardha-maṇḍapa* of the temple, connecting the site and this myth together.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, there is a Bhringi statue kept in the *garbhagrha*, albeit not fixed like the Ardhanārīśvara icon. In the previous section I describe an illustrated rendition of the Ardhanārīśvara icon found in the temple *garbhagrha* and that this illustration is found throughout Tiruchengode. This image generally includes a Bhringi figure, again reaffirming associations between Ardhanārīśvara and this narrative.

This particular myth was told to me by many locals and in turn my impression is that it is the most popular myth involving Ardhanārīśvara throughout Tiruchengode. When this narrative was presented to me with an explanation, Ardhanārīśvara was usually described as symbolic of the equality of men and women, or described in terms of husband and wife. I will expand upon these points when discussing conceptualizations of Ardhanārīśvara

To reiterate, there is a propensity in Tamil culture towards the localization of myths in order to establish the sacred origins of the site and to provide an example of a devotee benefited by worshipping there.<sup>24</sup> There are myths present in Tiruchengode that accomplish both of these things. Fuller narratives have been presented in chapter three and it will suffice to

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<sup>23</sup> Again, *ardha-maṇḍapa* refers to the chamber in front of the *garbhagrha*.

<sup>24</sup> David Shulman, *Tamil Temple Myths: Sacrifice and Divine Marriage in the South Indian Śaiva Tradition* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980), 17

present them here in brief. One myth relays the battle between Vāyu and Ādi Śeṣa that leads to the splintering of Mount Meru. The Nāgagiri hill overlooking Tiruchengode is considered one piece of the fragmented Meru. By connecting the Tiruchengode hill to Mount Meru, center of the Universe in Hindu cosmology, the myth affords Tiruchengode sacred status.<sup>25</sup> Another narrative recounts Viṣṇu appearing to a devotee in some *tulsi* on top of the Nāgagiri hill where he then promises to remain and offer salvation to all.<sup>26</sup>

One local myth, included in chapter three, recounts a story in which Murugan runs away from his parents, Śiva and Pārvatī, leaving Pārvatī particularly upset. To comfort Pārvatī, Śiva took her to a garden where her mood improved. However, she then playfully covered the eyes of Śiva which sent the Universe into darkness. As a result, Śiva banished Pārvatī which prompted her to undertake severe penances. Her austerities impressed Śiva and he appeared before her. Pārvatī requested Śiva to merge with her into a single body. Śiva instructed her to first find their son and then to go to the Nāgagiri hill in Tiruchengode. There they reunited as a family and Śiva and Pārvatī merged into the Ardhanārīśvara form.<sup>27</sup> As a result, Murugan, Ardhanārīśvara, and therefore Śiva and Pārvatī, become tied to the site. The familial theme apparent in this narrative is also significant as Ardhanārīśvara was consistently discussed in terms of family. This will be expanded upon in an upcoming section that deals with interpretations of the figure. However, it is worth noting that the connection between Ardhanārīśvara and family is present in this story.

If, as Shulman suggests, localized myths are meant to solidify the sacred status of the site then these local myths may be taken as exemplary. Accordingly, many locals relayed a sense that they live amidst a sacred geography. Furthermore, the above narratives are absent from

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<sup>25</sup> For description of Meru as center of Universe in Hindu cosmology see Storm, *Indian Mythology: Myths and Legends of India, Tibet, and Sri Lanka* (New Delhi: Anness Publishing, 2006), 21

<sup>26</sup> Again, the actual names used at this site for Viṣṇu are Venkatachalapathi and Adhikesava Perumal. For myth see Murugesan, "Arulmegu Arthanareswarar Temple," [www.arthanareswarar.com/English.asp](http://www.arthanareswarar.com/English.asp) (accessed June 2, 2015)

<sup>27</sup> In a brief and variant form one can find the narrative referenced on the temple website. Murugesan, "Arulmegu Arthanareswarar Temple," [www.arthanareswarar.com/English.asp](http://www.arthanareswarar.com/English.asp) (accessed June 2, 2015). The information I included above drew from the website information and people I spoke with in Tiruchengode.

works on Ardhanārīśvara but would be suitable additions for either including Ardhanārīśvara explicitly or relating to the site of the Ardhanārīśvara temple in Tiruchengode.<sup>28</sup>

### 4.2.3 Interpretations of Icon

People in Tiruchengode presented me with diverse views regarding their identification of deity with icon. Although specifically referencing the Ardhanārīśvara icon, they spoke as though their interpretations are applicable to icons in general. It was relayed that devotees may believe that god is in the icon; that god is not limited to the icon, yet is present there in a unique way; and that some reject the use of an icon, believing god is somewhere else entirely.

In addition, there are rites for inviting the deity into an image, *āvāhana*, and for its dismissal, *visarjana*.<sup>29</sup> This suggests that the icon may be occupied by the deity, but not always; the deity only occupies the icon under certain conditions. It is also likely that there are those in Tiruchengode uncertain of their stance on the icon, and those who may have different conceptualizations of the icon at different times.<sup>30</sup>

I suggest that the sacred status of an icon is directly related to what devotees believe interacting with the icon will yield; it is conceptualized in terms of potential action. It was communicated that devotees visit the Ardhanārīśvara temple and interact with the icon in hopes of improving their financial situation, overcoming illness, childlessness, for peace of mind, etc.<sup>31</sup> It appears that the sacred status of the icon is directly related to how one believes it may influence their lives, in terms of what it is able to *do*. This activity is also characterized by

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<sup>28</sup> I have encountered a similar Mount Meru myth involving Vāyu and Ādi Śeṣa elsewhere. The difference being that Tiruchengode is not mentioned as a piece of Meru. Storm, *Indian Mythology: Legends of India, Tibet, and Sri Lanka* (New Delhi: Anness Publishing, 2006), 84-85

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. 49-51

<sup>30</sup> McCallum did also recognize that conceptions may change from time to time. See Donald McCallum *Zenkōji and its Icon* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994), 182. There are also people of other faiths that may have interesting perspectives and relationships with the icon. For example, the *Bloomsbury Companion to Hindu Studies* mentions Muslim artisans commissioned to create Hindu images despite not affording these images sacred status. Kenneth Valpey, "Research Methods: From Manuscripts to Fieldwork," in *The Bloomsbury Companion to Hindu Studies*, ed. Jessica Frazier (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2011), 169

<sup>31</sup> This emphasis on pragmatism has been noted in scholarship. For example, Shulman stresses the pragmatic aspects of ritual pilgrimage; *tīrtha-yātrā* is most often concerned with benefiting life in this world. See Shulman, *Tamil Temple Myths: Sacrifice and Divine Marriage in the South Indian Śaiva Tradition*, 17

reciprocity; the devotee engages in devotional acts in order to incite the desired influence. This point will be expanded upon when analyzing Ardhanārīśvara in practice.

As noted in chapter three, there were a few locals who presented interpretations of icons in a hierarchical manner; they downgraded perspectives that contend the icon is special in any way and demonstrated favoritism towards those who do not involve icons in their conceptualization of god. Viewing the perspectives others have of icons in a stratified manner has social implications; it creates hegemonic dissonance. I am not speaking for the prevalence of such outlooks in Tiruchengode, simply the presence. In addition, I wish to emphasize the implication that the icon, individual perspectives, and social sphere are not divorced from each other; they are fluid. This notion of fluidity will be returned to and expanded upon in an upcoming section.

#### 4.2.4 Conceptualizations of Ardhanārīśvara

The literature review of chapter two provided the reader with various interpretations concerning Ardhanārīśvara. Of the several conceptualizations offered only one was explicitly disclosed to me in Tiruchengode. The literature review acknowledges Ardhanārīśvara discussed in relation to the subtle body systems of Tantric and *haṭhayoga* traditions. Through various practices and techniques the yogic aspirant awakens and raises Śakti, in the form of serpentine goddess Kuṇḍalinī, from the lowest *cakra*, *mūlādhāra*, to the highest, *sahasrāra*, where Śiva is present. These traditions propose the ultimate singularity of Śiva and Śakti, consciousness and observable phenomena. To merge Śiva and Śakti beyond distinction is to attain *samadhi*.<sup>32</sup> Ardhanārīśvara is associated with the *viśuddha* and/or *ājñā cakra*, which are both between the *mūlādhāra* and *sahasrāra*. Thus, Ardhanārīśvara is associated with a stage *en route* to mysticism.<sup>33</sup> A *sannyāsīn* informant, undertaking pilgrimage to the Tiruchengode temple, relayed this understanding; he associated Ardhanārīśvara with the *ājñā cakra* of the subtle body system and described the ascent of Kuṇḍalinī through the *cakras* to Śiva.

