

Iconography of Several Forms of Pārvatī: Images in Eastern India

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Abstract : *This paper describes several iconographic forms of Parvati, the consort of Lord Shiva, as recovered from eastern India. The geographical boundary of Eastern India mainly comprises of West Bengal, Bihar, Orissa and Jharkhand. In this vast tract of land six varieties of Parvati images have been noticed. These images are Uma, Lalita, Gouri, Ardhanarisvar, Panchatapa and Linga with Sakti. These images are very well executed and are of immense artistic merit. The Puranic texts also refer to the varied iconographic features of Parvati images. Beside this, some specific examples of the goddess have also been incorporated in this paper. It may be noted that among many other Sakti cults of Eastern India Parvati cult has occupied a very significant position. The archaeological evidences not only show her popularity in this region but also indicate a distinctive growth of Sakta tradition whose principle deity was Parvati.*

Key words: Parvati , Iconography, Puranic text, Shakta , Eastern India.

Introduction : Eastern India with its large repository of sculptural art conveys a great deal of artistic persuasion from time immemorial. The artistic activities were boosted by the several dynastic inspirations. Eastern India has been considered as an important centre of three great religions of India namely: Buddhism, Brahmanical and Jainism. From fifth / sixth centuries, the region had witnessed the outburst of

artistic display on stone which reached its efflorescence stage during early medieval period, coincided with the firm establishment of Pāla- Sena dynasties. At this time the ruling dynasties assumed a direct role in patronage and created an appropriate atmosphere for the artistic spirit and image making.

The end of Gupta Empire ushered a new phase of history with a new socio-economic and cultural phenomenon which lasted for roughly seven centuries (600 – 1300 C.E.). This phase has been termed as the early medieval age. During these centuries, kingdoms in both north and south India proliferated and regularly turned over. Therefore, at that time, India was fragmented into numerous regional kingdoms. As the rulers of these kingdoms battled and formed alliances, they employed the system of paramount and subordination begun during the Gupta era, with some rulers being overlords and others vassals. Also, successful rulers demonstrated their power by granting land to officers, Brahmins, and temples. The outcome was a political pattern labelled as Indian feudalism. Eastern India several ruler families ruled during this period. The geo-political connotation changed in different period of time under several political rulers. The religious history and cultural phenomenon changed under the ruling dynasty.

The geographical boundary of eastern India mainly comprises of West Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, and Jharkhand. In this vast tract of land six varieties of Parvati images been noticed. These images are Umā, Lalitā, Gaurī, Ardhanarīvara, Pañchatapā and *Liṅga* with *Śakti*. The images are generally very well executed and are of immense artistic merit. The four-armed goddess stands in the samapadasthānaka pose having the attributes like *Liṅgam* with rosary in the upper right, a *triśāṇḍī* or trident in the upper left hands. She bears a boon or pomegranate in the lower right and vase in the lower left hand. The goddess is represented wearing a *jañāmukūṇā* and other ornaments on her body. She also wears a sacred thread. There is a halo around her head and the usual flying vidyādhara figures on either side of the *Kṛttimukha* shown on the top of the decorated elliptical *prabhāvalī*. The iconography suggests that

usually the image of the goddess is attended by two female attendants each standing on either side of the goddess with a fly-whisk in their respective right hands. There is a pair of plantain trees near each of the female attendants and the figure of a lion and an antelope are shown on the right and left sides of the goddess respectively. The lion and antelope are represented seating beneath plantain trees. Heaped *naivedya* pots are placed on either corner of the lower section of the pedestal, when the figure of the creeping iguana is also shown in a separate compartment beneath the lotus pedestal of the goddess. Another iconography of goddess *Gourī* is represented as an unmarried girl either with two hands in the *abhaya* or the *varada* poses or with four hands three of which bears *akshamālā*, *padma* and *kamandulu*; while the fourth hand is in the *abhaya* pose.

ICONOGRAPHIC REPRESENTATION

PĀRVATĪ

Pārvatī the deity is represented as having four arms. All the four arms of the goddess bear an *akshamālā*, an image of Lord Shiva, an image of Lord Ganesha and a *kamandulu*. The abode of the goddess is between the *agni-kundas*.

