Chapter 1

Ardhanārīśvara in Indian Iconography

Without a form, how can God be meditated upon? If (He is) without any form, where will the mind fix itself? When there is nothing for the mind to attach itself to, it will slip away from meditation or will glide into a state of slumber. Therefore the wise will meditate on some form, remembering, however, that the form is a superimposition and not a reality.

—*Viṣṇu Saṃhitā*

Introduction

This chapter is particularly concerned with an analysis of the *mūrti* (image) and *rūpa* (form) of Ardhanārīśvara[1] in the canons of Indian iconography and point outs, through various emblems and traditional ornamentation, the gender implications of the diagnostic features used by the Indian *śilpins* of the past and present.[2] There are, to date, no systematic studies dealing with the image of Ardhanārīśvara as such, therefore, my data must be collected from scattered sources. This chapter draws primarily upon the principal canons of Indian iconography, the substantial canonical commentaries of Ardhanārīśvara in Indian iconography by art historians such as T. A. Gopinatha Rao (1967), J. N. Banerjea (1956), M. E. Adiceam (1967), and two recent studies of Ardhanārīśvara by Raju Kalidos (1993) and Neeta Yadav (2000), since they provide the most thorough accounts of the image in the context of sacred art. I also use the theories of Doris Meth Srinivasan

and her unparalleled insights into Śaiva art to locate Ardhanārīśvara within the broader category of Śiva *mūrtis*. To conclude, I offer an iconographical analysis of seventeen illustrations of the image of Ardhanārīśvara. Here I examine how applications of and commentaries on the image have traditionally portrayed the gendered diagnostic features of the divine androgyne. In the context of this interpretive investigation, I provide information that will help place the image in its historical context as well as outline the details of the critical feminist theory used throughout this analysis.

General Background Information

In Indian tradition, Ardhanārīśvara reveals a seemingly perfect, indissoluble unity, complete in himself/herself. The theological and philosophical presuppositions of Śaivism and the metaphysical underpinnings of the image in that tradition celebrate the ultimate singularity and nonduality of Śiva and Śakti in the form and figure of Ardhanārīśvara. For the precise purpose of examining the iconography of Ardhanārīśvara, it is necessary here to briefly discuss some of the theoretical and speculative ideas that lie behind the image, in particular, the relationship between form (*rūpa*) and formlessness (*arūpa*) in Indian art. The main reason for this, as contemporary art historian Vidya Dehejia (1997) reveals, lies in the fact that "so much of Indian sculpture was produced in order to embellish a sacred scripture" (Dehejia 1997: 1).

One crucial element in discerning the interrelationship between transcendence and materiality in Śaivism lies in an unfolding tripartite structure that, according to Srinivasan, explains in theological terms how the formless (*niṣkala*, *arūpa*, *aliṅga*) deity manifests through a progressive, three-stage process into material form (*sakala*, *rūpa*, *liṅga*), or *mūrti*. The *niṣkala-sakala* form of Śiva, or the subtle form of god known as *liṅga* or Sadāśiva, lies between the *arūpa* and *rūpa* stages.[3] This aniconic image has been referred to more recently in Indian iconography as *yoni-liṅga* and points to the highest expression of the unmanifest whose ultimate and singular essence is considered beyond attributes (*guṇas*), such as time (*kalā*), space (*ākāśa*), action (*karma*), and name and form (*nama-rūpa*) and, as we will show, it is similar to the iconic form of Ardhanārīśvara, particularly in the *haṭhayoga* tradition.

Śaivism (referred to here as an umbrella term pertaining to a constellation of somewhat diverse theological teachings) constructs and incorporates parallel iconographical themes and mythological narratives to represent underlying theological doctrines and beliefs.[4] According to Srinivasan, Parabrahman or Paraśiva are names given to

the formless or unmanifest aspect (*brahman*, *niṣkala*, *arūpa*, *aliṅga*) in an unfolding tripartite system. Maheśvara identifies the fully manifest form (*sakala*, *rūpa*, *mūrti*),[5] and Sadāśiva (*niṣkala-sakala*, *arūpa-rūpa*, *mukhaliṅga*) lies in the intermediary space arising between the two, as the creative aspect of the emerging transcendent begins to manifest parts or form (*kalā*, *rūpa*).[6] When expressed in theological and iconographical terms, the evolutionary descent of the transcendent proceeds from the formless Paraśiva (*niṣkala* or theological equivalent of Brahman) and moves toward full manifestation (*sakala*, *mūrti*, *rūpa*) in the form of Maheśa by way of Sadāśiva (*sakala-niṣkala*). This sequential, triadic assumption of form or *mūrti* is refracted not only through the lens of Śaivite theology, but also through Indian iconography. In this sense, the fully materialized *rūpa* of Paraśiva is Maheśvara, whereas Sadāśiva designates "the godhead on the way to full manifestation" (Srinivasan 1990, 108–10; 1987, 338; 1997, 272).

The positioning of Ardhanārīśvara in this threefold schema is not addressed explicitly by Srinivasan, nonetheless, an iconographic and a theological patternization is set out that can be applied to our specific analysis by articulating this basic structure. In terms of the canons of Indian iconography, Ardhanārīśvara is recognized as a composite, fully manifest, anthropomorphic form of Paraśiva emerging, similar to Maheśvara, in the third stage of the evolutionary descent. As such, the *rūpa* of Ardhanārīśvara as fully manifest and human bears structural and status equivalency with Maheśvara in visual and iconographic terms as well as in aspects of his/her basic theological presuppositions.