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<sup>32</sup> *Samadhi* here refers to *yogic* mysticism, a state of non-dual realization. It is described by Goldberg as a unitive state of pure consciousness. See Goldberg, *The Lord who is Half Woman: Ardhanārīśvara in Indian and Feminist Perspective*, 83

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* 77



There were informational booklets in the temple market, known as *māhātmya* literature, referencing cosmogonic concepts similar to some associated with Ardhanārīśvara in the literature review: *advaita* (non-dualism) and *coincidentia oppositorum* (coincidence of opposites).<sup>34</sup> This literature describes Śiva and Pārvatī as different only in appearance, and as one in actuality. The non-dualism of Śiva and Śakti is clearly implied and thus relates to *advaita*.<sup>35</sup> *Coincidentia oppositorum* refers to two opposites that have something in common in order to be opposed and united.<sup>36</sup> In other words, these paired opposites may be taken as symbolic of complementarity and/or paradox. The *māhātmya* literature provides examples of such opposites, including day and night, movement and stillness, left and right, and with the notable inclusion of Śiva and Śakti.

I have disclosed the above information because it is included in a resource that is available to the public. It insinuates a connection between Ardhanārīśvara and concepts akin to *advaita* and *coincidentia oppositorum*. It may therefore be inferred that such thought has disseminated amongst the Tiruchengode community to some degree. However, despite the availability of the above information, local practitioners appeared to emphasize other associations with the figure. Ardhanārīśvara was usually discussed in terms that relate to everyday human concerns. Often Ardhanārīśvara was explained as symbolic of an inherent male and female equality. More specifically, men and women were described as created equal. Certainly the Ardhanārīśvara iconography lends itself well to this interpretation, given that the male and female halves are split proportionately equal. In the Bhringi myth discussed earlier, Śiva and Pārvatī merge into the Ardhanārīśvara form in order to demonstrate that each is worthy of devotion and to convey their ultimate singularity. Accordingly, this narrative may also be taken to reaffirm said interpretation. Alongside a list of other pairs, the *māhātmya* literature

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<sup>34</sup> As referenced in relation to *coincidentia oppositorum* see Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty, *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 296. For a discussion of *advaita* see, Kamalakar Mishra, *Kashmir Śaivism* (Varanasi: Indica Books, 2011), 164. Although focusing on Kashmir Śaivism the author discusses *advaita* in general. *Māhātmya* refers to texts that relay the origins of sacred sites and the benefits of worshipping there. Over time their contents have been rendered from Sanskrit literature to vernacular languages and condensed into “penny-pamphlets.” See Eck, *India: A Sacred Geography* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2012), 9

<sup>35</sup> To reiterate, Pārvatī may be understood as a form of Śakti, the divine feminine principle.

<sup>36</sup> Doniger O’Flaherty, *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts*, 296. Doniger takes this definition from Mircea Eliade, *The Two and the One* (London: Harvill Press, 1965)

available in the temple market explicitly describes males and females as opposites but equals. It is implied that Ardhanārīśvara represents all such paired opposites, again supporting the interpretation that Ardhanārīśvara is symbolic of male and female equality.<sup>37</sup>

Doniger and Goldberg have offered feminist readings of the Ardhanārīśvara figure. Although both authors acknowledge that Ardhanārīśvara is often understood as a symbol of equality, harmony, and wholeness, they consider the figure representative of, and perpetually reifying, historical equalities.<sup>38</sup> In support of their argument, they highlight the fact that Pārvatī generally occupies the left half of the body, a subordinate position to Śiva.<sup>39</sup> Interestingly, in Tiruchengode the general consensus appears to be one that does not differentiate between left and right positions as subordinate and otherwise. The male and female halves were only described to me in terms of equality. As alluded to earlier, such readings of Ardhanārīśvara made by Doniger and Goldberg rely on textual and iconographic sources and do not incorporate ground realities, which evidently may commonly diverge from their conclusions.

At the same time there is no question that Śiva is afforded primacy at the Ardhanārīśvara temple. As described in chapter three, other forms of Śiva are accentuated, the name Śiva is twice hung on the outside of a complex wall, and the temple grounds contain features typical of other South Indian Śiva temples. However, I draw attention to the fact that when Ardhanārīśvara was discussed, even if described as a form of Śiva, it was always the feminine aspect highlighted as responsible for the uniqueness in form. In this way Śakti/ Pārvatī also garnered recognition.

An emphasis on family was apparent in the local understanding of Ardhanārīśvara. The masculine and feminine aspects of its iconography were conferred as representing the marriage of Śiva and Pārvatī, who in turn were frequently characterised as husband and wife. Murugan

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<sup>37</sup> The male and female motif was also referenced in relation to the Nāgagiri hill. I was told that the hill, on which the Ardhanārīśvara temple sits, can be seen from different angles, described as masculine and feminine views of the hill.

<sup>38</sup> Inequalities here refer to a history of patriarchy. This is expounded in greater detail in the literature review of chapter two. However, Goldberg does also point to empowering aspects of Pārvatī in what she calls a new interpretation (although I feel she makes no new arguments). See Goldberg, *The Lord who is Half Woman: Ardhanārīśvara in Indian and Feminist Perspective*, 153

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. 117

and Gaṇeśa, who each have dedicated shrines in Tiruchengode, are described as children to Pārvatī and Śiva. Viṣṇu, who has a shrine in the Ardhanārīśvara temple complex, was presented as brother to Pārvatī and brother-in-law to Śiva.<sup>40</sup> This family motif is present in the aforementioned myth that cast Śiva and Pārvatī as parents to a runaway Murugan, and which culminated in Śiva and Pārvatī assuming the Ardhanārīśvara form together. The fusion of Pārvatī and Śiva in the Bhringi myth was also described as a sign of their marriage. The *māhātmya* literature mentioned earlier illustrates non-duality through the metaphor of husband and wife as one in the home. In addition, it references pairs such as the sun and moon, left and right, and man and woman as opposite but equal. It then expands on this notion of equality by suggesting it is common knowledge that a husband and wife must share in all things equally in order to lead a good family life. In addition, Ardhanārīśvara is known locally as *ammaiappa*, meaning “mother-father” in Tamil, with my impression being that this parenthood is in relation to the whole world. Furthermore, Ardhanārīśvara worship is considered especially efficacious regarding familial concerns.

It should be noted that on several occasions Ardhanārīśvara was described in terms of marriage and kin, as representing gender equality, or as efficacious for familial concerns without any explicit reference to iconography, mythology, or philosophy. My impression is that general understandings and reputations of Ardhanārīśvara have formed. This is in accordance with the work of Leela Prasad cited in chapter one. To reiterate, she argues that our normative understanding of a concept draws from its presence in several contexts, such as community, circumstance, and media.<sup>41</sup> This mingling sometimes results in overall feelings and associations with regards to a subject.

According to McCallum, myths express the concerns of human experience: death, nature of life, morality, etc.<sup>42</sup> Relatedly, Shulman notes that marriage is a prominent theme in Tamil culture and lore, and that the divine marriage is thought of as a paradigm for human

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<sup>40</sup> There is also a temple dedicated to Ayyappan, son to Śiva and Mohinī, the female avatar of Viṣṇu.

<sup>41</sup> Leela Prasad, “Text, Tradition, and Imagination: Evoking the Normative in Everyday Hindu Life.” *Numen* 53, no.1 (Sept. 2006): 5. <http://www.jstor.org/> (accessed Sept. 11, 2013)

<sup>42</sup> Donald McCallum, *Zenkōji and its Icon* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994), 184

marriage.<sup>43</sup> It appears that these same concerns are read back into myths and imagery via our interpretations. The above conceptualizations of Ardhanārīśvara, which reference gender equality and family motifs, seem to reflect ethical ideals rooted in human experience. Congruently, the reputation Ardhanārīśvara has for assisting devotees with familial matters mirrors the concerns of human experience specific to family life. Although Ardhanārīśvara was described as helpful in family matters quite broadly, there was also specific mention of helping couples conceive children, helping single people find partners, and of helping marriages run smoothly. In this connection, there are those who appeared focused on the pragmatism of interacting with the figure. It is a point that will be expanded upon in an upcoming section but it is worth noting here that in such cases Ardhanārīśvara appears understood more in terms of its practical impact in the lives of devotees and less with any explicit reference to its iconography, mythology, and/or associated philosophies.

### **4.3 Analysis of Observations Relating to Unexplored Areas**

#### **4.3.1 Ardhanārīśvara Temple of Tiruchengode, Tamil Nadu**

Although there is documentation of Ardhanārīśvara images at various sites, there has been no extensive coverage of Ardhanārīśvara sites of worship in the available scholarship. Goldberg mentions, in passing, the presence of an Ardhanārīśvara temple in Mandi, Himachal Pradesh and Yadav includes an index of sites where Ardhanārīśvara images are present.<sup>44</sup> I have not come across any works that detail the Ardhanārīśvara temple of Tiruchengode.<sup>45</sup>

As mentioned in chapter three, the features of the temple complex are generally typical of South Indian Śiva temples.<sup>46</sup> This is significant inasmuch that it signifies primary allegiance to Śiva, despite Ardhanārīśvara being composite of Śiva and Śakti. There is no need here for

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<sup>43</sup> Shulman, *Tamil Temple Myths: Sacrifice and Divine Marriage in the South Indian Śaiva Tradition*, 138

<sup>44</sup> See Goldberg, *The Lord Who is Half Woman: Ardhanārīśvara in Indian and Feminist Perspective*, xiii and the appendices of Yadav, *Ardhanārīśvara in Art and Literature*, 191-195

<sup>45</sup> Yadav does list the Tiruchengode site, in a roundabout way, in the list of sites with Ardhanārīśvara images. See *Ibid.* 195

<sup>46</sup> See N.R. Bhatt, *Shaivism in the Light of Epics, Purāṇas and Āgamas* (Varanasi: Indica Books, 2008). This includes the Dravidian style architecture of the *gopurams* and *maṇḍapas* typical of the Nayaka and Vijayanagara periods. The temple website mentions a renovation in the 17<sup>th</sup> century which would have occurred during this period.

reiteration of these features, save those unique elements pertaining to Ardhanārīśvara. Although the temple grants primacy to Śiva, the Ardhanārīśvara form is clearly emphasized. Again, there are an ample amount of Ardhanārīśvara figures interspersed on the temple *gopurams*, and over the hillside staircase and roadway are archways ornamented with Ardhanārīśvara figures and *yoni-liṅgaṃ* images.

