



**Exploring Rare and Non-Canonical Asamyukta Hastas in
Bharatanāṭyam: A Study Based on the Bālarāmabharatam**

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Abstract

This study investigates a selection of rare and regionally preserved *asamyukta hastas* (single-hand gestures) as described in the Bālarāmabharatam, a lesser-known yet significant text in the field of Indian classical dance. While canonical treatises such as the Nāṭyaśāstra and the Abhinayadarpaṇa have long served as foundational references for *hasta-abhinaya*, the Bālarāmabharatam introduces several *mudrās* that are either absent from these texts or have evolved through oral traditions. This journal aims to bridge the gap between textual knowledge and performance practice by examining the historical, symbolic, and practical dimensions of these *hastas*. It also reflects on the continued use of certain *mudrās* in performance without awareness of their origins, and on gestures that may no longer be practical but retain theoretical significance. Through this exploration, the study enriches the expressive vocabulary of Bharatanāṭyam and encourages a more informed and authentic approach to abhinaya.

Keywords

Asamyukta Hasta, Bālarāmabharatam, Bharatanāṭyam, Abhinaya, Nāṭyaśāstra, Mudrā, Indian Classical Dance, Oral Tradition, Non-Canonical Gestures

Introduction

The use of hand gestures (*hastas*) in Indian classical dance and drama is a tradition of immense antiquity, deeply embedded in the ritual, aesthetic, and narrative frameworks of performance. These gestures are not merely ornamental but serve as vital instruments of communication, capable of conveying emotions (*bhāvas*), ideas, and stories. Their presence in Indian iconography—particularly in temple sculpture—underscores their cultural significance and continuity.

Bālarāmabharatam, composed by Kārttika Tirunāl Bālarāma Varma (1758–1798 C.E.), Maharaja of Travancore, is a Sanskrit treatise blending classical theory and contemporary performance practice. Rooted in the tradition of Bharata's Nāṭyaśāstra, the work emphasizes *āṅgikābhinaya* (physical expression) as central to evoking *bhāva* and *rasa* in theatre. Varma presents it not as innovation, but as a reflection of the prevailing performing arts of his time.



Edited by K. Sambaśiva Śāstri and published in 1935 (Trivandrum Sanskrit Series no. 118), the text—likely based on Varma’s own manuscript—is written in Malayalam script and transliterated into Devanāgarī. It comprises 2408 verses and extensive prose, covering body movements (*viniyoga*), musical elements, and definitions of *nāṭya*. Scholars regard it as a vital resource for understanding Kerala’s classical dance heritage and its revival.

While Bharata’s *Nāṭyaśāstra* laid the foundational grammar for *hastā-abhinaya*, later texts such as the *Abhinayadarpaṇa* and the *Bālarāmabharatam* expanded upon this system. The *Bālarāmabharatam* in particular offers a unique perspective by documenting *hastas* that are not found in earlier treatises, many of which have been preserved through oral traditions or regional practices. This study focuses on these lesser-known *asamyukta hastas*, exploring their form, symbolism, and relevance in contemporary performance.

It was Bharata, through his seminal treatise the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, who first codified the use of *mudrās* within the framework of *nāṭya* (dramatic performance). Later texts such as the *Abhinayadarpaṇa* and the *Bālarāmabharatam* expanded upon this foundation, offering further classifications and interpretations. Generally, the *hastā-mudrās* are categorized into three types:

- *Asamyukta-hastas* (single-hand gestures)
- *Samyukta-hastas* (combined or two-hand gestures)
- *Nṛttahastas* (gestures used in pure dance or *nṛtta*)

The *Bālarāmabharatam* enumerates a total of sixty-seven *hastas*—forty *asamyukta-hastas* and twenty-seven *samyukta-hastas*. In discussing the expressive potential of these gestures, the author invokes the well-known dictum from the *Abhinayadarpaṇa*:

“ *Yato hastastato dr̥ṣṭiḥ, yato dr̥ṣṭistato manaḥ,
yato manaḥstato bhāvaḥ, yato bhāvastato rasaḥ.* ” _

(Where the hand goes, the eyes follow; where the eyes go, the mind follows; where the mind goes, there arises *bhāva*; and where there is *bhāva*, there emerges *rasa*.)