It also must be registered that although Ardhanārīśvara and Maheśvara often display a different theological message in visual terms from Sadāśiva, all three bear close resemblance with one another in terms of theological categorization and dual diagnostic attributes. When viewed in this context, Ardhanārīśvara (alongside Paraśiva, Sadāśiva, and Maheśvara) is a vital part of a progressive evolutionary triptych or a visual, iconographic unfolding of the formless Brahman and, as such, is closely aligned with Maheśvara. Similarly, the equivalent functionary role of Maheśvara and Ardhanārīśvara as overseers of the creation, maintenance, and destruction of the world is evident in their respective mythic narratives and partial female natures. Consequently, iconographic texts such as the *Viṣṇudharmottara* situate the formulae for maintaining the diagnostic accuracy of Ardhanārīśvara *mūrtis* within the broader categorization of Maheśvara. Stories from the Śaiva *purāṇas* explain that Ardhanārīśvara appeared when Brahmā meditated on the form of Maheśvara. However, Ardhanārīśvara also is referred to as the Īśana form of Sadāśiva, and it is not uncommon to find parallel references to Ardhanārīśvara as Sadāśiva in *haṭhayoga* and iconographic sources. From these varied accounts, we can conclude that

Ardhanārīśvara as an iconic *niṣkala-sakala* form bears a subtle resemblance to, and can be closely aligned with, Sadāśiva. Ardhanārīśvara also displays a distinct resemblance to Maheśvara, particularly in functionary roles.

If one explicit purpose of Śiva *mūrtis* is indeed symbolic representation and embellishment of theological norms and doctrines, as Dehejia suggests, then it also is on these grounds that images of Ardhanārīśvara must be understood and assessed. Briefly, a theological message of cosmogonic and cosmological speculation is conveyed by the *mūrti* of Ardhanārīśvara. That is, Ardhanārīśvara, as found in myth and symbol, explains the biological fact of human origin. Through the form of Ardhanārīśvara, Śaiva iconography illustrates that as the ineffable void (*śūnyātā*, *brahman*) proceeds from "transcendence to materiality" (to borrow a phrase from Srinivasan), or from formlessness to form, the dual or composite aspect of deity becomes ever apparent in his/her symbolic concretization of reality. Hence, we find not only a male but also a female nature in the theistic equivalent of Paraśiva/Brahman that comprises no less and no more than half of the anthropomorphic form (*mūrti*, *rūpa*) of Ardhanārīśvara. As such, Śiva is described and portrayed in his/her explicit anthropomorphic androgynous aspect as the "god who is half woman." This bipolar representation provides the internal coherence necessary to partake of the primordial role and function of cosmogony.

This is a significant point that Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh (1993) raises in her investigation of the essential role that the feminine aspect of the transcendent plays in Sikh religion. Indian tradition, which includes among its diverse theological expressions a bipolar god/dess, offers women and men images of divine reality that orthodox, male, monotheistic traditions do not. Critical issues pertaining to the maleness of god and the pervasive and exclusive use of male god language in Judeo-Christian religions seriously affect Western theologians' feminist sensibilities. Masculine identity as the presiding singular reference to ultimate reality denies for women a sacred feminine norm or an equivalent. Jewish and Christian feminist theologians, such as Judith Plaskow (1991), Rosemary Radford Reuther (1983), and Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza (1994), argue that the invisibility of a countervailing feminine divine undermines women's equal representation and participation in society and divinely sanctions the invisibility and exclusion of women as equals in religious community and family life. Recognition of a bipolar god/dess in Indian tradition offers an alternative and inclusive image of divinity. However, the question as to whether this inclusion actually affects the status of "real" women remains to be seen.

Iconography also functions in Indian tradition as a meditational and devotional aid (*dhyānamūrti*) for worshippers and, consequently, it must be understood as a dynamic and an integral part of the pan-Indian traditions of *yoga* and *bhakti*. This first chapter addresses the idea of the progression of the sacred from transcendence to materiality in iconographical terms. This direction or movement toward the assumption of form is precisely what differentiates god/dess from human (Srinivasan 1997, 142). Srinivasan writes:

[T]he predominant movement of god's unfolding is downward, even though life as we know it grows upward. A baby grows tall. Grasses and flowers shoot up. A tree climbs high. . . . . Trees, like longings, originate from earth. Not so does god. His otherness is conveyed in many ways. One is his downward progression from transcendency to materiality. (Srinivasan 1997, 142)

For humans, however, the process is reversed. When we probe the image of Ardhanārīśvara in *haṭhayoga* theory in a later chapter, the experience of the adept becomes the focal point, as she/he becomes an embodied form of Ardhanārīśvara through the reversal process of *sādhana* (spiritual praxis). This, in turn, effects a dynamic inversion of the triarchic evolutes on the part of the living *yogin/ī*, or a return of the *yogin/ī's* consciousness to an unmanifest state (*laya*) by recognizing one's essential identity with Ardhanārīśvara. In this sense, Ardhanārīśvara presents a map or meditational aid for the *yogin/ī*. The *yogin/ī* as *rūpa* undergoes a process of return or involution (*nivṛtti*) in which manifestation or evolution reverses, thereby leading the adept practitioner to a state of transcendence called Śivatva, or the equivalent of the *niṣkala* aspect of Śiva. It is in this particular application that Indian iconography functions alongside and parallels other ritual technology and spiritual practices such as *mantra*, *pūjā*, *yantra*, chanting, *āsana* (postures), *mudrā*, *prāṇāyāma*, and so on to effect an experience of perfect union (*yoga siddhi*).

Ardhanārīśvara and Indian Iconography

It is important to understand what the canons of Indian iconography tell us about the broad-ranging body of traditional emblematic features of the androgynous god/dess before we consider particular illustrations of Ardhanārīśvara from various Indian sites. In general, sources of Indian iconography include archaeological, epigraphical, and numismatic data, as well as diverse literary material. The latter is particularly abundant and usually draws its descriptions from three

main Sanskritic sources: *śilpaśāstras*, *purāṇas*, and *āgamas*. Kalidos (1993) observes that texts of this latter type are usually "committed to a particular cause, i.e., the delineation of an iconographical theme, and thus present stereotyped and cooked-up material rather than account for a narrative of the quasi-historical type" (Kalidos 1993, 102). This being the case, most of the textual iconographic descriptions of Ardhanārīśvara appear in the literature as so-called recipes and are rather formulaic in their orientation. Our primary purpose is to cite from a few sources that specifically mention Ardhanārīśvara to demonstrate the formulaic methods used to convey the distinctive diagnostic features of the image across time and place and to develop a clear typology of the diagnostic language used to render and conceptualize a coherent tradition and formal patternization of Ardhanārīśvara images. Hence, this section draws primarily on the cursory descriptions offered by traditional canons of Indian iconography, studies by Rao (1968) and Adiceam (1967), and the empirical data of my own field research into pan-Indian Ardhanārīśvara images to create an overall typology of the stylistic discourse that clearly depicts recurrent and continuous iconographic patterns of identification often shared across regions.

