

## SIMILAR HAND GESTURES USED IN CLASSICAL DANCE AND RITUALISTIC PRAYERS

Hand gestures have been an integral part of Indian culture from primeval times. Ranging from the daily conversations to the latest modern applications, hand gestures find a great vicinity in the life of every individual. Indian classical dance and prayers are two subjects that largely exploit the theme of hand gestures. Classical art forms of India are based on the ancient texts which vastly describe the hand gestures, their methodologies and uses. Ritualistic prayers performed in India have a delicate connection with hand gestures and the spiritual texts essentially describe the use of some hand gestures as a significant part of the rituals. The following research is based on the comparison of the hand gestures used in these two enormous areas of Indian culture, with a focus on the similarities. The information regarding the hand gestures in dance and prayers are taken from the books *Abhinaya Darpana* and *Nitya karma pooja prakash*, respectively.

Hand gestures as used in Classical dance are vividly described in the *Abhinaya Darpanam* of Nandikeshvara. The literal meaning of *abhinaya* is to bring forth. *Abhinaya* or expressive dance is performed to bring forth an emotion, situation or personality. Out of the four types of *abhinaya*, *Angika abhinaya* forms a major part in performing arts.

*tatra angikongair nirdarshitaha*

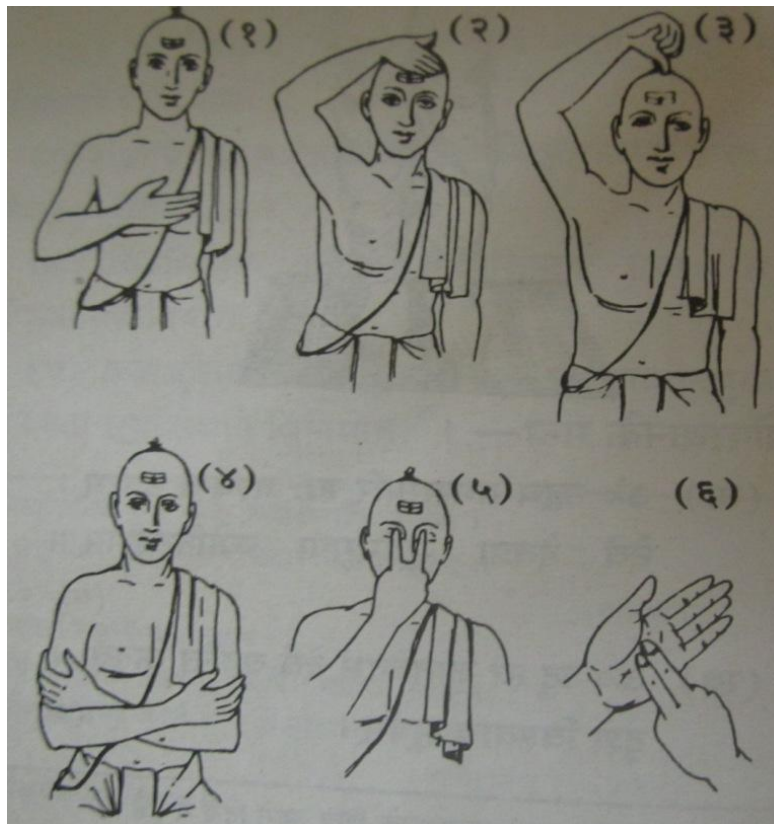
*(Abhinaya Darpana – 39)*

That which is expressed using the different parts of the body is known as *Angika abhinaya*. Among the list of hand gestures, eye movements, neck movements and head movements, *Hasta Mudras* or hand gestures are a fundamental section of the *angika abhinaya*. The *abhinaya darpana* divides hand gestures in two sections – *samyukta* (gestures done with both hands) and *asamyukta* (single hand gestures). Classical dance massively uses hand gestures to portray a story, to forward an emotion or for beauty.

In the rituals of India, *mudras* are used during the various ceremonies involved. According to the *shastras*, when the fingers arrange themselves in different ways to form the *mudra*, divine cosmic energy is captured within the

shaped gesture. This energy provides the aspirant with bliss. And that in essence is the accurate meaning of the word mudra. *Mudam rati iti mudra* i.e. that which brings bliss is known as mudra. In this way, hasta mudras are used in daily rituals and prayers to help the individual gain spiritual happiness and progress.