Given that the temple can be seen atop the Nāgagiri hill, which looms over the city, the Ardhanārīśvara temple is a part of the physical local landscape. Its domineering position is indicative of the focus Ardhanārīśvara receives throughout the city as well. Certainly the Ardhanārīśvara temple is a focal point. After all, its *garbhagr̥ha* enshrines the unique, anthropomorphic icon of Ardhanārīśvara for which Tiruchengode is known. Yet there is also content related to the temple and figure included throughout Tiruchengode at large. As chapter three notes, there are Ardhanārīśvara images dispersed around the city. In fact, if one travels from the outer reaches of Tiruchengode towards the Nāgagiri hill they will find a growing concentration of content relating to the Ardhanārīśvara temple and icon. Most noticeable are the Ardhanārīśvara images for sale in the markets around the base of the hill and outside of the temple complex. In this regard, the temple may be considered a nucleus for Ardhanārīśvara-related activity. This is a point that will be revisited and expanded upon in an upcoming section.

The site itself noticeably affiliates with two mythological narratives noted earlier. The 60 ft. snake carving, which parallels a section of the hillside staircase, both reinforces the Nāgagiri name and alludes to the origin myth containing Ādi Śeṣa, the multi-headed cosmic serpent.<sup>47</sup> As indicated earlier, there is also a mural of the Bhringi narrative in the *ardha-maṇḍapa* of the Ardhanārīśvara temple, reaffirming an association with this particular myth. Interestingly, the Ardhanārīśvara temple does not serve as a hub for the several Ardhanārīśvara narratives that exist, which one might anticipate given the rarity of this enshrined form and the subsequent attention it receives. Rather, it draws clear identification with specific myths, which have in turn become ingrained in the psyche of the local culture.

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<sup>47</sup> A description of Ādi Śeṣa may be found in Rachel Storm, *Indian Mythology: Legends of India, Tibet and Sri Lanka* (New Delhi: Anness Publishing, 2006), 84-85

The beginning of this section acknowledged an Ardhanārīśvara temple in Mandi, Himachal Pradesh. In Tiruchengode I was informed of another Ardhanārīśvara temple in Rishivandiyam, Tamil Nadu. I have since learned of yet another, recently re-established Ardhanārīśvara temple in Chennai. However, on many occasions I was told by both locals and visitors that this was the only Ardhanārīśvara temple in India. Some even cited this reputation as the reason they undertook pilgrimage to the site.<sup>48</sup> Regardless of the factuality of the claim that Tiruchengode houses the only Ardhanārīśvara temple, it is considered the case by many people. Importantly, the Ardhanārīśvara temple was discussed in such a manner that made it seem like a source of local identity.

#### 4.3.2 A Note on Śaiva Siddhānta

The temple priests of the Tiruchengode Ardhanārīśvara temple maintain an adherence to Śaiva Siddhānta. Śaiva Siddhānta is considered a dualistic or pluralistic school of thought.<sup>49</sup> I became curious how Ardhanārīśvara, often pegged as the quintessential representation of non-duality, figures into Śaiva Siddhānta.<sup>50</sup> The *māhātmya* literature in the temple market describing Śiva and Śakti as ultimately one further piqued my interest.<sup>51</sup> The temple priests were unable to shed light on my query, considering themselves to be ritual specialists, and appearing unfamiliar with Śaiva Siddhānta philosophy.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> There will be more on pilgrimage in relation to the Ardhanārīśvara temple in an upcoming section.

<sup>49</sup> Rohan Dunuwila, *Śaiva Siddhānta Theology* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1985), 96. This is corroborated by Karen Pechilis, "A Tamil Lineage for Śaiva Siddhānta Philosophy." *History of Religions* 35 no.3 (Feb. 1996): 235. <http://www.jstor.org/> (accessed Dec. 18, 2015)

<sup>50</sup> According to Flood, Śaiva Siddhānta is a dualistic or pluralistic system given that it maintains an ultimate distinction between Śiva and individual souls. This is in contrast to Kashmir Śaivism which is monistic, maintaining a theology in which Śiva, the individual soul, and the Universe or bond are a single reality whose nature is consciousness. See Gavin Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 162, 166-167. It may again be noted that the non-duality of Kashmir Śaivism differs from that of Advaita Vedānta. Whereas Advaita Vedānta sees *māyā* as the superimposition of illusory nature onto a neutral Brahman, Kashmir Śaivism considers *māyā* the ability of Śiva to project self limitation. Thus, in Kashmir Śaivism consciousness is considered dynamic. This dynamic aspect is represented by Śakti. See Kamalakar Mishra, *Kashmir Śaivism* (Varanasi: Indica Books, 2011), 447-450. The Ardhanārīśvara image is afforded special status in Kashmir Śaivism as a symbol that represents this understanding. Ibid. 164

<sup>51</sup> This pamphlet was translated for me from Tamil by an office that offered such services. Śiva and Śakti are described as one when seen through the inner eye of devotion.

<sup>52</sup> It was told to me that the temple priests are comprised of the male descendents of five families. Thus, the priests have inherited their positions and have not necessarily been theologically trained. The priests told me

The dualism of Śaiva Siddhānta applies to the relationship between Śiva and individual souls, not Śiva and Śakti. Individual souls, or *jivas*, are not considered identical to Śiva, although comprised of the same essence. As such, the relationship between Śiva and *jiva* has been described as sameness but not oneness. This seemingly paradoxical description has been termed *bheda-abheda*, separation and non-separation, or difference and non-difference.<sup>53</sup> The individual soul is different from Śiva in that it does not amount to the totality of Śiva, the difference between whole and part.<sup>54</sup> For example, a body includes a hand but you would not call the hand a body. Beyond that, the individual soul is subject to three impurities, whereas Śiva is not. The first is natural impurity, *sahaja mala*, which accounts for the limited knowledge and ability of an individual. The second is *karma*, binding souls to the consequences of their actions. Third is *māyā*, which binds *jivas* through sense objects as a result of desire and ignorance.<sup>55</sup> *Māyā* is of two types: impure, *asuddha māyā*, and pure, *suddha māyā*, which apply to impure and pure, liberated souls respectively.<sup>56</sup> This pure *māyā* is described as eternal, indestructible, indivisible, and one with Śiva in Śaiva Siddhānta.<sup>57</sup> Śiva pervades the whole world by *māyā*, also known as Śakti, the conscious energy of Śiva.<sup>58</sup> Dunuwila illustrates this point by likening Śiva and Śakti to a gem and its glow.<sup>59</sup> Similarly, Swami Śivananda offers fire and its burning power as an adequate metaphor.<sup>60</sup> Thus, the dualism or pluralism in this school of thought refers to the relationship between Śiva and *jiva*, not Śiva and Śakti. Therefore, the Ardhanārīśvara image, when considered symbolic of the non-dual nature of Śiva and Śakti, is not at odds with the dualism of Śaiva Siddhānta.

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that they look to the *Kāmikā Āgama* for ritual instruction. A man involved with the temple website told me that they also look to the *Kāraṇa Āgama*. The *Kāmikā Āgama* and *Kāraṇa Āgama* may be found at Himalayan Academy, “*Kāmikā Āgama*” [https://www.himalayanacademy.com/view/kamika-Āgama\\_grantha](https://www.himalayanacademy.com/view/kamika-Āgama_grantha) (accessed Oct. 2, 2015) and “*Kāraṇa Āgama*” <https://www.himalayanacademy.com/view/karana-Āgama-grantha> (accessed Oct. 2, 2015)

<sup>53</sup> Swami Śivananda, *All About Hinduism* (Uttar Pradesh: Divine Life Society, 1999), 143

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. 147

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. 155

<sup>56</sup> Jayandra Soni, *Philosophical Anthropology in Śaiva Siddhānta* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1989), 21-22

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Swami Śivananda, *All About Hinduism*, 155

<sup>59</sup> Dunuwila, *Śaiva Siddhānta Theology*, 84

<sup>60</sup> Swami Śivananda, *All About Hinduism*, 158

### 4.3.3 Ardhanārīśvara in Practice

The ability of an icon to procure benefits hinges on its sacred status.<sup>61</sup> In turn, the sacred status of an icon is directly related to how one believes it may influence their lives; it is understood in terms of what it is able to do. Accordingly, many devotees ritually engage the Ardhanārīśvara icon with the understanding that doing so may incite some manner of benefit.<sup>62</sup> The devotee aims to eliminate chance and secure a desired outcome.<sup>63</sup> It has been noted that these desires often relate to improving mundane existence: health, wealth, etc.<sup>64</sup> However, devotees also engage in ritual acts out of a sense of adoration. It is important to note that this intention still yields some return, if only the satisfaction of conducting a valued act. Pragmatism is not limited to materialism; even peace of mind may be considered a worldly benefit.<sup>65</sup> The idea of reciprocal, transactional exchange will be discussed in greater depth shortly. The following will analyze some aspects of the practices themselves.