A broadly conceived analysis of the diagnostic features of Ardhanārīśvara images indicates that the standard bipolar human body of the deity (*dehārdhavibhāgina*) is differentiated along the traditional central vertical axis (*brahmasūtra*)[7] into male and female, as the name Ardhanārīśvara (the Lord who is half woman) suggests. As stated earlier, the right half of the image is male, and the left half of the image is female. From top to bottom, the image usually is depicted with one face, though some variations can be seen. The male right half can display the following diagnostic features: a *jaṭāmākuṭa*, sometimes shown ornamented with snakes, crescent moon, the goddess Gaṅgā, and/or jewels; smaller right eye; half moustache; and male physique, including flat male chest, broad right shoulder, wider waist, and more massive thigh.

Three possible earring styles can be discerned on the right/male side, namely, *nakra-kuṇḍala* (common), *sarpa-kuṇḍala*, or an ordinary *kuṇḍala*, whereas a female-style earring called *vāḷikā* is worn in the left ear (Rao 1968, 324). The *Vāstuśāstras* also refer to *patra kuṇḍala* and *śaṅkha patra kuṇḍala,* worn by Umā, and a fourth style, *ratna kuṇḍala,* worn by Śiva. Dissimilar earrings are one of the most noticeable diagnostic emblems demarcating the dual male and female nature of the deity and can be discerned on Śiva *mūrtis* such as Naṭarāja, Caturmukhaliṅga, and so on. In fact, this significant identifying feature becomes one of the primary means of identification for busts of Ardhanārīśvara (see Figure 1.2).

One distinct diagnostic emblem found specifically on North Indian images of Ardhanārīśvara is the half *ūrdhvareta* (ithyphallic) feature on the right male side. South Indian Ardhanārīśvara images do not bear this marking. Perhaps this is the reason Rao does not account for it in his commentary, which considers primarily South Indian sources. Furthermore, the entire right/male side must be ornamented with the requisite and customary accessories suitable for a male/Śiva image. These include draped garments (e.g., *dhotī*) made of silk (*kauśeya*), cotton (*kārpāsa*), or tiger skin usually covering the body from the waist to the knees, *mekhala* (belts), jewelry, and so on. However, it also is important to note that clothing (*vastra*) is not always discernible on sculptural images from early periods, as we often encounter many that are damaged. In addition, two unusual features mentioned in the canons of Indian iconography suggest that the right/male side should be covered with ashes, and the *rudra* aspect, which is depicted as red in color, could be evident. Other right-side colorations include gold or coral, however, in actuality, these features are rarely encountered.

Several diagnostic features are shared jointly by the male and female sides. They include navel,[8] ornaments on the chest, wrists (*kankana*), upper forearms (*keyūra*) and ankles (*bhujangavalaya* on right side), neck pieces (*hāras*), rings, and belts (*mekhala*). A shared elliptical-shaped halo (*prabhamaṇḍala*, *prabhavali*) often illuminates the entire deity from behind the head, though the shape of the right and left halves may vary. The sacred thread (*yajñopavīta*) worn by the *dvijātis* (twice born) appears on deities from the Gupta period onward and is sometimes observed on Ardhanārīśvara in the form of a serpent (*nāga yajñopavīta*) crossing the upper torso of both the male and female sides of the deity. When indicated, the third eye (*trinetra*) of Ardhanārīśvara is constructed in several ways. It is shown as either a full or half eye situated slightly to the right side on the forehead on the male half, as a full third eye directly in the middle of the forehead and shared by both the male and female sides, or as a half third eye directly in the middle of the forehead above or below the female dot (*bindu*, *tilaka*). The entire body stands variously in *tribhaṅga* pose, that is, there are three bends, in the head (it leans to the left), torso (it leans to the right), and right leg (emphasizing the fuller left hip), or in *sthanamudrā* (straight posture), sometimes indicated on a pedesal, such as a *padmāsana* (lotus seat). The latter stance also is called *samapāda*. Seated images of Ardhanārīśvara are not as common in the canons of Indian iconography but do have a significant representation nonetheless.

An important feature of any Ardhanārīśvara image, and one that we will consider in more detail further on, is the number of arms. Typically, the deity is figured with either two, four, or three arms. As we will see, two-armed Ardhanārīśvara images were the earliest

representations. In this case, the deity holds the right male hand in *abhaya mudrā* (sign or gesture of reassurance and fearlessness), and the left female hand holds a mirror (*darpaṇa*) or *nīlotpala* (flower). If there are four arms, probably a later development, they are usually divided at the elbows, the front right hand is held in *abhaya mudrā,* and the rear right hand holds the *paraśu* or *triśūla*. We also witness canonical variations on the right male side, such as *varada mudrā*, *ṭaṅka*, *akṣamālā* (rosary), *daṇḍa*, *khaḍga* (sword), *khatvaṅga* (club), *vajra* (thunderbolt), *kapāla* (skull), and *pāśa* or *aṅkuśa* (noose), sometimes in the form of a snake. References to six or more armed images are rare but can be found in South Indian sources.

Although some *purāṇic* and iconographical accounts, such as the *Viṣṇudharmottara*, refer variously to Umā, Śivā, or Gaurī, the left female side is commonly identified as Pārvatī and is distinguished by what I call "female indicators." Beginning with the top of the head, the female/left/Pārvatī side of the image shows a *karaṇḍa makuṭa* or *dhamilla* (a braided hairstyle or bun, sometimes laden with jewels and ornamentation).[9] Earlier we mentioned that on the left/female side of the forehead is a half *tilaka* or dot (*bindu*) corresponding to the half third eye on the male side. The *bindu* also can be placed in the center of the forehead above or below the male third eye, or a third variation is no *bindu* at all but rather a shared third eye centrally situated in the middle of the forehead. In rare instances, the *bindu* is strategically placed in the center as the only forehead marking (see Figure 1.8). The left eye, unlike the one on the right, can be larger, and it is typically outlined with collyrium. A female-style earring, as mentioned above, is worn in the left ear. When color is indicated, the left half of the body is covered either in saffron or is parrot-green, though this diagnostic emblem is seldom employed in practice. Rarely do we notice nose ornamentation (*vesara*) on the female side of early images of Ardhanārīśvara, as this seems to be a later custom.