UMĀ

Goddess Pārvatī is worshipped in various aspects. She is also worshipped also as goddess U mā. In the form of U mā, the iconography suggests that her four hands bear an *akshamālā* a mirror, a lotus and a *kamandulu*. When *Gourī* is worshipped as Pārvatī, the deity is represented as having four arms. All the four arms of the goddess bear an *akshamālā*, an image of lord Shiva, an image of lord Ganesha and a *kamandulu*. The abode of the goddess is between the *agni-kundas*.

GOURĪ

Another iconographical feature of the goddess Gouri represents her as a female figure standing upon the back of an alligator. This particular image of Gourī is generally worshipped in household by the people who desire wealth and prosperity. The deity is shown as having four hands. In two of her hands, she bears the *akshasātra* and the *padma*; while the other two are kept in *varada* and *abhaya* pose respectively.

LALITĀ

The *Agni Purāṇa* has prescribed specific attributes for the Lalitā that she adorned with a spear, a small pitcher or *galantikā* (a pitcher with a hole at the bottom) and one hand showing conferring boon. Moreover she would have also a mirror and a collyrium stick in her hands. She will be accompanied by Ganesha and Karttikeya. Generally the images are found standing in Samapadasthānaka position on a simple lotus pedestal and her vehicle is *igunai.egodhā*.

ARDHANĀRĪŚVARA

Ardhanārīśvara is one of the sixty four manifestations of ParaŚiva, the aspect of Lord Śiva, who is Absolute, beyond all human comprehension and is hence considered the *Nirguna Brahman* (the Supreme One, who is beyond attributes). Ardhanārīśvara is a composite androgynous form of Śiva and his consort Pārvatī. This form is shown as a fusion of half-male and half-female forms, split down in the centre. The right half is depicted as Śiva, while the left half shows the female form of Pārvatī. The very name Ardhanārīśvara implies "the Lord who is half-woman". This form of Śiva is also referred to as *Ardhanarisha*, *Ardhanarimateshwara*, *Ardhayuvateeshwara*, *Ardhagaureeshwara*, *Gaureeshwara*, *Naranari*, *Parangada* and *Ammiappan*. Since Ardhanārīśvara represents the perfect synthesis of male and female forms, it also embodies the *Prakriti* and the *Purusha*, the feminine and masculine energies of the cosmos and also illustrates how Śakti, the Sacred Feminine, is inseparable from Śiva,

the male principle of God. This form also symbolizes the all-pervasive, all-enduring nature of Lord Śiva. The origin of the concept of Ardhanarīśvara can be traced back to hermaphrodite figures in both the ancient Hindu and Greek cultures. The earliest images of Ardhanarīśvara date back to the Kushana era, records of which exist from the first century CE.

It is believed that the iconography of Ardhanarīśvara developed and evolved during the Gupta period. The concept of Ardhanarīśvara continues to be a popular iconographic form and can be found in most Śiva temples throughout India. But strangely, there are very few temples in this country that are actually dedicated to this deity. It is believed that the early iconography of Ardhanarīśvara could have been inspired by the Vedic literature's composite figure of Yama-Yami, the combination of the primordial Creator *Vishvarupa* or *Prajāpati* and *Agni*, the Fire God. This figure appears as a bull, which is also a cow. Interestingly, the androgynous forms of Hermaphroditus and Agdistis are famous in Greek mythology as well. The *Bṛihadāraṇyaka* Upanishad says that this androgynous form occurs as a result of Puruṣa splitting himself into two parts, male and female. These two halves copulate, thereby producing all life. The *Shwetashwatara* Upanishad also talks about Rudra, the antecedent of the Puranic Śiva, the maker of all and the root of Puruṣa and Prakṛiti (the female principle), adhering to Samkhya philosophy. The earliest images of Ardhanarīśvara show the male half as ithyphallic with an *urdhvaliṅga* and the female left having a rounded breast and holding a mirror. This is the commonest representation of Ardhanarīśvara, which is also universally recognized. The right side which shows the male half has matted hair with a skull and crescent moon, while the left female side has well-combed hair decorated with pearls and flowers and wears a *patra-kundala* (earring). The face of Ardhanarīśvara has one common third eye as well. The earliest Kushan images showed Lord Ardhanarīśvara in a simple two-armed form, but later texts and sculptures depict a more complex iconography of the deity. One can also find the deity with three, sometimes even

eight, arms. In the case of three arms, Pārvatī "owns" only one of them, thereby showing her submissive, less dominant nature.

