

Indian Dance Mudras - An Interesting Insight

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Introduction

Art is a fascination that can attract all. It possesses a multidisciplinary quality which includes, Uniqueness, identity, index, flexibility, transparency. The classical dancers acquire all these qualities and exhibit. Distinctive features like their bodily movements, hand gestures, facial expressions, costumes, jewellery, make-up, music compassion, and *Tala* patterns. These features differ from one classical dance to another but while researching about *hasta mudras*, its meaning and usages are similar. This makes the hand gestures unique.

In early times *hasta* was referred to as '*Mudra*' and by the following years. *Hasta* means Hand and symbol forms during the movements of fingers like folding, stretching, half-folding, expanding, and joining are said to be '*Mudra*'. *Abhinaya Darpanam* says gesture plays an important role in communication among the primitive people. Even now, gestures are used when there is a language barrier and some of the emotions cannot be expressed adequately without the hand movements. When these hand gestures form definite patterns, its termed *ashastas*. *Hastas* are classified as *Asamyuta* (single hand) and *Samyuta* (double hand) gestures.

These *mudras* are used by people in different fields such as Yoga, Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism and are benefitted. Both *Samyuta* and *Asamyuta hastas* differ from text to text into number and the way of holding(position) but it is similar in meaning and utilization.

In *Nandikesvara's Abhinaya Darpanam* (2013), 28 *Asamyutahastas* and 24 *Samyuta hastas* (p.xxxix) were marked and gives a detailed long list about each *mudra's viniyoga* and its usages. Generally, most research articles on mudras were on healing and dealt with utmost all the therapeutically methods. Unlike those, this research article is distinct by selecting three specific *mudras* of 52 and focussing only on three *mudras*.

The objectives of this article are

- Highlighting *mudras' viniyoga* and its usages.
- Revealing the feelings of *mudras* that were hidden by our ancestors.
- Diagnosing the positive vibrations while holding a *mudra*.
- Proposing the usage of *mudras* which were not spoken in the classical texts.

➤ Validation for selecting the three *Mudras*

In this period (COVID-19), the entire world seeks positive vibrations. This article assures that by productively using these *mudras*, one can achieve an adequate feel of positive vibrations. Upholding the fact that each *mudra* has a specific vibration which is accepted by all.

➤ Distinctive features of the Three *mudras*

- *Pataka* - Neutral, Grasping and accepting anything(positive or negative) according to the mood
- *Alapadma* - Happiness, Joy
- *Anjali* - Devotion, Respecting, and Humility.

1. Pataka Hasta – Usage and Characteristic Features



Image Source: Dr. G. J. Leema Rose (2017)

The very first mudra in *Asamyuta Hasta* is *Pataka hasta*. In *PanchaMarabu*, *Pataka hasta* has been classified under *Aankai*(male-hand gestures). The definition of *Pataka hasta* mentioned in *Abinaya Darpanam* is

“*Angulyahkuncitangusthahsamslistahprasrtayadi
Sa patakakarahproktonrtya karma visaradaih*”

This *viniyoga* says, when the thumb is bent and its tip is at the root of the forefinger and the palm and the four fingers are stretched, it becomes *Pataka hasta*.

1.1 Pataka hasta viniyoga

Anitha Vallabh (2013) says,

“*Natyarambhevarivahe vane vasthuniSheDhane
kuchasThalenishaayaamchanadhyaamamaramaNdale
thurangekhandanevaayaushayanegamanodhyame
prathaapa cha prasaadhe cha chandhrikaayaamghanaathape
kavaatapaatanesapthavibhakthyarThetharangake
veeThipraveshabhaavepisamathve cha angaraagake
aathmaarTheshapaThechaapithooShNeembhaavanidharshane
thaalapathre cha kete cha dhravyaadhisparshanethaThaa
aasheervaadhakriyaayaamchanrpashreShTasyabhaavane
thatrathathrethivachanesindhau cha sukruthikrame
samboDhanepurogepikhadgaroopasyaDhaaraNe
maasesamvathsarevarShadhinesammaarjanethaThaa
yevamarTheShuyujyanthepathaaka hasta bhaavanah*” (pp. 82,83,84)

1.2 Meaning of Sloka

Beginning of *Natya*, clouds, forest, forbidding things, breast, night, river, heaven, horse, cutting, wind, lying down, walking, prowess, favour, moonlight, strong sunlight, open or close the door, indicating seven cases of grammar, waves, a road, entering, equality, applying the sandalwood paste, one's self, taking an oath, silence, Palmyra leaf, shield, touching the things, benediction, an ideal king, indicating in such and such place, sea, series of good things, addressing a person, going forward, holding a sword, month, year, rainy day, sweeping.