The central feature of the left/female half is a woman's breast that is characteristically round and well developed. The waist is usually smaller and the hip fuller than the corresponding male half. The ornamentation identifying the female half includes earrings, jeweled *hāras*, draped silk clothing to the ankles, saffron body powder, anklets, bracelets, belts, necklaces, and red lac (henna) coloring on the left foot or hand. Depending on whether the image has four arms or two, the following variations are seen. On later four-armed images of Ardhanārīśvara, one left arm is bent and rests on Śiva's vehicle Nandin, and/or is held in *kaṭaka mudrā*. The other left hand typically holds a *darpaṇa* (mirror) or a *nīlotpala* (lotus flower or *puṣpa*, sometimes hanging at her side). Alternatively, the female left hand carries a *kamaṇḍalu* (waterpot), a *vīṇā*, a *ḍamaru* (drum), or a small parrot perches on the

left wrist. On three-armed images of Ardhanārīśvara, the right male side always has two arms, whereas the female side has only one. Both are shown with variations of the attributes outlined above.

Mudrās in Indian art are suggestive of the states of consciousness or the specific psychology, character, or emotion of a given deity (*bhava*) and find corresponding expression in the traditions of Bharata's *Naṭyaśāstras*.[10] In this context, *mudrās* are symbolic gestures that crystallize or convey a particular underlying sentiment. To understand this codified system of hand gestures, one requires technical background not only in Indian religion but in Indian classical dance as well. While such a reading is well beyond the limits of this particular work, the overall significance of *mudrās* in Indian iconography is that they give voice to seemingly silent deities. Hence, what is of import to this particular analysis is to identify the symbolic voice encoded in the specific hand gestures that we see on Ardhanārīśvara images in Indian tradition.

The *Vastuśāstras* enumerate three varieties of not less than fifty-six *hastas* or *mudrās* in all. However, the principal *mudrās* pertaining particularly to the right male side of Ardhanārīśvara are *abhaya* (variously referred to as *śāntida,* and *varada)*, *cinmudrā*, and *kaṭyavalambita hasta*. In *abhaya mudrā* the right male hand of Ardhanārīśvara is shown with the palm turned upward facing the devotee, and fingers straight, in a gesture of fearlessness and reassurance. This hand gesture is quite common, and we also see it on well-known Kuṣāṇa images of Śākyamuni Buddha. According to Zvelebil (1985), it is the right hand gesture "*par excellence*" (Zvelebil 1985, 35). The *varada mudrā* elicits a meaning similar to *abhaya mudrā*, and is alternately used. It implies the bestowal of favors or boons onto the devotee by the deity. Characteristic of this *mudrā*, the hand faces downward with palm turned toward the devotee, and fingers are held straight. *Cinmudrā* is similar, but in this *mudrā* the hand is held closer to the right chest, and the thumb and forefinger touch. In some examples, we see the left female hand of Pārvatī in *kaṭyavalambita* or *katisamsthita hasta* or *mudrā* (posture of ease). In this pose, the left hand is held by the side of the body resting on the leg or thigh. Just as Zvelebil referred to *abhaya* as the *mudrā par excellence*, Coomaraswamy acknowledges *katisamsthita mudrā* as the "most excellent" *mudrā* in ancient and medieval India (Coomaraswamy, cited in Shukla 1996, 125). However, Coomaraswamy makes no specific reference here to images of Ardhanārīśvara.

Embodied deities also appear in various postures (*sthānas*, *āsanas*). Nine principal postures are enumerated in the *Viṣṇudharmottara*. Generally, Ardhanārīśvara can be seen standing in three different poses, technically referred to as *samapāda, ardhasamapāda*, and *tribhaṅga*.[11] One description of *tribhaṅga* offered by A. N. Tagore specifies that the

brahmasūtra or medial axis passes through the left or right pupil, the midsection of the chest, the navel, and follows downward to the heels (Tagore, cited in Shukla 1996, 132). In addition, there are three bends in the body, in the hips, shoulders, and head (hence, the term *tribhaṅga,* meaning three bends). This implies that the head leans either to the right or left. The alternative postures *samapāda* and *ardhansamapāda* suggest balance, symmetry, and equipoise in the body, as the two halves are divided equally along the *brahmasūtra* from the navel to the crown of the head. The weight and proportions of the body are distributed on the left and right sides equally, and there are no bends whatsoever in the body to differentiate the rounded volumes of the female form or shape. We find this posture on early Indian coins, seals, and some four-armed anthropomorphic images of Ardhanārīśvara. *Tribhaṅga* pose, according to Banerjea, is less common than *samapāda*, though our findings suggest that it is actually quite common, because *tribhaṅga* is the typical posture for female deities, hence, this stance is depicted on the female half as normative.

Iconographical Texts

Specific accounts of the formal diagnostic features of Ardhanārīśvara are given in the canons of Indian iconography. The *Viṣṇudharmottara* (eighth century), for instance, besides being the prominent treatise on the rules of *pratimālakṣaṇa*, contains references on *dharma*, medicine, dance, archery, astrology, astronomy, temple architecture, and the efficacy of *mantra* and, similar to other texts of this genre, provides only brief, formulaic descriptions of the rules of composition (*rūpa*). Structured in the form of a dialogue between the mythical King Vajra and the sage Mārkaṇḍeya, the *Viṣṇudharmottara* proclaims the greatness of Lord Viṣṇu and therefore belongs to the genre of Indian literature known as *upapurāṇas*. The third *khaṇḍa* on the ancient Indian arts of *pratimālakṣaṇa* is considered exemplary and is cited here specifically for this reason.