In actuality, the principle of Ardhanarīśvara seeks to unify the two sects of Shaivism and Shaktism, dedicated to Siva and the Devā respectively. Very rarely, in some schools of Shaktism, one can also see the female half to the right side of the Ardhanarīśvara image half to the left side. The male half dons a jata or piled, matted hair twisted on top of his head, adorned with a crescent moon. Sometimes this *jatā* is also ornamented with snakes and the Ganga (Ganges), flowing in a stream through the hair. In the right ear is a makara-kundala or sarpa-kundala (serpent-earring). In some pictures, the male eye is depicted as smaller than the female one (this is also mentioned in one other verse of the Ardhanarīśwara stotra and a half-moustache is also seen. While most portraits show both half-forms sharing the *trinetra* or the third eye, sometimes, a half third eye is shown on the male side of the forehead and Pārvatī's side of the forehead is adorned with a half bindi or round dot. In the two-armed form, one right hand holds a skull cap or *kapāla* and the other shows the *varada mudra* (gesture of succour). In the four-armed version of Ardhanarīśvara, one of the right hands holds a *parashu* or axe and another one gestures an *abhaya mudra*. Sometimes, one of the right arms is slightly bent and rests on the head of *Nandī* (Siva's mount, the Bull), while the other holds the *abhayamudrā*. In yet another pose, the right hands hold the Trishula or Trident and an *akshamaḷā* or rosary another makes an *abhaya* or *varada hasta*. Sometimes, the four-armed version shows the deity playing a Veena or lute, using a left and a right arm. The other male arm holds a *parashu* and the female one, a lotus. The male half of the body has a flat masculine chest, broader shoulder, wider waist and muscular thigh. He also wears a *yagñāpavita* or sacred thread across the chest. This sacred thread may sometimes divide the torso into its male and female halves. In some images from North India, the male half may be depicted shorn of any clothing. In South India though, the male side is usually covered in a dhoti (flowing

garment tied at the waist) made of cotton or silk, tiger-skin or a *sarpa-mekhala* or serpent girdle of sorts. The right side usually rests on a *Padma-Pitha* or *lotus pedestal*. The entire right half is also usually covered with ashes. The female half of the deity is shown having a *karanda-mukuta* or basket-shaped crown. The well-combed hair is neatly held in place. The left ear wears a *valika-kundala*. A bindu or *tilaka* adorns her forehead. While the male half of the neck is shown ornamented with a hooded serpent, the female neck has a blue lotus. In the case of two-armed icons, the left hand rests on Nandi's head, hangs loose or holds a flower, a mirror or a parrot. Sometimes, the parrot is perched on Pārvatī's wrist. In the three-armed portrait, the left hand holds a flower, a mirror or a parrot. The four-armed female form shows one of the left arms resting on Nandi's head, while the other is bent, holding a *nilotpala* or blue lotus. Sometimes, this hand also hangs loosely to her side. Her hands are usually adorned with ornaments like a *keyura* (bracelet) or *kankana* (bangles). The female half of the deity has a well-rounded, full bosom and a narrow feminine waist embellished with various *haras* or waistbands. She is also adorned with other ornaments, made of diamonds and other gems. She is shown having a fuller thigh and a curvier body and hip than the male part of the icon. The torso, hip and pelvis of the female are exaggerated so as to emphasize the anatomical differences between the halves. The female part of the body is always fully clothed. She wears a multi-coloured or white silken garment or sari down to her ankle and one or three girdles around her waist. The left half wears an anklet and her foot is painted red with *Alta* or Henna. The left leg usually rests on a *Padma-Pīṭha*. The Pārvatī half is smeared with saffron and is shown to be calm and gentle and is usually parrot-green or dark in colour.