One of the most common features of the daily prayers performed by Brahmins is the *anganyasa*. This consists of holding six different parts of the bodies and saying certain syllables and mantras. Since six parts of the body are involved, the term *sadanganyasa* is more frequently used and the ritual is generally performed before beginning the prayers. According to the scriptures, this process purifies the earthly body and thus makes is worthy of offering prayers to the supreme. The following figure shows the six procedures of the *sadanganyasa*:



The first two portions use a similar hand gesture. In the *abhinaya darpana*, this mudra is given the name *ardhachandra*.

*ardhachandrakarah soyam patakengushta prasarane*  
(Abhinaya Darpana -111)

'The Ardhachandra mudra is depicted by using the pataka mudra and spreading out the thumb.'

Nandikeshvara has described earlier that the pataka mudra is made by spreading out the four fingers and touching the thumb to the pointing finger. When the thumb is spread out, the ardhachandra mudra is formed. This mudra is clearly shown in the first two procedures of the *anganyasa*.



The third section of this daily ritual is performed using the Shikhara mudra, which Nandikeshvara describes as follows:

*melanangulinancha kunchitanam talantare*  
*angushtashchopariyuto mushtihastoyamiryate* (Abhinaya Darpana 116)  
*chenmushtirunnatangushtah sa eva shikhara kara* (Abhinaya Darpana 118)

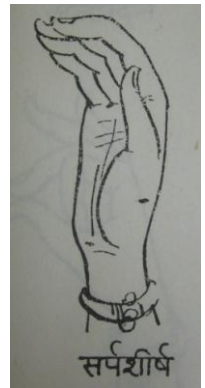
'When the four fingers are put together and are folded inwards to the palm with the thumb lying on top of them, the mushti mudra is formed. If the thumb is raised up in this mudra, it shows the shikhara mudra.' This mudra is used to touch the head during the procedures.



The fourth section of the *anganyasa* makes use of the sarpashirasa mudra. The sarpashirasa mudra is depicted as:

*pataka nemitagra chet sarpashirsha karo bhavet*  
(Abhinaya Darpana - 137)

'If the fingers in the pataka mudra are bent forward, the sarpashirasa mudra is shown.'



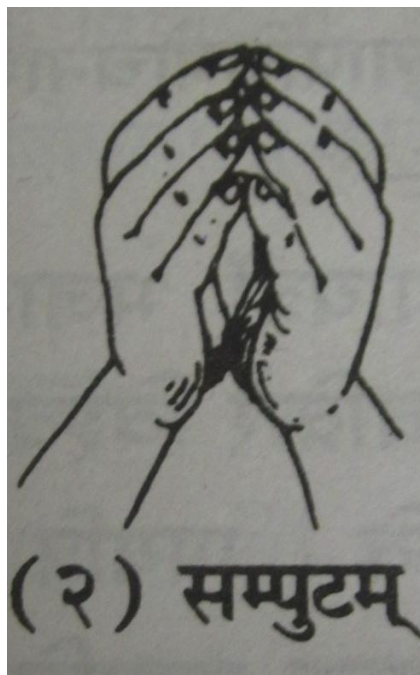
This mudra is used to hold the two arms as the fourth body part for the ritual.

The sixth procedure of the ritual involves the use of the ardhapataka hasta mudra which Sri Nandikeshvara describes as being formed by folding the last two fingers in the pataka mudra. Consequently, the sadanganyasa process involves the use of similar hand gestures as used in classical artforms for five out of the six procedures.



As per the Devi Bhagawat Purana, a certain number of mudras should be depicted before chanting the daily mantras during the time of worship. Out of these, there are a few which are also employed in classical dance. These mudras are described below. Some mudras that are illustrated in the same way have different names in the two different fields of rituals and dance.