The *Viṣṇudharmottara* (*adhyāya* fifty-five in the third *khaṇḍa*) gives a simple description of the iconographic attributes of Ardhanārīśvara under the collective heading Mahādeva. It identifies Ardhanārīśvara as the Īśana form of the *pañcamukha* Mahādeva, and refers to him/her as Īśanarūpam, as well as the Gaurīśvara form of Śiva. In accordance with the typology of diagnostic features articulated above, it records that Īśana should have one face, two eyes, and four arms. The right half of the deity holds a rosary (*aksamālā*) and trident (*triśūla*) and is adorned with snakes (*nāgas*), the attributes of Śiva. The left half of the body is Śiva's consort (*vāma-ardhadayitātanuḥ*), who holds in her two hands a mirror (*darpaṇa*) and a lotus flower (*nīlotpala*). According to

this account, the composite form represents the nonduality (*abhedābinnā*) of *prakṛti* and *puruṣa*.[13]

The *Viṣṇudharmottara*, like other canonical sources of Indian iconography, offers only a brief description of the image of Ardhanārīśvara. What is equally significant in the formulaic account given is a single reference to worship and meditation, suggesting that this is only possible when there is a form. In other words, Mārkaṇḍeya reiterates the reciprocal relationship, stressed at the outset of this chapter, between the form of the deity as portrayed in the *mūrti* and the higher realms of experience of the adept in meditation. Here, form is considered inspirational, and meditation on the *mūrti* brings the adept closer to an experience of nondual reality (i.e., Ardhanārīśvara, or *prakṛti-puruṣa*). As iconographical treatises characteristically suggest, religious images function primarily as aesthetic, devotional, and meditational aids, and as such they convey both an "extrinsic" theological doctrine and an "intrinsic" meaning for the devotee (Maxwell 1989, 3; Srinivasan 1997, 14; Shukla 1996, 45). In this latter sense, the *mūrti,* insofar as it follows time-honored prescriptive guidelines, functions as a map in the process of worship or *sādhana*.

It also seems that the *Viṣṇudharmottara* and other *śilpa* texts represent a compilation of recipes or formulas from older texts which, as Kalidos (1993) and Kramrisch (1924) show, have been lost to us by the ravages of time. The research that Bruno Dagens (1989) has conducted on the *Śaivāgamas* led him to conclude that Indian *śilpa* treatises[13] such as the *Mayamata* and the *Vāstuśāstras*, which deal primarily with Indian temple architecture and, to a lesser extent, Indian art, have for the most part extrapolated their formulaic descriptions from preexisting monuments (Dagens 1989, 151). In other words, Dagens argues that image precedes text, and this is clearly the status with images of Ardhanārīśvara. As such, the *śāstra* tradition for Dagens offers nothing more than a guide for the image maker and presents "a short, factual, and non-optional list of compulsory requirements needed to identify the god" (Dagens 1989, 153). Dahmen-Dallapiccola draws a similar analogy between the *śilpa* tradition and Western cookbooks that offer recipes for unexperienced cooks (Dahmen-Dallapiccola 1989, xv). According to these interpretations, the iconographic textual tradition is understood as subservient to practice. The *śilpin* has the liberty to modify the image according to his/her creative and aesthetic imagination, but only within the limits of tradition. As we will see in chapter 2, this is precisely what Eliade concludes in his comparative study of iconography and *yoga*.

Moreover, the prescriptive accounts of Ardhanārīśvara given in various iconographical texts preserve an orthodox tradition of *brahmanical* theology and philosophy. Ardhanārīśvara is generally listed

as the *saumya* and *śanta* (benevolent and peaceful) forms of Śiva along-side other orthodox *brahmanical* Hindu images. That is, the *mūrti* portrays an ideal, or what R. N. Misra calls a "symbol-symbolized continuum" (Misra 1989, 175). Consequently, the *śilpaśāstras* are an integral link in a much larger cultural system of homologues or a network of correspondences in which the *mūrti* is understood as a "concretized" or "reconstituted" form of the unmanifest deity (ibid.). When viewed from this perspective, the *śilpaśāstras* function to uphold and embellish already existent theological and philosophical traditions through prescribed canonical forms. The significance of the *rūpa* seen in this context lies primarily in how it relates and/or is integrated with other forms of Indian religious practice, such as *yoga* technique, *dhyāna*, *pūjā*, and *darśana*.

Of course this raises several important issues regarding the purpose or function of iconography in India. Most icons are used primarily as objects of worship, and although the modes of practice vary to some extent throughout the subcontinent, the use of images is pan-Indian. The word "*pratimā*" has as its basic connotation the idea of "likeness" (Shukla 1996, 25). Bhattacharyya (1980) uses the term *echo* to convey the idea of symbolic representation of divine attributes. *Mūrti* reflects only the manifest aspect (*saguna, sakala*, etc.) of the deity, whereas *pratimā* refers to the actual living "likeness"of deity. This is clearly consistent with Srinivasan's theory of Saivite iconography, discussed earlier. The purpose of the canons of iconography, however, is simply to codify prescriptive formulae for maintaining a system of correct proportions and attributes of a particular *mūrti* for use in worship, whatever form that worship may take. Therefore, adherence to correct rules and practices of measurement and form, as the research of John Mosteller (1987, 1988) reveals, is central to effecting and maintaining the orthodox tradition of manifest sacred images particularly for the *brahmanical* elite. In this way, the precise implementation of a specified artistic tradition ensures continuity and the programmatic transmission of conventional form (*rūpa*) across time and place.