Interpreting the usage of *Patakahasta* we can see,

- Seasons - Year, Month, Day, Rain, Cloud, etc.,
- Materials - Palmyra leaf, Sword, Shield
- Actions - Forbidding things, Cutting, Walking, Sleeping, Open & Close the door, Entering the street, Applying sandal paste, Silence, Taking an oath, Benediction, Touching, Saying, etc.,
- Things reacting joyous mood – River, Wind, Bosom, Night, Wave, An ideal king, Equality, Prowess, Word of gods, etc.,

- Personal planners - Meaning of the seven cases, One's self, Addressing (a person some distance away)

1.3 Reference to PanchaBootha

Analyzing the above, *Pataka* is a prowess mudra as it incorporates the contradicted actions with the aptness of the meaning. *Pataka* is not simply conjoint of five fingers. In the book *Mudras of India*, Cain Carrol, (2013) represents the five senses concerning *Panchaboothas*

- *Angustha* (Thumb) - *Agni*, Wisdom, Power
- *Tarjani* (Index finger) - *Vayu*, Compassion
- *Madhyama* (Middle finger) - *Akash*, Trust, Creativity
- *Anamika* (Ring finger) - *Prithvi*, Stability, Support
- *Kanishtha* (Little finger) - *Jal/Apas*, Wellbeing.

Each possesses variant forms and qualities and are related to the five senses. Thus *pataka* establishes a neutral. When a person holds *Pataka* and meditates for 5 minutes he/she will experience a beautiful positive vibe. In the case of a dancer, doing *Pataka* mudra *viniyoga* with hand and eye movements as said by Anitha Vallabh (2013),

“*Yatohastastodrstiryatodrstistatomanaha
Yatomanastatobhavoyatobhavastatorasaha*” (pp. 31,32)

Meaning – Wherever the hand moves, the glance should follow; where the glances are pointing, the mind should follow; where the mind is fixed, there expression should follow; where bhava is expressed, there is rasa.

He/she can experience certain beneficiaries such as

- reduced depression
- increasing stamina
- proper blood and contentment and
- the composure of mind which is already felt by our ancestries.

1.4 Mention of Patakahasta in Bharatarnava of Nandikeswara

Nandikeswara (1998) says in Chapter 4 – The Uses of *Hastas* according to *Brhaspati*

“*Pataka* (Asamyuta No.1) is used to denote the act of touch, in asking for a gift, to indicate absence of attachment, to denote a street, to indicate an entry, in showing changes of form, to indicate the application of cosmetics, to denote one-self, in declaring a vow, to indicate silence, to denote a bull, to indicate excellence, in showing the act of embracing, in showing the act of wailing, to denote a sword, to show the act of running, to denote a bedstead, to denote water, to indicate the sea, to denote milk, and to indicate slight bending. The *mudras* also used for expressing the idea of ‘then and there’, to indicate a wavy form, and in receiving something to make one's own”. (pp. 63,34)

Some special uses of *Patakahasta*

- To denote an act of cunning, both the hands hold *Pataka* facing each other and embracing each other.
- To denote dejection or like feeling, *Pataka mudras* are held a little away from the shoulders.
- To denote an adventure, *Pataka mudras* in both the hands are held pointing upwards and facing oneself. It is also used to denote a mirror or a look.
- For denoting a prohibition, *Patakas* are held facing outward.
- *Patakafacing* downward is used for denoting prohibition or sudden motionless. The same *mudra* is used to show the consideration of pros and cons, in understanding the purport of scriptures, and to denote haughtiness and like attitudes. (p. 574)

1.5 Uses of Pataka which were not Mentioned in Texts

The following usages of *Pataka* which were not mentioned in the texts and, are used in daily life are Salute, Attention, Rubbing back, Rising beloved's chin, Flying kiss, Exclaiming, Wiping tears, Waving hands, Beating on the head in Frustration, To receive something, To indicate chopping vegetables, Close the objects, Stop, Shut your mouth, Stay there, Wait, Mobile phone, Come, Go, Applying powder, soap/cream

on face, *Abhaya hasta*(to bless), Scold, Slap. Likewise, *Pataka* is used for different actions in our day today life.