Analysis Of Rare Asamyukta Hastas

The *Bālarāmabharatam* presents forty *asamyukta-hastas*, encompassing those mentioned in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and introducing several others based on oral transmission and regional practice. The following *hastas* are notable for their absence in canonical texts and are likely rooted in localized traditions or practical innovations within specific dance forms such as *Bharatanāṭyam* and *Kathakali*.

1. Triliṅga

In this *hasta*, the index finger is separated from the ring finger, and its tip touches the edge of the thumb. This *mudrā* is not referenced in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* or the *Abhinayadarpaṇa*, and appears to be preserved through oral tradition. In *Bharatanāṭyam*, it is typically employed to signify sin (*pāpa*) or crookedness.

2. Bāṇa

Formed from the *Mṛgāsirsa* *hastā*, this *mudrā* involves stretching the little finger while the other three fingers are pressed down by the thumb. Known only from the *Bālarāmabharatam*, it is used



to denote the number six and is iconographically associated with Śrī Kṛṣṇa lifting the Govardhana hill with his little finger.

3. Nirīkṣaṇa

An extension of the Bāṇa hasta, this *mudrā* is formed by straightening the ring finger. It is not found in any classical text and is likely derived from oral tradition. In Kathakalī, it is used to represent the number seven, the *sapta-lokas*, the *sapta-māṭṛkās*, or the act of gazing through a Chinese mirror.

4. Ūṛṇanābham

All five fingers are bent at the middle joint, creating a hollowed palm. Also referred to as Siṃhanakha, this hasta is absent in the Abhinayadarpaṇa. It is used to depict a lion (*siṃha*), tiger (*vyāghra*), or spider, among others.

5. Pūronnata

Derived from the Padmakōśa hasta, this gesture is formed by placing the thumb's tip on the nail of the little finger while the other fingers are extended. Though not mentioned in the Nāṭyaśāstra or Abhinayadarpaṇa, it is referred to as Triśūla in other contexts. It symbolizes the number three, the Triśūla weapon, the Trimūrti, and the three guṇas.

6. Caturunnatahasta

In this variation of Patāka, the four fingers are extended upward while the thumb is bent toward its middle joint. Not found in classical texts, it is used in Bharatanatyam to denote the four *puruṣārthas*, four Vedas, four *varṇas*, and four *yamas*.

7. Pūrṇacandrahasta

A fully expanded Patāka with all fingers stretched out, this hasta represents the number five, the five sacred trees (*pañcavṛkṣa*), five limbs (*aṅgas*), and the solar and lunar discs.

8. Śilimukhahasta

Here, the tip of the index finger touches the middle of the thumb, pointing downward, while the other fingers are curved and separated. This corresponds to the Vardhamānahasta of the Hastalakṣaṇadīpikā and is not mentioned in other major texts. It is used to depict drinking water, as a *nṛtta hasta*, or for drawing kolam patterns.

9. Bhadrahasta

A variation of Siṃhamukha, this hasta involves stretching the thumb in its natural position. It is closely related to the Mukurahasta of the Hastalakṣaṇadīpikā and is often used to depict the ḍamaru (drum) associated with Śiva.

10. Prālambam

If in the Balachandra *hasta* the three fingers, beginning with the little finger, are extended upwards and then curved inwards, it is Prālambam *hasta*. Even though Prālambam *hasta* is widely used in Bharatanatyam, it is not mentioned in any texts before the 18th century.

Conclusion

The exploration of these rare and non-canonical asamyukta hastas reveals the richness and adaptability of Bharatanāṭyam's gestural vocabulary. While some of these *mudrās* may no longer



be practical in contemporary performance, their symbolic and historical value remains significant. By engaging with these gestures through both textual study and embodied practice, dancers can cultivate a more nuanced and authentic approach to abhinaya. This study affirms that tradition is not static but a living continuum—one that honors its roots while embracing evolution.

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