Chapter three identified ritual practices present at the Tiruchengode temple, including *ārtī*, *abhiṣekam*, *prasād*, *parikrama*, *tīrtha-yātrā*, and *darśan*. These practices are not unique to this particular temple but are present at temples throughout India. Moreover, scholars have forwarded notions of henotheism and kathenotheism which may be interpreted to suggest that temple icons are interchangeable, primarily serve as supports for ritual activity, and are not regarded uniquely. As such, the following will provide a discussion on henotheism and kathenotheism and maintain that the practices listed above contain unique elements in the context of the Tiruchengode Ardhanārīśvara temple.

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<sup>61</sup> The second chapter referenced the work of McCallum who suggests that an icon may be conceived of in three ways: as the likeness of the deity, as symbolic of the deity, and as the deity itself. See McCallum, *Zenkōji and its Icon*. For the icon to procure benefits one must believe that the icon in some way mobilizes divine power, an understanding akin to the third conceptualization of icon forwarded by McCallum.

<sup>62</sup> This is in accord with the discussion on ritual provided in chapter three.

<sup>63</sup> Idea of eliminating chance and securing outcome also found in Ian Reader and George Tanabe Jr., *Practically Religious: Worldly Benefits and the Common Religion of Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1998), 46

<sup>64</sup> Shulman, *Tamil Temple Myths: Sacrifice and Divine Marriage in the South Indian Śaiva Tradition*, 20

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.* 16-17



#### 4.3.4 Ardhanārīśvara Worship with Regards to Henotheism and Kathenotheism

Henotheism refers to the worship of a particular god without discounting others and while considering the god being presently addressed as supreme. Kathenotheism refers to the worship of one god at a time and doing so in turn.<sup>66</sup> Eck describes this process much like the turning of a kaleidoscope by which the relational patterns of the pieces change; the god who in one moment is taken as supreme may become subsidiary and vice versa.<sup>67</sup> I did observe devotees engage several ancillary shrines at the same site in much the same manner, one by one. In fact, I visited multiple temples of Tiruchengode, including the Ardhanārīśvara temple, with the same group of people and their conduct was virtually identical at each location. Thus, henotheism and/or kathenotheism may seem like apt terms to describe such conduct. However, henotheism and kathenotheism may be taken to suggest that temple icons are interchangeable and that they are not regarded uniquely, which in this case would be an erroneous oversimplification.

There are some features of the ritual practices listed above that are unique at the Tiruchengode Ardhanārīśvara temple. For example, as with many hilltop temples, devotees circumambulate the entire hill. In the case of this particular site there is a vantage point on the circumambulatory path from which the hill is considered masculine and another where it is feminine, extending the androgynous motif of Ardhanārīśvara to the entire site. The temple is most noted for enshrining the rare, composite icon of Ardhanārīśvara in its *garbhagrha*. As a result, locals, residents of neighboring villages, pilgrims, and other visitors stop by the temple to receive *darśan* from this unique form. There is no doubt that the primary reason many visit the temple is to witness this form specifically. Furthermore, during *abhiṣekam* both male and female clothing adorn this *mūlamūrti* icon before and after the consecration, again drawing attention to the androgynous Ardhanārīśvara form.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Eck, *Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*, 26. The word kathenotheism was coined by Max Muller

<sup>67</sup> Ibid. 27

<sup>68</sup> Although not playing on the Ardhanārīśvara form per se, it may be noted that devotees receive water from a natural spring at the base of the *mūlamūrti* icon as *prasād*, which is not a standard temple feature. Other forms of *prasād* may occur. For example, at some Bhairava temples the *prasād* is liquor. At the Kamakhya temple, during the Ambubachi Mela, *prasād* may include a piece of cloth believed to have soaked in the menses of the

As alluded to, *tīrtha-yātrā* to the Ardhanārīśvara temple is undertaken by pilgrims in order to observe the uncommon Ardhanārīśvara temple and icon. I met a *sannyāsin* who travelled from North India for this very reason. Others journey to the temple because of the belief that Ardhanārīśvara is uniquely effective in benefiting family life. For example, I learned of a group of unwed women from a neighboring village who were visiting the temple with the understanding that doing so may increase their chances of finding suitable partners.<sup>69</sup> It is likely that their village also has the icon of a deity, and that the aforementioned modes of worship are also available there. Yet they visit the Ardhanārīśvara temple with the belief that doing so is more effective in benefiting their aims. Thus, despite the fact that ritual practices may be expressed similarly at various sites, the acts are not identical; intentions may differ according to the reputation of a given site and devotees may choose to engage sites whose reputations match their concerns.

Chapter three also highlighted the “car-festival,” where *utsavar* icons of the principle temple deities are taken through the streets of Tiruchengode. It is true that similar practices happen elsewhere in India. For example, in the festival known as Rath Yatra the Hindu deity, Jagganath, is taken through the streets of Puri, Orissa in a large chariot.<sup>70</sup> However, that this practice occurs elsewhere in no way dilutes the importance of its occurrence in Tiruchengode. For the residents of Tiruchengode the focus during this time is on their specific locale with an emphasis on Ardhanārīśvara, who is afforded the most elaborate vehicle in procession. In this connection, even if similar boons are being offered from site to site, in Tiruchengode what matters is that they are bestowed by Ardhanārīśvara; locals cherish this fact and people come to the city for this reason alone.

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Goddess. To be clear, this is not to say that the Ardhanārīśvara temple of Tiruchengode is the only temple to use the water of a *garbhagr̥ha* spring as *prasād*, but it is not the case at every temple.

<sup>69</sup> It is significant to note that when I visited the Ardhanārīśvara temple in Rishivandiyam, Tamil Nadu there was a man there from Pondicherry who was visiting the temple because he understood Ardhanārīśvara to be effective for family matters. His mother had sent him there because he was about to be married and they felt doing so would help the marriage to run smoothly. This corroborates the reputation Ardhanārīśvara has in Tiruchengode amongst devotees.

<sup>70</sup> Paul Routledge, “Geopoetics of Resistance: India’s Baliapal Movement.” *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 25, no.3 (July-Sept. 2000): 381. <http://www.jstor.org/> (accessed Dec. 19, 2015)

## 4.4 Ardhanārīśvara and Fluidity

### 4.4.1 Blurriness of Categories

In the first chapter I describe observable phenomena as seamlessly interrelated and in constant flux. This understanding led to acuminous observations about Ardhanārīśvara in Tiruchengode that will be delineated in the following sections. Current scholarship tends to present Ardhanārīśvara in a rather static manner, as a character that may be summed up by a set list of descriptors. However, the categories and content generally used to characterize Ardhanārīśvara do not play out in a closed and definite fashion within the context of Tiruchengode. In living context categories such as iconography and mythological narratives interplay and influence each other; their parameters are blurry. Using imagery as an example the following will illustrate how some elements that may appear disparate actually interweave.

For instance, Ardhanārīśvara images and narratives inform each other. The main Ardhanārīśvara narrative in Tiruchengode details the merging of Śiva and Pārvatī. People may understand Ardhanārīśvara images in relation to this narrative. Vice versa, visualization of the narrative may be influenced by memory of Ardhanārīśvara images. Ardhanārīśvara images are also present in ritual practice; during *darśan* there is a perceived exchange wherein the devotee both witnesses the icon and is reciprocally viewed by the icon itself, understood as beneficial to the devotee. In turn, Ardhanārīśvara images are present throughout the city. One can easily find Ardhanārīśvara images in workplaces and used in advertising.