1.6 Usage in Adavus

Depending on the styles of Bharathanatyam *adavus* differ in number. Some *adavus* using *Pataka* are *Paravaladavu*, *Kathi Adavu* and *Kitathakatarikitathom*. Both *Paravaladavu* and *Kathi adavu* were set in *Adi tala* ($8 \times 4 = 32$). *Kidatakatarikitathom* was set in *Rupaka tala* ($6 \times 4 = 24$). It is also termed as *Teermanaadavu*. It is harder to do these three *adavus* in a proper form. It is to be done in 'Araimandi' (half sit) in I, II, III speeds. By practicing these *adavus* a dancer can efficiently perform other *adavu*.

1.7 Perspective of Ancestors

In *Theermanaadavu*, the lower part of the body will remain in *araimandi* which are fully balanced by the lower limbs, and the upper torso will be balanced by the *hasta mudra* i.e. *Pataka*. While performing this whole *adavu*, the *angashudham* should be stiff along with the *Pataka*, or else the beauty of the whole *adavu* will not reach the audience. The ancestor has set this *adavu* in such a beautiful way through which an artist gathers the energy of the *PanchaBootha* while performing. While doing this *adavu* the *Pataka hasta* gathers the energy of *PanchaBootha* and while changing the *Pataka* to *Katakamukha* The energy of *Akash*, *Vayu*, and *Agni* are gathered together, and while stretching the hand, pointing the *Prithvi* the energy of *Jal* and *Prithvi* remains together. And thus, in these four counts, the whole energy of this *PanchaBootha* merges with the energy of a dancer which is also a therapy. Hence the body and mind of a dancer will have a linear communication. A dancer must understand the usage of the *mudras* and its hidden therapy which were said by our ancestors.

2. Alapadma Hasta – Usage and Characteristic Features



20. Alapadma

Image Source: Dr. G. J. Leema Rose (2017)

The twentieth mudra in *Asamyuta Hasta* is *Alapadma hasta*. In *PanchaMarabu*, *Alapadma hasta* has been classified under *Aankai* (male-hand gestures).

2.1 Alapadma hasta viniyoga

Anitha Vallabh (2013) says,

“*Vikachaabjae Kapitthadiphalaecha Aavarthakae Kuchae Virahae Mukurae Poorna-chandrae Sowndarya-bhavanae Dhamillae Chandrashalayam Gramae Uddhatakopayoho Tatakae Shakatae Chakravakae Kalakalaravae Shlaganae So alapadmashcha Keertito Bharatagamae*” (pp. 104,105)

2.2 Meaning of Sloka

Vikacha-abja – A fully bloomed lotus; *Kapittha-diphala* – wood apple; *Aavarthaka* – circular movement; *Kucha* – breast; *Viraha* – yearning to the beloved; *Mukura* – mirror; *Poorna-chandra* – full moon; *Sowndarya-bhavana* – beautiful form; *Dhamilla* – hair-knot; *Chandra-shala* – moon pavilion; *Gram* – village; *Uddhathakopa* – great anger; *Tataka* – pond or lake; *Shakata* – cart; *Chakravaka* – a type of bird; *Kala-kalarava* – murmuring sound; *Shlagana* – praise

The speciality of this mudra is the whole sentiments or *bhavas* which are used in *Natyam* can be showed in this *mudra* for example through this *mudra* a dancer can express the following sentiments such as the *Aacharyam* as *sthayibhavam*; *Rathi* or *shringaram* as *sancharibhavam*; *Nayagan* or *Nayagi* as *Vibhavam*; and nature as *Anubavam*. The term *alar* means blossom and *Padma* refer to lotus or flower. Hence the term *Alapadmameans* fully blossomed flower.