It is from this dynamic and varied *śilpa* tradition that our information on the prescriptive dimension of Ardhanārīśvara iconogrphy derives, at least in part. However, Maxwell (1989) warns us that applying *śāstric* iconographical passages to specific images is ultimately "doomed to failure," because in the final analysis, these texts are not the "key" to understanding the iconography (10). As I mentioned, Maxwell, like Dagens, Bose, and V. Dehejia, to mention only a few contemporary commentators on Indian iconography, see iconographical canons as being designed primarily to elaborate, preserve, and embellish convention and tradition rather than create it. Indeed, as Maxwell observes, "many of the most exciting and communicative

examples of Indian art are far beyond the reach of seemingly precise *shastric* injunction" (Maxwell 1989, 11).[14] Some of the figures of Ardhanārīśvara that we will look at later in this chapter are certainly examples of inspired works of sacred art that reach well beyond formulaic design. One such example is the masterful tenth-century Chola bronze from Tiruvenkadu. The vibrant imagery in contemporary Indian poster art also maintains the basic codes of the diagnostic tradition, though it far exceeds its preserved vision. One explanation for this is that iconography primarily derives its aesthetic inspiration from the adept *yogins*, *yoginīs*, saints, and sages of Indian religions.[15]

Although the *śilpaśāstras* are relatively silent on the social function of art, they do provide cultural archetypes, or what Maxwell calls "inherited symbol clusters" of received "cultural intelligence" (Maxwell 1989, 11). It is in this sense that the image of Ardhanārīśvara must also be understood or assessed. Maxwell's point is important and will bear close reinvestigation as the feminist analysis of this study unfolds. For now, it is clear that instructions regarding *śāstric* precepts originate from *brahmanical* sources that not only codify the iconographical tradition but also legitimate it. Maxwell is arguing this when he writes:

If we rely exclusively upon surviving *shilpashastric* texts to interpret Indian art, we will never understand it, since these texts are manifestly those of a small group composed not of artists but of their social superiors, the priestly gaurdians of cultural tradition. (Maxwell 1989, 15)

In other words, the dominant social class preserves the normative way to perceive a deity through *śāstric* iconographical rules and encoded traditions.

Still, Maxwell recognizes the necessary and requisite spiritual practices on the part of the *śilpins* to adeptly execute the empirical and aesthetic form that the deity assumes. For this reason, he urges the art historian to regard the *śilpin* tradition, and its inherited body of literature, as a distinct category that may not only be "divorced from the realities of image making," but in a broader sense is actually "mediating," "legitimating," and "recording" their perceived norms and practices (Maxwell 1989: 12). It is in this sense that the *śilpa* tradition operates as a storehouse of legitimated cultural norms under the power and supervision of its priestly/male guardians (15).

What we can conclude from this in the final analysis is that the *śilpa* tradition indicates and records the traditional norms as put forth by the male elite for maintaining the so-called perceived integrity of the image across time and place. Sheldon Pollock (1989) provides corroborating evidence of this and argues that the *śāstric* tradition in India typifies the "desire to codify" and "textualize" the iconographic tradition (15).

The *brahmanical* tradition extends rules to incorporate all domains of human activity and, in its overall purpose, he claims, the *śāstras* teach people typically "what they should and should not do" (18–19). In other words, they impute prescribed "human" and "divine" moral imperatives (18). This does not, however, discount the skill and multiple talents[16] required by the *śilpins* to produce Indian works of sacred art, nor compromise their significant role as aesthetic visionaries articulating the symbolic forms that eventually become the form and substance of the codified *śilpa* tradition.

With this view clearly in mind, we can look at a few samples of some of the formulaic descriptions of Ardhanārīśvara found in Indian iconographical works. These so-called recipes are consistent with the typology discussed earlier and are in keeping with the *brahmanical* codified tradition of the *śilpaśāstras*, though we do notice some variation. The examples chosen represent both commonalities and differences in Ardhanārīśvara images across time and place.

1. A typical, albeit abbreviated, description of Ardhanārīśvara given in the *Mānasollāsa* states that the right male chest should be flat, and the left female side should indicate a female breast. The hairstyles should differ, with jatted locks on the right, and a female hairstyle or bun on the left. The forehead (of the single face) is marked by a half third eye on the left.

2. The *Skanda Purāṇa* does not add much to this overall description except to indicate, in an unusual reference, that the vehicles (*vāhanas*) of the fish (*matsya*) and bull (*vrisabha*) should be shown with their respective deities. As we will see in an examination of the images themselves, variations on the depiction of *vāhana* are evident, but nowhere have we found this particular formation executed.

3. The *Matsya Purāṇa*, which is one of the three oldest of the eighteen *mahāpurāṇas*, provides generous material on Indian iconography. Indeed, its elaboration on iconic representations is one of its special features. Iconographical details in the *Matsya Purāṇa* (MP) are treated in as many as ten chapters. Ardhanārīśvara is addressed specifically under the various anthropomorphic forms of Śiva, alongside other composite or so-called syncretic deities, such as Umā-Maheśvara and Hari-Hara (MP 260.2-11). Typically the prescription of Ardhanārīśvara in the *Matsya Purāṇa* proceeds along traditional lines. The deity is half male and half female. A partition is made in the hair, with the right male half indicated by plaited hair and crescent moon, and the left female half beautifully coiffed. This hairstyle differential indicates the bipolar division of male and fe-

male along the *brahmasūtra*. The forehead is centrally marked by a shared *tilaka*. The right male ear wears an earring made from the serpent Vasuki, whereas an ordinary earring marks the left female ear. The right hand carries a skull (*kapāla*) or a trident (*triśūla*) and the left a mirror (*darpaṇa*) or a lotus flower (*nīlotpala*). From this brief description, we can ascertain that the deity is featured with one face and two arms. The right male half of the body is covered in tiger skin and serpents and displays genitals, whereas the left female side of the body is fully covered in cloth and various jewels. There is an unusual reference to the right foot, which rests on a lotus, and the left foot dyed in red lac is adorned with jewels and women's ornaments.

4. The *Mayamata* (36.81b–89a) delineates Ardhanārīśvara as a three-armed figure, holding a *kapāla*, a *triśūla*, or an ax in the right hand and an *utpala* (flower) in the left. The iconographic description mentions that a rosary adorns the left side of the chest, and the *yajñopavita* is arranged on the right. The right arms are muscular, and the left side is marked by a female breast. The two-footed deity is standing on a *pīṭhapadma* (lotus pedestal). The right half is described as Īśa and the left as Umā. Three-armed figures raise important questions regarding gender and will be discussed in more detail further on in the chapter.