These examples illustrate the actual fluidity of categorical parameters. It shows, for example, that Ardhanārīśvara iconography may be discussed in its relation to narrative, in terms of its ritual involvement, or its use in advertising. The actual blurriness of categorical lines implies arbitrariness. There is an analogy that describes the sun as measurable by the length of its flames, the stretch of its heat, or the reach of its light.<sup>71</sup> Similarly, the Ardhanārīśvara icon may be understood in terms of its physical features, its connection to ritual, or its rippling effect

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<sup>71</sup> I believe I first heard this analogy online in a recorded talk by Alan Watts

in the lives of devotees. As Sarah Caldwell writes in reference to the goddess Bhagavati in Kerala, these various scopes of definition render Ardhanārīśvara impossible to essentialize.<sup>72</sup>

#### 4.4.2 Distinctive Relationships with Ardhanārīśvara

Different understandings of Ardhanārīśvara suggest an interpretable, subjective element to its conceptualization. The first chapter maintains that fluidity renders every vantage point distinct, each clad with a unique measure of content and conditions. In relation, I also highlight that our concepts draw from several sources.<sup>73</sup> For example, a single individual may know Ardhanārīśvara as an image bought and sold in markets, as the deity enshrined on the overarching hill, and as a character from a story their grandmother told them. Another person may be unfamiliar with mythological narratives but produce Ardhanārīśvara images for income and contemplate the metaphysical symbolism of the figure. Even the same, seemingly static text will be read differently by two individuals given their particular preferences, personalities, upbringings, etc. As such, the idea of Ardhanārīśvara coagulates differently in the experience of each person. Moreover, an individual can conceive Ardhanārīśvara relative to the context; one may perceive the Ardhanārīśvara icon of the temple disparately from the Ardhanārīśvara on a postcard sold in the market.

Relationships with Ardhanārīśvara relate to the earlier discussion regarding conceptualizations of the figure. Accordingly, its reputation and the aims of the devotee also come into play. For example, for the group of unwed women described earlier Ardhanārīśvara may be experienced as a potential catalyst for securing future marriage. For others Ardhanārīśvara is experienced as symbolic of gender equality and/or representative of divine marital love; it is understood in terms of ideals worth emulating. For the aforementioned *sannyāsin* the Ardhanārīśvara icon may be looked upon as symbolic of a yogic state, a

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<sup>72</sup> 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: State University of New York Press, 2001), 111

<sup>73</sup> This idea of normative understanding drawing from several contexts found on Leela Prasad, "Text, Tradition, and Imagination: Evoking the Normative in Everyday Hindu Life." *Numen* 53, no.1 (Sept. 2006): 5. <http://www.jstor.org/> (accessed Sept. 11, 2013)

contemplative guidepost to which one may strive. The various conceptualizations of Ardhanārīśvara appear to yield significantly different experiences of the figure.

Societal roles also impact relations with Ardhanārīśvara. For example, lay devotees are dependent on the temple priests to conduct ritual acts like *abhiṣekam* and facilitate others such as *darśan*. Thus, the Ardhanārīśvara icon is involved in the hegemonic discourse inherent within the ritual activity of the temple, reinforcing roles that ensure different experiences of the figure. Shopkeepers and market attendants profit from the reputation that Tiruchengode is home to this rarely enshrined form. For them Ardhanārīśvara connects to their finances, as sales of its images generate income. This is not to say that those involved in the sale of Ardhanārīśvara images experience the figure solely in this way. Rather, it is to say that their role in the sale of its images is not shared by all; it is a distinguishing element in their relationship.

To recapitulate, transsexuals, hermaphrodites, and transvestites are collectively known as *hijra* in India.<sup>74</sup> Danielou references an understanding of the *hijra* people as embodied “images” of Ardhanārīśvara.<sup>75</sup> There are other authors, such as Pande, who also clearly associate the *hijra* with Ardhanārīśvara and others who imply Ardhanārīśvara is a patron of the *hijra* people.<sup>76</sup> Tiruchengode houses a significant amount of *hijra*. Although I was unable to speak in depth with any members of the *hijra* community, other locals described them as being both male and female like Ardhanārīśvara. It is worth noting that this idea is present in Tiruchengode to some measure. The *hijra* of Tiruchengode are probably aware of their existent association with Ardhanārīśvara. In turn, this likely influences their resonance with the figure.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> The *hijra* are often referred to as the “third sex” in India. Alka Pande, *Ardhanarishvara, the Androgyne: Probing the Gender Within* (New Delhi: Rupa & Co., 2004). Gayatri Reddy also acknowledges the *hijra* being referred to as the “third sex” and offers an analysis of the implications. See Gayatri Reddy, *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 30-34

<sup>75</sup> Danielou, *Shiva and the Primordial Tradition: From the Tantras to the Science of Dreams* (Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions, 2007), 42

<sup>76</sup> See Alka Pande, *Ardhanarishvara, the Androgyne: Probing the Gender Within*. The following article implies Ardhanārīśvara is patron to the *hijra* as it describes the *hijra* as legitimizing their “sexual middle-ground” by looking to Ardhanārīśvara. See Vidya Venkat, “From the Shadows” in *Frontline*, 25 no.4 (2008) <http://www.frontline.in/navigation/?type=static&page=flonnet&rdurl=fl2504/stories/20080229607610000.htm>. (accessed Jan. 31, 2016).

<sup>77</sup> I did attempt to speak with some *hijra* individuals. However, they did not seem too receptive. Perhaps this was due to their marginalized status in society, the fact that I am a white, male foreigner, or neither or both of

It is also worth noting that different Ardhanārīśvara icons are used in different contexts. For example, the *utsavar* icon is paraded through the streets of Tiruchengode during the “car festival” so that devotees may receive *darśan*. Conversely, the *mūlamūrti* stays fixed in the *garbhagrha*. Furthermore, the *utsavar* icon is the result of artisanship while many believe the *mūlamūrti* is *svayambhū*, naturally and miraculously occurring. These varying contexts raise questions about the singularity of Ardhanārīśvara in Tiruchengode, as do the differing understandings and experiences considered in this section. To echo a point Caldwell makes in her own study, Ardhanārīśvara in Tiruchengode is an amalgam and confluence of all of the above.<sup>78</sup>

Much of the above information is true for the presiding deities of any site; their images are also bought and sold, they attract pilgrims, their conceptualizations draw from many sources, etc. However, the fact of the matter is that in Tiruchengode people are not concerning themselves with, for example, the goddess Kamakhya from Assam; they emphasize Ardhanārīśvara from Tiruchengode. Eck writes that each god may serve as a lens through which the whole may be seen.<sup>79</sup> For the people of Tiruchengode, Ardhanārīśvara is this lens. That is, through identification and interaction with Ardhanārīśvara devotees connect with the Hindu tradition. To say that this is not unique because there are other deities that one may also look to would be denying the uniqueness devotees feel regarding Ardhanārīśvara.

#### 4.4.3 Transactions between Ardhanārīśvara and Devotees

The transactions between Ardhanārīśvara and devotees are intriguing contexts to observe fluidity. One of the biggest faults of the current scholarship is that it has virtually ignored living context and as a result has overlooked orthopraxy regarding Ardhanārīśvara. It so happens that in Tiruchengode Ardhanārīśvara appears significantly more characterized by its involvement in these omitted areas than the static descriptors of scholarship. As stated earlier,

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these. Regardless, I did not feel it was appropriate to push for conversation. However, there is a lot of potential there for future research. For information about *hijra* in society see Gayatri Reddy, *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005)

<sup>78</sup> Caldwell, “Waves of Beauty, Rivers of Blood,” in *Seeking Mahādevī: Constructing the Identities of the Hindu Great Goddesses*, ed. Tracy Pintchman, 111

<sup>79</sup> Eck, *Banāras: City of Light* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 20

many people found the information of scholarship interesting but hardly emphasized it themselves; they understood Ardhanārīśvara more in terms of its influence in their lives. As such, there was a prevalence of ritual efforts involving the Ardhanārīśvara icon, with the idea that some manner of benefit would be procured. The theoretical and methodological concerns of the first chapter imply that Ardhanārīśvara should be understood in terms of fluidity. Interestingly, the people of Tiruchengode also appeared to understand Ardhanārīśvara in terms of its activity in their lives, and the activity required of them to prompt the deity to confer a desirable influence.

Devotees perform their ritual acts with the belief that doing so will evoke some manner of benefit. As such, there is a sense of reciprocity; the rituals are transactional.<sup>80</sup> Foucault describes power as a way in which actions modify other actions.<sup>81</sup> Tiruchengode devotees engaged the Ardhanārīśvara icon with the hopes of conceiving a child, curing an illness, increasing prosperity, etc. By doing so devotees are pragmatically attempting to eliminate chance and secure a particular outcome; they are actively playing with power relations.<sup>82</sup> My fieldwork observations also describe devotees engaging in ritual acts with a sense of adoration. Again, it is important to note that this intention still yields some return, if only the satisfaction of conducting a valued act. Pragmatism is not limited to materialism; even peace of mind may be considered a worldly benefit.<sup>83</sup>

The Ardhanārīśvara temple is a hub of activity, with the icon of the *garbhagr̥ha* serving as a focal point for ritual efforts. The rituals themselves have been described as transactional; there is a perceived exchange between devotee and deity. In turn, content relating to Ardhanārīśvara flows back into the city with the devotees. For example, people may express enthusiasm for the figure by having a picture of Ardhanārīśvara in their homes or by using its

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<sup>80</sup> With the example of pilgrimage, Shulman also discusses pragmatism and reciprocity of Hinduism in the Tamil region. See *Tamil Temple Myths: Sacrifice and Divine Marriage in the South Indian Śaiva Tradition* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980), 17

<sup>81</sup> Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," in *Critical Inquiry* 8, no.4 (Summer, 1982), 788

<sup>82</sup> Idea of eliminating chance and securing outcome also found in Ian Reader and George Tanabe Jr., *Practically Religious: Worldly Benefits and the Common Religion of Japan*, 46

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.* 16-17

image on shop signboards, changing the aesthetics of the city.<sup>84</sup> As such, the city of Tiruchengode is not separated from the Ardhanārīśvara temple, but interacts with it. This notion will be explored in the following section.