2.3 Usages of this mudra

This mudra is used to show the full blossomed lotus, the beautiful face, full moon, hair not, separation from the loved one, a village, sun and so on which were mentioned in the classical texts. Apart from the usages mentioned in the texts, *Alapadmahastas* are also used in day to day life, such as thinking by keeping the hands-on cheeks, showing the vibrations around us, showing the birth, eating, showing the pot, the round face, a big rock, showing any many thinking, showing the extreme happiness, the greatness, while saying don't know.

2.4 Usage in Adavus

This *mudra* is mainly used in *Nattadavu*, *Paravaladavu*, *Kuditamettadavu*, and in *TheermanaAdavu*. It is one of the commonly used *mudras* in *Nritta*. This *mudra* is mostly used in most of the *adavus*. Among that in *Kudhithumettuadavu*, *Paichaladavu*, *Tha hatha jam tharitha*, this *mudra* was set in such a graceful way. There is a close relationship between the *Alapadma* and *Katakamukhamudra*. Where ever the dancer uses the *Alapadmamudra*, the *Katakamukhamudra* is used. there is also a school which was named after this *mudra*, 'The *Alapadma* School of Dance'.

2.5 Benefits of this mudra said by the ancestors

As the ancestors said, there are vibrations for all mudras which heals the body with the help of the energy of the five elements. In this mudra, the fingers are stretched and separated from each one which creates a stretch in the nerves of the finger and this will become a therapy.

Sakthi Bhakti (April 29) says, "Stimulates all five fingers and therefore activates all Five Elements in the body, improves circulation and benefits the heart, boosts vitality and energizes body and mind. According to yoga or Ayurveda, this mudra is used to improves the immunity of the body and increase the positive energy".

2.6 Alapadma in other texts

Alapadma is the name of the dance *mudra* (hand gesture) that represents the fully opened lotus and can be found in the ancient texts on Indian dance and theatre namely the *Natyasastra* and the *AbhinayaDarpanam*, which serve as invaluable repositories of knowledge for most Indian classical dance forms. Apart from these texts, the information of *Alapadma* is given in the following texts,

2.6.1 Iconography texts (since this mudra is used in many sculptures)

Marie Stella (2012) says in her Ph.D. thesis,

- *Alapadmahasta* or simply *Alapadma* refers to blossomed lotus, happiness and represents one of the twenty-four gestures with a single hand, as defined according to texts dealing with *silpa* (arts and crafts), known as *silpasastras*. Accordingly, *pratima-lakṣaṇa* (body postures of the icons) is comprised of hand gestures (*hasta*, *mudra* or *kai-amaiti*), stances/poses (*asanas*) and inflections of the body (*bhaṅgas*). There are thirty-two types of hands [viz., *alapadmahasta*] classified into two major groups known as *tolirkai* (functional and expressive gestures) and *elirkai* (graceful posture of the hand).
- The many aspects of the lotus such as *SrishtiSarasija* (signifying creation), *Padae* (mythology), *LeelaKamala* (romance), *AlankaaraAmbuja* (iconography) and *SahasraraPadmam* (human wisdom) will be brought alive through music and dance.
- The lotus is a flower sacred to nature and the divine, and representative of both the abstract and the physical universe. It is also emblematic of the productive powers within and borne out of the spiritual and physical realms. It was held sacred in antiquity by the Hindus, the Egyptians, and thereafter by

the Buddhists. Revered in China and Japan, and adopted as a Christian emblem by the Greek and Latin Churches, the symbolism of the lotus is an enigma worthy of exploration.

2.6.2 Mention of *Alapadmahasta* in *Bharatarnava* of *Nandikeswara*

Nandikeswara (1998) says in Chapter 4 – The Uses of *Hastas* according to *Brhaspati*

To denote changed in features, or the pangs of separation, the hands holding *Alapadma mudra* (*Asamyuta* No. 20) starts from the navel and is given a winding movement of *Udvestita* (the hands going upward, the first finger going out first). To indicate sweetness or courtesy, this *mudra* is held above the shoulders. To denote ghee clarified from fresh butter, the *mudra* is held near the mouth, and if a winding movement upward is added, it denotes the sweet condiment called *Modaka*. When held above the head it is used to denote a lotus or a crown, and when held near the abdomen it denotes the lotus of the plexus near the navel. (pp.84, 85)