The first similar hand gesture is the samputam mudra. The following figures show the illustration of the mudra as used in rituals and dance respectively, in different orientations. In classical dance, this particular gesture is described as kapotam. Sri Nandikeshvara mentions that the kapota mudra is derived from the anjali mudra which in turn is formed using the pataka mudra. When the two hands holding the pataka mudra are joined together, the anjali hand gesture is shaped. And if the fingers in this gesture are bent, the kapota mudra is formed.

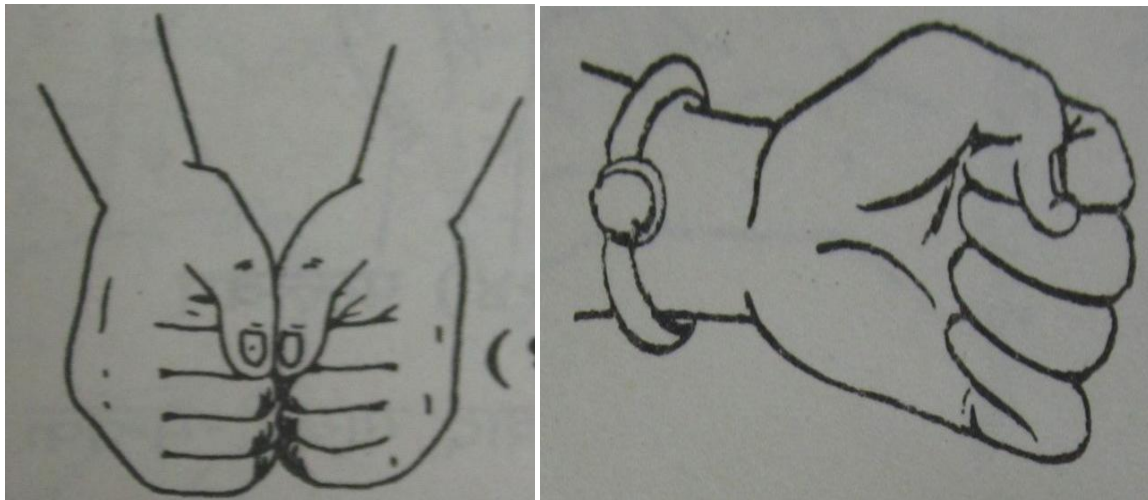


The vyapakanjali mudra that is used in prayers is known as the pushpaputa hasta in classical arts. The abhinaya darpana describes:

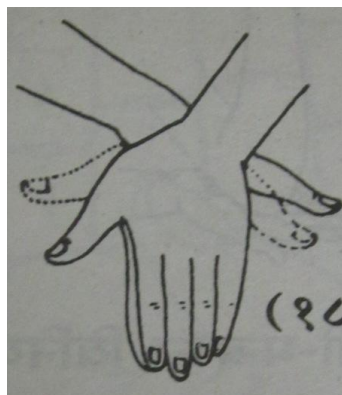
*sanshishtakarayoh sarpashirshah pushpaputah karah*(AbhinayaDarpana 182)

'If the two hands holding the sarpashirasa mudra are joined together, the pushpaputa mudra is produced.'

Mushtikam is the mudra used in prayers that is very similar to the mushti hasta used in dance. The only difference is that, in classical art forms, the mushti hasta can be shown using a single hand, while the mushtikam mudra is basically holding the mushti mudra in both hands and joining them together.



The matsya hand gesture is a mudra that is common to both the areas considered above. By holding the ardhachandra gesture on both hands and placing the right hand above the left while facing downwards, the matsya mudra is formed.



Another mudra that is common to both areas is the shankha mudra, which is formed by holding the thumb of the left hand using the shikhara mudra on the right hand and joining the two hands.

In this way, there are numerous ways in which the gestures used in the broad culture of India are closely related to each other. Thus, it is very dominant that the mudras used in classical dance and spiritual rituals have a large number of similarities between them. The shastras say that classical dance is no less than a spiritual ritual or a yagya, therefore it is rather obvious that it will have comparable characteristics as other prayers.

\*Reference texts

1. Nityakarma pooja prakash, Sri Ram Bhavan ji Mishra
2. Bharatiya Natya Parampara and Abhinaya Darpana, Sri Vachaspati Gairola