The Ardhanarīśvara is often shown in the Tribhanga posture, that is, bent at three areas of the body: head (leaning to the left), torso (to the right) and right leg or in the sthanamudra position. If the deity is shown standing on a lotus pedestal, it is

referred to as the *samapada*. Very rarely is the Ardhanariśvara shown in a sitting position.

Linga with Śakti

The inclusion of the Linga with Śakti images into the fold of Saivism remains inconclusive. D.C Sarkar referred to several literary references indicating the worship of the Syncretic form. According to Sircar, the *malatimadhava* of Bhavabhuti (8th Century A.D) refers to a female yogini who worshipped the *kapalika* at the *Sripārvata* and described the vrata by the terrible activities of *Aghoraghanta* and his female disciple *kapalkundala* who are referred from the *sripārvata* and staying near the *mahamanasa* (at *padmavati* in the Gwalior state) containing a temple of Chamunda to whom they were going to offer *malati* sacrifice. This eighth century text not only testifies to the prevalence of human sacrifice before the mother goddess but also to interesting fact that the *kapalika*s worshiped both Śiva and Sakti. The *kapalika* group are often called *Viracara* and *vamachara*. This *kapalika* group worshiped Sakti in conjunction with Śiva. In this respect D.C Sircar referred to the Sulkis of Orissa who although their family deity was *Stambesvari*, claimed to have been exclusive worshipers of Mahesvari and he pointed out that "the very name of the goddess shows that she was made on at a sthamba indicating a Linga.....and thus that subordinate to Śiva". He seemed to have accepted "this Linga with the representation of Sakti" from Eastern India as example of such a goddess.

PAÑCHATAPĀ

There are two major events pertaining of Pārvatī, as indicated earlier, with the first being her desire to win Śiva as her husband and the second being her desire to have a golden complexion. A considerable number text provides detail description of the austerities of Pārvatī. The first event pertaining to her winning Śiva as her husband, is frequently associated with (a) the burning of *Kama* the god of love, who sent by

Brahma to incite Śiva with passion for Pārvatī, and (b) with the pride of Pārvatī who believed that beauty alone was enough to win Śiva as her husband as in the *Brahmavaivartapurāṇa*.

According to *Kumārasambhava* of Kalidas where in the summer she sat in the middle of the four blazing hot fire and gazed at the sun even spurning subsistence of fallen leaves. She developed a close familiarity with the deer which ate *kusa* grass from her hand even comparing her own eyes with theirs. She wore a tawny bark garment and matted hair. Her waist was red from string of *munja*-grass serving waistband. In her hand the finger from plucking tender blade of *kusa* grass, she carried a rosary of beads. Various textual descriptions of *tapasvini*- Pārvatī have been found among which one example is given by Gapinath Rao stating that she holds a rosary, images of Śiva and Ganesa and the *kamandula* in her four hands. Her abode is between *agni - kundas*. The *pañcagni-tapasyā* of Pārvatī signifies the performing of penance while surrounding by four pots of fire. She may be depicted either seated or standing in the rigid *samabhanga* pose. In *pañcagni-tapasyā* scene, Pārvatī depicted in a rigid *samabhanga* pose flanked by four *agnikundas*, two near each foot. She holds a rosary in her raised right arm while in her left lowered left hand she holds a *kamandula*. She wears a minimal amount of adornment, an antelope skin over her left shoulder, and lower garment that hangs her ankles. Some examples shows Pārvatī is seated in *ardhaparyanka* on a lotus cushion with her right knee raised. Her front right arm supported by her knee, is broken off while the left hand is lowered, holds a *kamandula*. The uplifted back right hand holds a rosary. The *sruk* or *ketaki* flower or *tridanda* holds its back left hand. She has elongated ears and her eyes are half closed in meditation. She wears a loose *ekavali* that falls in between her breasts, a broad *yajñapavita* and a lower garment that falls to her ankles. She is surrounded by four *agnikunda*, two on either side superimposed one above the other.