Some special uses of *Alapadmahasta*

- *Alapadma* held at the ear with a shake is used to denote a wholesome application to the ear.
- The abhinaya of a deity is shown when the hands holding *Alapadma* are bent as also the feet and the hands are held slightly extended.
- If *Alapadma* is shaken in front it denotes a thing of beauty.
- If *Alapadma* in the right hand is held over *Alapadma* in the left, it denotes surprise or a promiscuous group.
- If *Alapadma* in both hands at the chest it denotes things celestial.
- *Alapadma* in both hands allowed to hang freely on either side in *Dola* form is used to denote either illness, deep sorrow, intoxication or unconsciousness.
- *Alapadma* pointed towards the sides is used for something at the side.
- *Alapadma* in *Dola* form accompanies the normal standing posture when a character appears on the stage. When the same *mudra* is shaken it is used to denote playfulness or excitement. (pp. 580,581)

3. Anjali Hasta – Usage and Characteristic Features



Image Source: Dr. G. J. Leema Rose (2017)

Anjali is the first *mudra* of the 24 *Samyuta hastas*. *Anjali mudra* is a gesture of devotion and respectful greetings in which both hands are clasped together with the fingers upward and palms touching. It is held near the chest. Devotees and minor deities are often portrayed in this pose. It is said that *Anjali mudra* is used as a posture of composure, of returning to one's heart, while greeting someone or saying goodbye, initiating, or completing an action. *Anjali Mudra* is also known as *Pranam Mudra*, *Namaste Mudra*, or the prayer position. Most of the time, we perform it with our hands in the center of our heart chakra. This represents the balance and harmony between the right and left sides reunited in our center. This balance can be not only physical but also mental and emotional. The idea is to bring us to the center to prepare ourselves for meditation and contemplation. *Anjali mudra* is offering one's lower self to the higher self during meditation. This *mudra* activates *Anahata chakra* or heart-centre in the subtle body.

3.1 Anjalihasta viniyoga

Anitha Vallabh (2013) says,

“Devataguruvipranamnamaskareshavanukramat
Karyahashiromukhorasthoviniyogeanjalirbudhaihi”(p. 126)

3.2 Meaning of Sloka

Anjali is a divine offering. *Anjali mudra* also called *atmanjali* or *hridayanjali*, is used as a form of greeting by joining the palms of hands, in front of the heart, face, or crown of the head. The fingers point skyward. While making salutation to a deity or its form.

3.3 Usages of this mudra

This *mudra* is used to offer salutation to God, Elders, Teachers, and a Brahmin. The *Anjalimudra* is kept above the head to offer salutations to God. It is kept in front of the face to offer respect to the Teachers and Elders. It is kept in front of the chest to offer *pranams* to the twice-born or the Brahmins.

3.4 Usages of this mudra in daily life

This *mudra* is used as the symbol by politicians, by the air hostess to welcome the passengers, and in the temples while praying to god.

3.5 Benefits of mudra

Bringing together the palms in this *mudra* connects the right and the left hemispheres of the brain and connects the practitioner with spirituality/god/divinity. It promotes respect for oneself and others. It is considered a natural remedy for stress and anxiety and is useful for entering into a meditative state. The *Anjali mudra* is also seen in Buddhism, Hinduism, and many other religions. Of course, in the West, it is seen as being the hand gesture of prayer. *Anjali mudra* is so closely associated with religion, many non-religious people do not wish to make the gesture.

It believes *Anjali mudra* has a lot of spiritual, mental, and emotional benefits.

Dr. Raghuram Y.S. MD (Ay) & Dr. Manasa, B.A.M.S have said,

- *Anjali mudra* is most commonly used for meditation.
- The *Anjali Mudra* is associated with spirituality.
- The most effective *mudra* for anger control.
- It brings peace to mind and mind. All nervousness is removed from the body.
- *Anjali mudra* also brings balance to the right and left hemispheres of the brain.
- The brain improves concentration and core awareness.
- Scientists worldwide have argued that it brings harmony and peace in your life.

3.6 Anjali mudra in Yoga practice

Anjali Mudra is the easiest *mudra* to learn as every child is taught this gesture since the time they could consciously learn how to fold hands. When used in Yoga, doing this *mudra* means bringing both the palms together in front of the heart chakra, with the fingers pointing upwards. The hands need to be pressed evenly and firmly together. Every *Surya Namaskar* starts with the practitioner bringing their hands in *Anjali mudra*. While doing the *Anjali mudra*, it is important to be aware of the sensations that happen when you bring your palms together. Doing it slowly can make it easier for us to feel the vibrations. As we do it several times, we can notice the change in vibrations.