#### 4.4.4 Tiruchengode as Ardhanārīśvara Temple

Shulman writes that in Tamil Nadu important shrines are usually within boundaries that define the sacred space; the walls serve to isolate the shrine from the surrounding chaos.<sup>85</sup> However, there are arguably varying degrees of perceived sacredness within the temple complex. For example, the *garbhagrha* is widely considered the most sacred space in the larger compound.<sup>86</sup> Similarly, I suggest that there is another perimeter that can be considered to demarcate sacredness: the perimeter of Tiruchengode. After all, Tiruchengode is extensively identified as home to the unique Ardhanārīśvara icon, from both locals and outsiders. In enthusiastically identifying as the home to this rarely enshrined form there is the implication of other forms and shrines. Thus, there is the acknowledgement of both the broader tradition and the way that this location and icon figure into it. Diana Eck describes that for a Hindu the whole of India is sacred geography.<sup>87</sup> It is clear that Tiruchengode understands its sacredness to hinge upon the fact that it plays host to this Ardhanārīśvara form.

If Tiruchengode is to be considered an extension of the Ardhanārīśvara temple, then the temple complex, and more specifically the icon of the *garbhagrha*, may be considered the nucleus. To many people the city owes its sense of sacredness to the Ardhanārīśvara icon. By this I do not mean that devotees are dependent on the anthropomorphic icon. After all, Gilles Tarabout provides an example of Hindus from Kerala who bring together coconuts and sticks in the absence of an anthropomorphic form.<sup>88</sup> What I mean to say is that the public of

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<sup>84</sup> These are but a few examples. For example, one could also inquire about the relationship between Ardhanārīśvara and marriage motifs in Tamil lore, or the influence of familial traditions and conceptualizations of Ardhanārīśvara.

<sup>85</sup> Shulman, *Tamil Temple Myths: Sacrifice and Divine Marriage in the South Indian Śaiva Tradition*, 75

<sup>86</sup> The *garbhagrha* is often described as the *sanctum sanctorum* of a Hindu temple. *Sanctum sanctorum* is widely referred to as the holy of holies, giving the impression that it is the most sacred space.

<sup>87</sup> Diana Eck, *Banāras: City of Light*, 38

<sup>88</sup> Gilles Tarabout, "Theology as History: Divine Images, Imagination, and Rituals in India," in *Images in Asian Religions: Texts and Contexts*, ed. Phyllis Granoff and Koichi Shinohara (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2004), 56-60



Tiruchengode frequently references the Ardhanārīśvara temple as the reason why the city is unique, granting it a special place within the broader Hindu fold. Thus, the same description that Eck ascribes to Varanasi appears applicable to Tiruchengode; the city is a living text of Hinduism.<sup>89</sup>

When considering the temple complex and, more specifically, the *mūlamūrti* icon as the nucleus of Ardhanārīśvara-related activity in Tiruchengode it is important to note that the temple falls within the city limits. The previous section acknowledged ritual transactions between devotees and the icon, the perceived exchange by the devotee, and devotional expressions throughout the city. It is clear that the activity of the temple complex and the rest of Tiruchengode, though marked by differences, seamlessly flow together. Devotees talk about the Ardhanārīśvara icon; they discuss its rarity, share its associated mythological narratives, interpret its iconographic symbolism, etc. Correspondingly, Ardhanārīśvara is deeply impressed upon the collective psyche of Tiruchengode. Devotional expressions also influence the visual urban landscape. The substantial amount of Ardhanārīśvara images found throughout the city demonstrates that fervor for the deity is not limited to the complex walls. One also gets the impression that it is considered favorable for businesses to put up images of Ardhanārīśvara; ideas of reciprocity are found throughout the whole municipality.<sup>90</sup> As such, images of Ardhanārīśvara have been ingrained into the physical texture of Tiruchengode at large.

Chapter one describes observable phenomena as a fluid state of affairs. It is plain to see that the influence of Ardhanārīśvara ripples throughout the city in a multitude of ways; it is integral to the fluid fabric of life in Tiruchengode. The concentration of activity in Tiruchengode related to Ardhanārīśvara suggests something akin to an Ardhanārīśvara cult while notable devotional expressions, particularly visual, reflect throughout the city itself. Accordingly, all of Tiruchengode may be taken as a unique setting to observe the deity, as a city-temple centering on Ardhanārīśvara.

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<sup>89</sup> Eck, *Banāras: City of Light*, 9

<sup>90</sup> Again, this practice is not unique to Ardhanārīśvara. However, the Ardhanārīśvara image is used in this regard to a significant degree in Tiruchengode.

## 4.5 Conclusions and Contributions

At the beginning of this thesis the reader is familiarized with critiques of the academic study of religion alongside information about Ardhanārīśvara. The misconceptions and gaps in scholarship purported by these critiques appeared applicable to the academic treatment of Ardhanārīśvara; information regarding the figure in living context has largely gone omitted. Accordingly, I called for fieldwork at the Ardhanārīśvara temple of Tiruchengode, Tamil Nadu. I provide a comprehensive literature review to acquaint the reader with Ardhanārīśvara and to substantiate the claim that significant areas of content relating to the figure have been overlooked. The third chapter presents the subsequent fieldwork observations and impressions while this concluding chapter analyzed the findings. The results demonstrate contributions to both areas of previous scholarly focus and to those areas previously ignored. The following will review and elucidate the conclusions and contributions yielded.

### 4.5.1 Contributions to Those Areas of Previous Scholarly Focus

The fieldwork observations note the presence of two images in Tiruchengode congruently included in present works on Ardhanārīśvara: a popular “contemporary poster-art” depiction and *yoni-līṅgam* images used in clear association with the figure. However, there are also examples of iconographic depictions of Ardhanārīśvara that are unavailable in any catalogue. Specifically, there is an illustrated version of the *garbhagrha* icon found commonly throughout Tiruchengode, decorative Ardhanārīśvara statues present on archways throughout the hillside staircase and roadway, a significant amount of Ardhanārīśvara carvings on the *gopurams*, the *mūlamūrti* icon that is fixed in the temple *garbhagrha*, and the *utsavar* icon that is used for public procession. The insertion of these examples into the Ardhanārīśvara catalogue would be contributive in terms of iconographic documentation, while the *mūlamūrti* and *utsavar* icons also relate to ritual elements discussed in a section below.

Similarly, this chapter identifies a mythological narrative present in Tiruchengode that is congruently included in the literature review: the Ardhanārīśvara myth involving the sage, Bhringi. However, the fieldwork observations also present mythological narratives currently absent from the Ardhanārīśvara compendium: a myth including Murugan, Śiva, Pārvatī and the

merging of the latter two into Ardhanārīśvara atop the Nāgagiri hill, a narrative that includes the appearance of Viṣṇu to a devotee on Nāgagiri hill, and another that describes the formation of the Nāgagiri hill as the result of a fight between Vāyu and Ādi Śeṣa. Inclusion of these myths would contribute to a more robust documentation of mythological narratives relating to Ardhanārīśvara and this dedicated site of worship. In addition, these myths reflect the propensity of Tamil culture to localize figures to sites of worship, to have narratives that describe a devotee benefited by worshipping there, and to establish sacred origins.<sup>91</sup> This suggests interaction between Tiruchengode and the broader region, implying a fluid state of affairs that will be discussed below.

Congruencies between conceptualizations of Ardhanārīśvara present in scholarship and those expressed by people present in Tiruchengode were also noted. Specifically, a *sannyāsin* informant described Ardhanārīśvara in association with the *ājñā cakra* of the subtle body system. Additionally, he described Kuṇḍalinī ascending through the *cakras*, rendering Ardhanārīśvara a state *en route* to mysticism.<sup>92</sup> The *māhātmya* literature available outside of the temple complex references Ardhanārīśvara in relation to cosmogonic concepts akin to some included in the literature review: *advaita* (non-dualism) and *coincidentia oppositorum* (coincidence of opposites).<sup>93</sup>

As with iconography and mythological narratives, there were conceptualizations of Ardhanārīśvara present in the context of Tiruchengode whose inclusion would be contributive to current scholarship. Ardhanārīśvara was usually described in terms that relate to everyday human concerns: as a symbol of inherent male and female equality, and as relating to marriage and family. It is important to note that such interpretations do have support in existing sources. With regards to marital union, it is true that Śiva and Śakti, often in the form of Pārvatī, are popularly understood as consorts to each other.<sup>94</sup> Furthermore, devotional relations between

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<sup>91</sup> David Shulman, *Tamil Temple Myths: Sacrifice and Divine Marriage in the South Indian Śaiva Tradition*, 40

<sup>92</sup> These notions have been explained in greater detail earlier in the thesis and may be referenced there to avoid muddling reiteration.