5. The *Śilparatnakośa* by Sthāpaka Nirañjana Mahāpātra is a seventeenth-century Orissan *vāstu* text (not to be confused with the South Indian *Śilparatna* of Śrīkumara). It focuses primarily on temple construction based on the underlying correspondence between the structure of the temple and the human form (*puruṣa*), that is, macrocosm and microcosm. Of particular interest to our study is that it provides programmatic evidence of the Mañjuśrī type of *yantra* temple construction deriving from the geometric substructure or diagramic form of the *śrīcakra* or *śrīyantra* (S. 363–96). Consequently, this *śilpa* treatise offers one of the few textual examples identifying the integration of the dynamic female principle, Śakti, and the static male principle, Śiva, to create a temple structure that parallels other iconic and aniconic idiomatic forms of Ardhanārīśvara.[17] The second *khaṇḍa* (part) of this technical treatise pertains specifically to temple sculpture or images (*pratimālakṣaṇa*) and mentions Hara-Pārvatī by name only. Iconographic details are not given (S. 316).

6. South Indian *śilpa* treatises, such as *Śilparatna* (1.3.57), *Śrītattvanidhi*, *Sārasvatīyacitrakarmaśāstra* (*Adhyāya* 23), *Kaśyapaśilaśāstra* (*Paṭlam* 72), *Agastyasakalādhikara* (*Adhyāya* 12), *Aṃśumad-bhedāgama*, and *Supraphedāgama*, to name just a few, present the *pratimālakṣaṇa* of

Ardhanārīśvara as contiguous with the overall typology mentioned earlier (Rao 1968; Kalidos 1993; Kandasamy 1994; Adiceam 1967; Yadav 2000). The body is divided along the right male left female axis. The right half has a broader shoulder and virile chest, and the left half has a voluptuous breast. In several descriptions, Nandin appears in front of the image or at the side of Umā/Pārvatī. The image stands primarily in the *tribhaṅga* posture. The Śiva half is described as white or ash colour, and the Pārvatī half is gold or saffron. Most texts describe the deity with two and a half eyes, that is, a half third eye is placed on the right Śiva side, complemented by a half *tilaka* on the Pārvatī side. Hairstyles and ornamentation is also consistent with other *śilpa* materials. We find the sacred thread is common to both sides, or the alternate feature of a garland of skulls on the right half, and a necklace of jewels around the left half of the neck. Śiva is also portrayed dressed in tiger or elephant skin, whereas Pārvatī is wearing beautiful clothes of the finest fabric. The *Āgamas* indicate a three-armed Ardhanārīśvara, with two arms on the right Śiva side. Other representations show two and four armed images as normative. There is an atypical reference to Śivārdhanārīśvara in his *rudra* form with eight to sixteen arms. Adiceam (1967) charts these characteristics in more detail in her typology of South Indian Ardhanārīvara images.

Ardhanārīśvara is just one example among many described briefly in the complex texts on the religious art of India, and an analysis of its textual and iconographic descriptions and terminology will yield, as Maxwell argues, only a partial understanding of the image itself. In other words, the descriptive language used in the *śāstras* to convey the seemingly singular and normative forms of the icon is only part of the making of an image. A stylistic analysis can only convey part of the message that is central to its success as a cultural iconic archetype. Overall, one sees in the *śāstric* tradition on Indian arts in general and the descriptions of Ardhanārīśvara in particular a formulaic discourse. The intent is probably one of legitimation, as well as preservation, embellishment, and perpetuation of tradition. However, it also must be remembered that the correlation between iconography and Indian culture is at once philosophical and theological, and this must be central to any explication or understanding of Indian images. The aphoristic and repetitious style of the *śilpa* texts enabled memorization and, as Dahmen-Dallapiccola (1989) shows, an easy way to pass on "the secrets of the trade" from one generation to the next (40). In this way, parallels are drawn with other Indian traditions that relied on memorization and oral transmission, including dance, and *yoga.* Clearly, Indian iconography is highly religious and aesthetic in nature, but this

must not mystify the political and social forces also at work within the tradition. Perhaps this will be understood best in the analysis of specific examples of Ardhanārīśvara from various regions of the Indian subcontinent.

An Examination of Seventeen Images of Ardhanāriśvara

Before we begin in this section to look at specific images of Ardhanārīśvara it is important to understand the critical feminist theory that is being applied, and its appropriateness, given the ambivalence of the status of the female half and the close association of the feminine with nature in Indian tradition. The female-nature equation in Indian tradition does not necessarily imply the same ideological assumptions that it does in some Western feminisms. In the Indian context, the association of the feminine with nature is a sign of divinity and auspiciousness imbued with the qualities of fertility, prosperity, creativity, abundance, power, wisdom, and growth. The term *prakṛti*, which in essence has come to be synonymous with the feminine, has as its basic meaning "original or primary substance," "nature," "fundamental form," and so on, according to Monier Williams. By extension, it has come to represent the active or dynamic principle inherent in Indian cosmogony, as well as a female cosmological principle. As such, it is concerned with origins and associated with powerful images of motherhood, giving life, nourishment and nurturing, wealth, energy, purification, creativity, healing, and so on.

As well, the half-male, half-female image of Śiva under examination here belongs to a rich and stylized pantheon of Indian sacred art and, consequently, the function of this imagery must be thoroughly examined in its theological context. It is important, I think, to understand that in many cases religious imagery of the feminine is not necessarily an oppressive force in women's daily experience but rather a positive factor providing personal empowerment and agency. Nonetheless, the asymmetry of power and privilege at times embedded in the image must be acknowledged.