3.7 Power of Anjali Mudra

Dr. Raghuram Y.S. MD (Ay) & Dr. Manasa, B.A.M.S have said,

Globally, the *Namaste* gesture is practiced fondly because it is one sign that can exhibit greeting, humility, and gratitude simultaneously. And, the one doing it will also experience the same feeling of groundedness and humility. This is the first benefit of *Anjali mudra*, allowing you to internalize the external experience of humility and groundedness.

Some other benefits of the *mudra* include:

- The coming together of both hemispheres of our brain when we do the *Anjali mudra* channelizes our thought process temporarily. You can feel your mind experiencing positive thoughts during the practice.
- Slow breathing during the process of *Anjali mudra* and its connection to the heart improves the circulation of oxygen in the blood. It also balances the breathing pattern, calming an agitated mind instantly.
- Practicing *Anjali mudra* regularly brings more awareness, enhances concentration, and calms the mind thereby relieving stress.
- Physically it improves flexibility of the arm joints and wrists.
- Aside from stimulating the *Anahatachakra*, the regular practice of *Anjali mudra* is seen to stimulate the *Ajna chakra* as well. *Anahata Chakra* is located in the center of our chest and its stimulation helps us deal with our emotions in a better way. *Ajna Chakra* is located in the middle of the eyebrows and is the concentration center of our body. Stimulating it increases our focus and memory prowess.

3.8 Meaning of *Anjali* in text

There are some famous texts which give information's about this *mudra* apart from the classical texts. Some of the texts are

3.8.1 *Ayurveda* (the science of life)

Anjali is the Sanskrit word representing a measure of corn (sufficient to fill both hands when placed side by side). This measurement equals a single *Kudava* unit, which is a weight unit used throughout Ayurvedic literature.

3.8.2 *Purana and Itihasa* (epic history)

Anjali- A mode of worship with both hands. He who worships a god by raising only one hand is liable to have that hand cut off. It is a type of gesture (*āṅgika*) made with combined hands (*saṃyutahasta*); Instructions: Putting together of the two *Patāka* hands is called *Anjali*. Uses: It is used to greet gods, venerable persons (guru), and friends. In greeting gods it is to be held on the head, in case of venerable persons like father, teacher, etc. it is to be held near one's face, and for greeting the friends it is to be placed on the chest and in case of the remaining persons there are no fixed rules.

3.8.3 *Shilpashastra* (iconography)

Marie Stella (2012) says, *Anjali* or refers to "devotion" and represents one of the four gestures with both hands, as defined according to texts dealing with *śilpa* (arts and crafts), known as *śilpasastras*. Accordingly, *pratima-lakṣaṇa* (body postures of the icons) is comprised of hand gestures (*hasta, mudrā or kai-amaiti*), stances/poses (*asanas*) and inflections of the body (*bhaṅgas*). There are thirty-two types of hands [viz., *Anjalihasta*] classified into two major groups known as *astolirkai* (functional and expressive gestures) and *elirkai* (graceful posture of the hand).

There are many texts which give the definitions of *Anjali mudra*. *Anjali Mudra* is a large part of the culture and practice of yoga. This gesture signifies the potential for an intention to progress to greatest spiritual awakening. When done properly the palms are not flat against each other; the knuckles at the base of the fingers are bent a little, creating space between the palms and fingers of the two hands resembling a flower yet to open, symbolizing the opening of our hearts.

Conclusion

Mudras are also used as therapy by our ancestors. There are many mysterious benefits of these *mudras* of which we are not aware and which are not mentioned in any texts. There are some yogis, who used these *mudras* as the healing therapy for the body. These *mudras* have healing therapy through which our immunity power increases. These three *mudras* are part of our culture and the practice of yoga. All these gestures signify the potential for an intention to progress the great spiritual awakenings. While doing all the *mudras* in a proper way with realizing the vibrations absorbs by the body from nature, can improve the immunity system in our body which is most important for everyone in the current situation.