Archaeological Evidences : *Parasuramesvara* group of temples are nearly identical and among these temples *Parasuramesvara* is a better preserved temple. Beginning from the right we can see a dancing figure; a standing male holding a rosary and a vase; standing Sârîya; a kneeling Bramhà pouring libations on seated Agni; a diminutive Ganesha seated next to a vessel at the foot of Agni; Śiva and Pārvatī, each in a swaying pose of Śiva holding the right hand of Pārvatī in his left hand ; Two standing females (*Srīdevī* and *Bhūdevī*) with one resting her right hand on a staff or a sword plunged into the ground and the other lifting a sword over her head; Vishnu holding a pot, with his front two hands, ready to pour water in the ceremony of giving away the bride; a small attendant, beneath the vessel held by Vishnu, who holds a platter or garland over his or her head. In a fragment from the compound of the late eighth-early ninth century *Manikesvara* temple at Suklesvara, the placement of Śiva and Umā is reversed. Umā is badly damaged. She is seated in *ardhaparyanka* with her right knee raised and her bent left thigh placed under her body. She is depicted in profile as she faces the board and Śiva. Her left hand stretches across the board and holds an indistinct stick-like object. Śiva, who is seated in a bawdy *urdhvaliṅga* feature is clearly exposed. He holds a dice in his uplifted right hand while his left hand is in front of his chest. A seated attendant is behind him. *Kalyanasundara-murti* from Bihar-Bengal, one of the earliest is the Pala period stele from Pachher (Gaya district) now housed in the Patna, museum, which possibly dates to the second half of the eighteenth century. Both figures are somewhat stout in body proportions. Śiva stands in a slightly flexed *tribhaṅga* pose with his legs leaning towards Pārvatī. His right hand receives her right hand while his left hand is on his hip. His uplifted back right hand displays *vandanabhinayi* while holding a small, flat disc above the head of Pārvatī. His left hand holds a trident. He faces outward and appears immersed in reverie. Pārvatī stands with her left leg crossed behind the right and her body turned slightly inward towards Śiva. Her raised left hand holds a mirror. Her head is tilted down somewhat and she likewise is absorbed in reflection.

Bramha appears seated between them performing the *homa* ceremony. They are flanked by small images of Indra and Vishnu on the right and left respectively, each of their inside hand uplifted and holding a vessel. The rounded top of the backslab has an alignment of the *navagrahas* while the lion and bull mount appear on the pedestal. In the 12th century image from Muhammadpur, West Bengal, preserved in the Indian museum, Kolkata, Pārvatī is flanked by a cauri- bearing female attendant either side. She is two armed. Her lowered left hand holds the meandering stalk of an *utpala* with the closed blossom appearing opposite her face. Her lower Right hand displays *varada*. A meandering stalk, with an open lotus framing her hand, also rises up on her right with its open blossom opposite her face balancing the *utpala* on the left. She is richly adorned and her tall *kirita-mukuta* is framed by an oval- shaped halo with flanking *vidyadhara*s. *Vyala* Motifs decorate the sides of the backslab while a music playing *kinnara* is above the *makara* on other side at the base of the adumbrated *torana* design. Along the top edge is an alignment of five seated deities. Śiva at the apex is flanked by Ganesha, Bramha, Vishnu and Skanda.

In a bronze image of *pañcagnī -tapasyā* from Nalanda, Bihar an iguana is crawling near her right foot while a lion and a rather fat deer are carved on the front face of the pedestal. Her lower right hand is broken off while the damaged in uplifted back hand it holds a rosary. Her lower left hand hold a *kamandalu* (spouted vessel) while the raised back holds a trident. She stands in a *samabhañga* pose and wears minimal amount of adornment, including elongated and ornamented earrings, a necklace, *yajñapavita* and a lower garment, secured with a girdle, that hangs to her ankles. Her ornate aureole is decorated with the crescent-moon on the right and the sun on the left. An *agnikunda* is placed at each corner of the pedestal. The image, now in the National Museum, New Delhi, can be dated to the beginning of the ninth century, during the reign of Dharmapala.