Consequently, I intend to use a feminist analysis at certain points to probe the gender issues and associations raised by the images of composite male-female form in various media of Indian tradition. Ardhanārīśvara, as I mentioned, is certainly informed by more than just the canons of Indian iconography. Although there are a variety of textual accounts of Ardhanārīśvara from *śilpaśastra*, *purāṇas*, *yoga* treatises, and *bhakti* literature, as well as Śaiva and Śakta theology, social convention, law codes, family values, and so on also inform the construction, interpretation, and application of the image at the level of

"mortal" men and women. In other words, the visual legacy of Ardhanārīśvara deriving from varied sources constellates to establish the paradigmatic diagnostic features used to recognize, identify, and legitimate the image of Ardhanārīśvara in Indian tradition. Thus we find a range of types of Ardhanārīśvara images that also varies in the degree to which gender hierarchy is present, though I would agree with Kalidos (1993) that the overall impression of the referential typology in specific cultural terms places the advantage primarily, but not always, on the right-male side (bearing in mind that Ardhanārīśvara is an image of Śiva). Indeed, only when we look at a countervailing image (see Figure 5.1) referred to by Kalidos as Ardhanārī or Kaṇṇaki, as we will see in chapter 5, is the privileging reversed. As such, this marks a shift in the emphasis of worship from the god Śiva to the goddess Śakti-Devī and may or may not portray a corresponding shift in human gender relations.

Ardhanārīśvara is not "human" or "mortal." As an iconic form, Ardhanārīśvara is typically employed in a religious or sacred context. For this reason, it is important not to collapse this image into mundane or secular terms. Rather, it is instructive to perhaps consider this image as a description of divine reality operating in the human realm or, as Srinivasan outlines, as the third stage in a triadic process of divine emanation. This explains why we are concerned here both with the physicality of iconography as a sacred Indian art form, as this aspect of analysis is necessary to establish the typology of Ardhanārīśvara images, but also, and perhaps more importantly, how this image has been historically formulated to convey religious significance and to encode philosophical and metaphysical presuppositions in a language that is essentially gender identified. Overall, the pairing of Śiva and Śakti/Pārvatī in one androgynous form represents several ancient Indian cultural narratives all compressed into one highly nuanced image. Looking at the androgynous metaphor reminds us again and again that this is not in any strict sense a model for human physicality *per se* but rather that Ardhanārīśvara represents an archetype or a paradigm of sacred human knowledge. Moreover, Ardhanārīśvara offers an interpretation of our essential and subtle natures as defined by Indian *haṭhayoga* traditions. As such, Ardhanārīsvara encodes a description for attaining emancipation and representing divinity at the subtle level of metaphysics. In this way, the body of the divine androgyne Ardhanārīśvara becomes a symbolic cultural landscape, formulating, regulating, and legitimating religious and ideological presuppositions including gender, on the one hand, while also providing a diagnostic paradigm for mapping the transformation of human consciousness through the subtle conjunction of the male and female symbolic form, on the other hand. In other words, the image

of Ardhanārīśvara enables the professional practitioner to approach more closely the *haṭhayoga* view of *sādhana* as a vehicle for self-knowledge (*ātmavidyā*, *jñāna*), but this must not idealize, romanticize, or mystify our attention to and critique of the implications that this motif has on human society.

As we have seen, it is clear that Indian sacred art is subject to regulation and control. Normative values, that is, male *brahmanical* values, are concretized by the *śilpins* in the artistic production of sacred images. With this in mind, it follows that not only are philosophical and theological doctrines encoded in the production of sacred images in India, but social relations and regulations also are most certainly codified and fixed in these standardized models of the bipolar sacred. For this reason, an interpretation of the divine androgyne that also is informed by feminist imperatives is long overdue. Hence, one purpose of this book is to identify and point out the gender implications in the representation of male and female and to question systematic, seemingly normative, and traditional typological patterns of subordination when and if they appear to place authority and privilege on the right-male side.

Although we will consider this in more detail later in chapter 5, in this section it is my overall contention that the image of the divine androgyne, like the earlier "pairs" of Vedic religion, portrays the female half in largely ambiguous ways. Śakti-Pārvatī is both goddess and woman (*nārī*) in her embodied or physical union with Śiva, though most often it is her womanliness that is emphasized in the iconography. For instance, the *śilpa* texts enumerate various emblems for mundane female figures who could best decorate sacred sites. Of these, three of the prerequisite diagnostic features assigned to ordinary women by the *śilpin* texts are canonically echoed as standard fare by the left-female/Pārvatī side of Ardhanārīśvara, including mirror, lotus flower, and anklets, and the fourth diagnostic feature, the parrot, is cited in texts and encountered in sculpture, though less often (Dehejia 1997, 19, 7–8). Yet Pārvatī, in her mythology and heroic imagery as the triumphant woman who is not only a goddess but the counterpart of Śiva, offers Indian society a powerful image, and it is here, in the role of heroine-goddess, that she speaks most eloquently to worshippers about the human experience. Consequently, I propose a feminist reading that considers the concepts associated with this so-called composite image and acknowledges Pārvatī-Śakti's ambivalence as both goddess and woman (*nārī*) in her embodied iconographic union with Śiva.

Although there is no lack of images of Ardhanārīśvara in sources on Indian iconography, this image has yet to receive its recognition. I make an effort here also to correct this deficiency by presenting an

examination of seventeen images of Ardhanārīśvara from different regions and periods in Indian tradition. I have selected these images from over 100 examined because, in my estimation, they represent a broad cross-section of the various ways in which the half-male and half-female image of Ardhanārīśvara has been portrayed in Indian art over the centuries. The sacred image of Ardhanārīśvara is universal in the Indian context, from Kashmir and Nepal to Tamil Nadu but, to be sure, variations can be seen throughout the following examples. The illustrations are arranged both chronologically and by region. I begin with the earliest images of Ardhanārīśvara from North India, followed by classic examples of well-known, rock-cut reliefs, and South Indian images, and I conclude with later North Indian images, including Nepal. This brief survey attempts to cover both commonalities and marked representational variations realized over time and place.

The Earliest Images of Ardhanārīśvara

The earliest images of Ardhanārīśvara date from the Scytho-Kuṣāṇa period. The oldest of them (Figure 1.1) is a small, mid-first-century C.E. red sandstone Kuṣāṇa stele currently located in the Government

Figure 1.1 Kuṣāṇa stele, mid-first-century c.e. Courtesy of the American Institute of Indian Studies, Gurgaon, India.