<sup>93</sup> These concepts are elucidated above and do not need a full recap here

<sup>94</sup> Yadav, *Ardhanārīśvara in Art and Literature*, 7

Śiva and Pārvatī are a recognized theme in scholarship.<sup>95</sup> This motif is exemplified in the aforementioned local myth wherein Murugan is described as son to Śiva and Pārvatī. With regards to the notion of male and female equality, Ardhanārīśvara iconography, given its male and female halves, lends itself well to this interpretation. One may cite these sources and argue that any concurrent understanding is redundant. However, no existing works actually document ground realities.<sup>96</sup> Any such information may be considered contributive for this reason alone. The following offers nuanced observations in this regard.

Often informants did not explicitly reference information regarding narratives, or even iconographic features, when discussing Ardhanārīśvara. It appeared, rather, that many people spoke about Ardhanārīśvara in terms of general understanding. For example, Ardhanārīśvara was described several times as reputable for aiding familial concerns, without reference to any specific myth or image in support.<sup>97</sup> Additionally, Ardhanārīśvara was called by the epithet *ammaiappa*, or “mother-father,” again without reference to any image or narrative. One may argue that such general understanding has its basis in pre-existing iconography, mythology, and philosophy and that the public of Tiruchengode adopted an amalgam of this information. However, I argue this is not so simply the case. My impression is that the emphasis on family, and notions concerning male and female equality, are equally rooted in human concerns and experience, perhaps more so. After all, the reputation Ardhanārīśvara has for aiding familial concerns reflects the concerns of human experience specific to family life. Moreover, in Tiruchengode the family unit was extremely valued; there is an abundance of joint families and decision making appeared to regularly involve kin.<sup>98</sup> In short, on the ground conceptualizations of Ardhanārīśvara incorporate life on the ground. As such, notions of gender equality and the emphasis on familial concerns do not simply mirror the content of iconography, mythology, and

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<sup>95</sup> For example, see *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 314

<sup>96</sup> As mentioned before, there are works that consider *yogis* and *hijra*. However, these are concerned more with a specific group/circumstance versus the geographical community of focus here.

<sup>97</sup> Yet this reputation clearly relates to the on-the-ground interpretations presently being discussed. This was identified earlier in the chapter and will also be noted when recapping Ardhanārīśvara and fluidity.

<sup>98</sup> This, of course, has been identified as a trend across India. For example, see A.A. Khatri, “The Adaptive Extended Family in India Today.” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 37, no.3 (August 1975): 633. <http://jstor.org/> (accessed Dec. 29, 2015).

philosophy. Instead, the content of Ardhanārīśvara images, narratives, and related thought meld with perspectives of actual people. As a result, values rooted in human experience, which here specifically involve gender and family, become emphasized, idealized, and integrated into the general understanding of Ardhanārīśvara. My observations also led to the inference that Ardhanārīśvara is conceptualized in terms of activity. However, this is more suited for inclusion in the following section.

#### 4.5.2 Contributions to Unexplored Areas

Although scholarship has identified the presence of Ardhanārīśvara images at various sites there has been no focus on Ardhanārīśvara sites of worship and related orthopraxy. My descriptions of the Ardhanārīśvara temple in Tiruchengode and its related activity contribute towards filling this gap.<sup>99</sup> To this effect, this section will provide a recap of key observations made by this work. The Tiruchengode Ardhanārīśvara temple shares many features common to Śiva temples across South India. Although some of these general features are acknowledged in chapter three, this project focused primarily on unique elements relating to Ardhanārīśvara. This included descriptions of narratives associated with the site and iconographic depictions of Ardhanārīśvara, including the *utsavar* and *mūlamūrti* icons. It is clear that the temple complex emphasizes the Ardhanārīśvara form. Importantly, this emphasis is also present throughout Tiruchengode more broadly. This is evidenced, for example, by images of Ardhanārīśvara found in high concentration throughout the city, including the popular, illustrated depiction reminiscent of the *garbhagrha* icon. In fact, the present analysis argues that the temple and town need not be regarded as separate but may be considered fluid, a theme delineated below.

The first chapter described observable phenomena as interrelated and active. This understanding led to a number of astute observations regarding Ardhanārīśvara in the context of Tiruchengode. For example, this chapter describes the actual blurriness of categorical lines often used by present scholarship to describe Ardhanārīśvara in rather definite terms. In living

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<sup>99</sup> In this thesis I also acknowledge the presence of other sites of worship for future studies: one in Mandi, Himachal Pradesh, one in Rshivandiyam, Tamil Nadu, and another in Cheennai, Tamil Nadu. Furthermore, Hildebeitel has acknowledged five Ardhanārīśvara temples in the Kallakurichi Taluk in South Arcot, also in Tamil Nadu. See Alf Hildebeitel, *The Cult of Draupadī*, vol.1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 447

context, categories such as Ardhanārīśvara iconography, mythology, etc. actually interplay, suggesting that lines of definition are ultimately drawn arbitrarily. Under such conditions it is impossible to essentialize Ardhanārīśvara.<sup>100</sup> Furthermore, this thesis identifies each experience and understanding of Ardhanārīśvara as ultimately idiosyncratic. Additionally, various contexts involving different Ardhanārīśvara icons are also noted. Consequently, one may suggest that there is no single Ardhanārīśvara in Tiruchengode, but a multiplicity of amorphous ones. This project concludes that in Tiruchengode Ardhanārīśvara is a confluence and amalgam of all of these contexts, experiences, and scopes of definition.<sup>101</sup>

Given that this thesis describes observable phenomena as dynamic, it is interesting that the devotees of Tiruchengode often appear to conceptualize Ardhanārīśvara in terms of action, by the influence Ardhanārīśvara may have in their lives and the activity required of them to prompt the deity to confer a desirable influence. In conjunction, devotees perform their ritual acts with the belief that doing so will evoke some manner of benefit. There is a sense of reciprocity, a perceived transaction on the part of the devotee. The ritual practices observed at the Tiruchengode temple are described in chapter three and do not need full reiteration here. However, it is worth repeating that these practices (*ārtī*, *abhiṣekam*, *prasād*, *parikrama*, *tīrthayātrā*, and *darśan*) take place at other Hindu temples and that individual devotees visit numerous temples in a rather similar manner.<sup>102</sup> This connects Ardhanārīśvara with the broader Hindu tradition, to shared modes of devotional practice and with other members of the Hindu pantheon. This may be interpreted as implying that the presence of a specific deity, Ardhanārīśvara in this case, is inessential to the aims of the devotee; an individual may simply worship another deity elsewhere. However, this would be a misguided understanding. It would completely ignore the extent of focus paid to this unique form in Tiruchengode. After all, the people from neighboring villages, and pilgrims from far away, come to interact ritually with the Ardhanārīśvara icon specifically; although *darśan* happens at most temples, devotees come to

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<sup>100</sup> 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, 111

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> To reinstate their definitions, henotheism refers to the worship of a particular god, without discounting others, and while worshipping the god at present as supreme. Kathenotheism refers to worship of one god at a time, and doing so in turn. See Eck, *Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*, 26.

receive *darśan* from this particular form. In this connection, Ardhanārīśvara is particularly reputed to assist devotees with family life and draws devotees to the Tiruchengode temple for this reason. Moreover, that Tiruchengode houses this temple and Ardhanārīśvara icon was reiterated repeatedly to me. Also, to echo an earlier point, to say that interactions involving the Ardhanārīśvara icon are not unique because temples dedicated to other deities share similar practices would be denying the uniqueness devotees feel regarding Ardhanārīśvara.

The ritual transactions that occur within the Ardhanārīśvara temple reverberate back into the city with the devotees, impressed upon their experiences. Subsequently, enthusiasm for the figure is expressed by various means, and perhaps most obviously by the visual representations of Ardhanārīśvara disseminated throughout the city. It is evident that the Ardhanārīśvara temple and the rest of Tiruchengode are seamlessly interlaced. This is argued to the effect that the perimeter of Tiruchengode itself may be considered a scope of sacred space relating to Ardhanārīśvara; it is a concentric demarcation that, along with the temple complex and *garbhagrha*, plays host to the Ardhanārīśvara icon.