An Orissan example of *Ekapāda-tapasvīnī Pārvatī* appears as a detached image leaning against the south wall of the Jagmohana of the Kosalesvara Temple at

patnagarh in the Bolangir district. The left leg of Pārvatī is broken off at the hip but it was originally uplifted and placed horizontally across her right leg at the knee. Her front hands as joint hands are visible in front of her body. They are broken off, so it is not possible to determine if they held any object such as a water pot (*kamandalu*). Both uplifted back hands are broken from the elbows. Her head, mostly obliterated, is framed by an oval-shaped, crenulated halo. On the right side of the halo, above her missing right hand, is a Śiva-linga while on the left side above her missing left hand, is an image of Ganesha.

A unique stone sculpture of the Goddess from Sonarpur, Uttar Dinajpur, North Bengal, has been considered as the main centre of worship of Lalitā as suggested by Gauriswar Bhattacharya. This image is shown carrying collyrium stick in her upper right hand and other three broken hands clearly indicate that Goddess has similar attributes as has been noticed in the previous image. At the back of the Goddess a double petal like halo is seen. Back stele is beautifully curved with *vidyadharas*, *gajasardula* and peacocks. Other characteristics remain the same. It is interesting to note that in Bengal each and every image of Lalitā has revealed similar iconographic traits.

There is another 11th century stone image of Lalitā hailed from Barabelun, Bardhaman. Here Lalitā stands on a Lotus pedestal in *samapada* posture. The four handed Lalitā is shown holding in her upper right hand the usual collyrium stick and her lower right hand has been depicted in *varada mudra* with pomegranate on the palm. The upper left hand is broken but the position of her hand shows that of holding a mirror. Devā is heavily jewelled and adorned with *Jatāmukuta*. On the pedestal a fire vessel has been depicted. In all these images, the attributes of the Goddess are same, differences occur only in the mirror details.

Another beautiful figure of Lalitā hails from Rajshahi district, Bangladesh. The Goddess shows some unique characteristics and plastic style which have been created by the artist excellently. The image has all her identifiable attributes. In her

four hands, she holds the Collyrium stick and mirror in the upper hands, while in her lower right hand is holding a fruit and her lower left hand touches the head of Kartikeya. Devi has a beautiful smiling face with divine calmness. She is richly ornamented. She is standing on lotus seat in *samapada* pose, whereas her companion display the *tribhanga* pose. Her *Vahana* *Godhika* is found on the pedestal, flanked by two devotees. Admittedly, all these images were created with iconographical precision following the Puranic exposition.

Conclusion : It may be noted that among many other Śakti cults of Eastern India Pārvatī cult also occupied a significant position. Archaeological evidences not only show her popularity in this region but also indicate a distinctive growth of *Śakta* tradition whose principal deity was Pārvatī. The above mentioned images of Eastern India clearly pointed out a regional development of goddess Pārvatī with specific iconography features. These images have followed the description of the *Agni Purāṇa* and a number of images, found from different parts of Eastern India have always been characterized by holding collyrium stick and mirror. These iconography features of the Goddess are noticed only in Eastern India. In South India they followed different iconography tradition of Pārvatī. These images have close affinity with the iconographic descriptions of other *Purāṇas* where noose, bow and goad have been recognised as her common attributes. The foregoing account makes it very clear that there were several centres of Pārvatī worship in India, stylistically, iconographically and conceptually the images of Pārvatī of this region portray complete different form of the Goddess.

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FIND SPOT OF PARVATI IMAGES IN EASTERN INDIA



**SOME PHOTOGRAPHICAL EXAMPLES FOR SEVERAL FORMS OF
PARVATI IMAGES IN EASTERN INDIA**



1. Image-Liṅga with Śhakti image
Find Spot-Dulmi-Jharkhand,
Date-11th Century C.E.Preserved in a Local Temple



2. Kalyansundaramurti (Wedding of Siva and Parvati)
Courtesy- RDPN24 (alamy)



3. Lalitā, North Bengal, Courtesy- British Museum



4. Uma-Maheswar image in Bihar.
Courtesy- [ee16b1ddd83468dc1b244469a52d9db4](#)

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