#### **4.6 Closing Remarks**

The research conducted on Ardhanārīśvara in Tiruchengode, Tamil Nadu offers a more robust treatment of the figure. This thesis contributed information to areas previously acknowledged by scholarship, including undocumented iconography, mythological narratives, and interpretations of Ardhanārīśvara which have taken into account actual people, whose perspectives appear to reflect concerns rooted in human experience. It also contributed to areas previously overlooked, including information about this site of worship, and the place of Ardhanārīśvara in ritual within this context. In relation, the reputation of Ardhanārīśvara as efficacious in family matters was identified. I demonstrate that those areas recognized as overlooked are perhaps most prevalent in the context of Tiruchengode. Additionally, the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of this thesis emphasized understanding things in terms of activity. This included conceptualizing Ardhanārīśvara as dynamic versus static; the figure is integral to the activity of Tiruchengode and impacts the lives of devotees. The transactional ritual activity between devotees and the temple icon was also emphasized,

rendering the populous akin to an Ardhanārīśvara cult and the city an extension of the temple.<sup>103</sup> This information, centering on Ardhanārīśvara, is in line with other studies examining how certain locales relate to their principal deities.<sup>104</sup>

#### 4.6.1 Future Studies

Future studies may benefit from investigating other temples dedicated to Ardhanārīśvara. This thesis acknowledged the verified presence of others; there is one in Mandi, Himachal Pradesh, and another in Rishivandiyam, Tamil Nadu.<sup>105</sup> Comparisons between sites will likely yield valuable observations regarding incongruent and common elements. For example, devotees at the temple in Tiruchengode said that Ardhanārīśvara is known to aid familial concerns, including marriage, fertility, child rearing, etc. Congruently, at the Ardhanārīśvara temple in Rishivandiyam I met a pilgrim, about to wed, who said he travelled there because Ardhanārīśvara is known to help new marriages run smoothly. As of now there is nothing in the scholarship on Ardhanārīśvara that associates the figure with any sort of reputation for ritual efficacy. Comparative studies across various sites will likely shed light on lines of investigation such as this.

The relationship of Ardhanārīśvara with *hijra* in Tiruchengode may also be further explored. Although there was a notable amount of *hijra* in Tiruchengode, who were described to me as similar to Ardhanārīśvara for being both male and female, I was unable to converse

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<sup>103</sup> This information, centering on Ardhanārīśvara, is in line with other studies examining how certain locales relate to principal deities.

<sup>104</sup> For example, see Caldwell, “Waves of Beauty, Rivers of Blood” in *Seeking Mahādevī: Constructing the Identities of the Great Hindu Goddesses*, ed. Tracy Pintchman, 95. Here the author references an example in the book, *Kali Worship in Kerala* by C.A. Menon. For another example see Kinsley, *Tantric Visions of the Divine Feminine: The Ten Mahāvidyās*. Here the author, for example, discusses Tara worship in the context of Tārāpīṭh, Kolkata.

<sup>105</sup> I say verified because I have visited them. I have since learned of another in Chennai. For an article chronicling the re-establishment of an Ardhanārīśvara temple in Chennai see Isha Blog, “Re-establishment of the Ancient Ardhanārīśvara Temple in Chennai,” Isha Foundation, September 2013. <http://isha.sadhguru.org/blog/yoga-meditation/science-of-temples/re-establishing-ancient-ardhanarishvara-temple-chennai/> (accessed Jan. 31, 2016). Additionally, I have come across the mention of an additional five. Hildebeitel briefly mentions five Ardhanārīśvara temples in the Kallakurichi Taluk in South Arcot, also in Tamil Nadu. See Alf Hildebeitel, *The Cult of Draupadī*, vol.1, 447



with any members of the *hijra* community in depth.<sup>106</sup> One may want to further explore the evolving relationship of *hijra* and Ardhanārīśvara in general. The place of *hijra* in Indian society is changing. For example, the first transgender college principal in India was appointed recently. Furthermore, as developments in the *hijra* community occur so may information concerning Ardhanārīśvara. For example, Mitra Joy Street in Kolkata recently made headlines for implementing its first transgender Durgā idol for the Durgā Pūjā festivities.<sup>107</sup> The form in question explicitly resembles, and is also outright identified as, Ardhanārīśvara. This is particularly intriguing given that Ardhanārīśvara is generally referred to as a form of Śiva. It will be interesting to see how gender primacy will or will not be afforded to the figure if associations between *hijra* and Ardhanārīśvara continue to mount.

Finally, this thesis familiarized the reader with the scholarly treatment of Ardhanārīśvara by means of a literature review. It noted gaps in content relating to biases in the study of religion, particularly the omission of information regarding the deity in living context. As a result, it argued for the value of fieldwork. It went on to disclose and analyze the fieldwork observations and impressions and provide significant, contributory information. It is highly probable that the scholastic body of work on other figures may benefit from similar treatment.

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<sup>106</sup> As noted an earlier footnote, I did attempt to speak with some *hijra* individuals. However, they did not seem too receptive. Perhaps this was due to their marginalized status in society, the fact that I am a white, male foreigner, or neither or both of these. Regardless, I did not feel it was appropriate to push for conversation.

<sup>107</sup> For an online article discussing the implementation of the “first transgender Durgā idol” in Kolkata for the Durgā Pūjā celebrations see Indrani Basu, “How India Got Its First Transgender Durga Idol,” Huffington Post, October 2015, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/how-india-got-its-first-transgender-durga-idol\\_us\\_561ead92e4b028dd7ea65245](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/how-india-got-its-first-transgender-durga-idol_us_561ead92e4b028dd7ea65245) (accessed Jan. 31, 2016). For an article on the first transgender college principal in India see Biswas Premankar, “College in Bengal to have country’s first transgender principal,” The Indian Express, May 2015, <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/west-bengal/college-in-bengal-to-have-countrys-first-transgender-principal/>. (accessed Jan. 31, 2016)

## Appendix

Image 1

Common local depiction of Ardhanārīśvara

Location: Signboard near temple



Image 2

Common local depiction of Ardhanārīśvara

Location: Wall near bus stand in city-center



Image 3

Common local depiction of Ardhanārīśvara

Location: Wall of *ardha-manḍapa*



Image 4

Common local depiction of Ardhanārīśvara

Location: Store signboard



Image 5

Common local depiction of Ardhanārīśvara

Location: Signboard near temple



Image 6

Common local depiction of Ardhanārīśvara

Location: Store signboard



Image 7

Common local depiction of Ardhanārīśvara

Location: Reusable bag from market



Image 8

Common local depiction of Ardhanārīśvara

Location: On bus that goes from town to temple



Image 9

Sculpted Ardhanārīśvara figure

Location: Archway over hillside staircase



Image 10

Sculpted Ardhanārīśvara figure

Location: Archway over hillside staircase



Image 11

Sculpted Ardhanārīśvara figure

Location: Archway over hillside staircase



Image 12

Sculpted Ardhanārīśvara figure

Location: Temple road-access entranceway

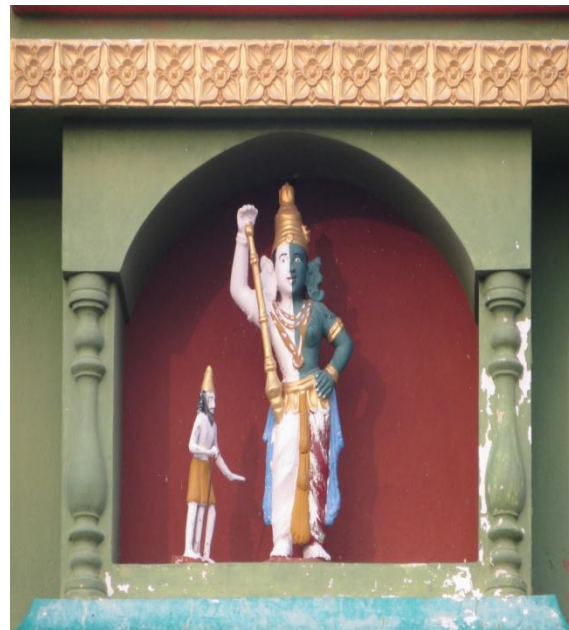


Image 13

Sculpted Ardhanārīśvara figure

Location: Temple *gopuram*



Image 14

Sculpted Ardhanārīśvara figure

Location: Temple *gopuram*



Image 15

Sculpted Ardhanārīśvara figure

Location: Temple *gopuram*

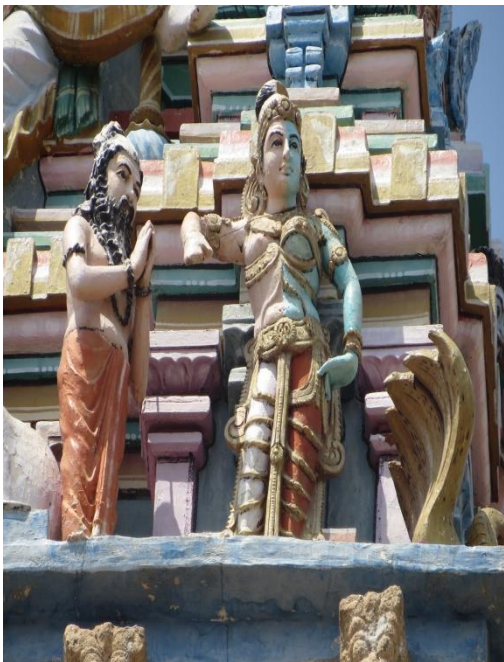


Image 16

Sculpted Ardhanārīśvara figure

Location: Temple *gopuram*



Image 17

*Yoni-līngam* image

Location: Archway over hillside staircase



Image 18

Sculpted Ardhanārīśvara figure

Location: Inside temple complex



Image 19

Ardhanārīśvara relief

Location: Inside temple complex



Image 20

Common local depiction of Ardhanārīśvara

Location: Inside temple bus



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