

# Comprehension of Hasta Mudras: Exploring the Application of Abhinaya Hasta Mudras in Mohiniattam Choreography

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## Keywords

Mohiniattam, Abhinaya, Hasta Mudras, Choreography, Bhava, Rasa, Natya Shastra, Hastha Lakshana Deepika, Angika abhinaya, Vedic mudra, Tantric Mudra.

## Abstract

Mudras, the codified hand gestures intrinsic to Indian classical dance, serve as powerful tools for expression, narrative, and symbolism. In the context of *Mohiniattam*, the classical dance form of Kerala known for its graceful movements and emotive storytelling, *Abhinaya Hasta Mudras* hold a particularly vital place. This paper explores the application and significance of these mudras in *Mohiniattam* choreography, emphasizing their role in conveying *Bhava* (emotion) and enhancing *Abhinaya* (dramatic expression). Rooted in ancient treatises such as *Bharata's Nāṭyaśāstra* and the *Hastha Lakshana Deepika*, these gestures have been adapted over centuries to suit the lyrical and emotive ethos of *Mohiniattam*, evolving into an expressive vocabulary that bridges tradition and innovation.

The study undertakes a comprehensive examination of selected mudras through both textual analysis and practical application. It investigates how these gestures contribute to the evocation of *Rasa* (aesthetic sentiment), define character identities, and support thematic and narrative structures within solo and group choreographies. Employing methodologies such as observation, interviews with seasoned performers and gurus, and critical analysis of choreographic compositions, the research contextualizes the use of hasta mudras in both traditional repertoires and contemporary adaptations.

Key findings reveal the fluidity and adaptability of mudras in *Mohiniattam*. While certain gestures remain close to classical prescriptions, others have undergone subtle transformations to align with changing aesthetics and performance contexts. The study highlights how *Angikabhinaya*—expression through body movements, including the hands—operates in synchrony with facial expressions (*Mukhabhinaya*), torso sways (*Torso Abhinaya*), and rhythmic footwork to create a nuanced and layered narrative experience. Additionally, it uncovers regional and stylistic variations in mudra usage and presentation, reflecting the diversity within the tradition itself.

This research affirms that hasta mudras are not static symbols but dynamic components of Mohiniattam's expressive core. Their continued relevance is evident in the way contemporary practitioners incorporate them to articulate new themes while preserving the form's cultural authenticity. By tracing the lineage, transformation, and function of Abhinaya Hastas, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of *Mohiniattam*'s aesthetic richness and the enduring power of gesture in classical Indian dance. It invites further exploration into under-researched mudras and supports the revitalization of forgotten gestures, enriching the pedagogical and performative dimensions of the art form.

## Introduction

Mohiniattam, the "*dance of the enchantress*," is a solo female dance tradition rooted in Kerala's temple rituals and Lasya aesthetics. Its hallmark lies in its graceful sways (*Lalitha movements*), emotive storytelling (*abhinaya*), and symbolic gestures (*mudras*). The mudras used in Mohiniattam are more than mere embellishments; they are potent tools for conveying complex emotions (*bhavas*), dramatic moods (*rasas*), and narrative depth. Codified in classical treatises such as Bharata's *Natya Shastra* and the Kerala-specific *Hashta Lakshana Deepika*, these mudras offer a visual vocabulary that Mohiniattam dancers employ to articulate devotion, love, sorrow, and other emotional nuances. Unlike more vigorous dance forms, Mohiniattam applies mudras with grace and rhythm, merging them fluidly with body movements and facial expressions. This paper investigates the choreographic relevance and interpretive richness of Abhinaya Hasta Mudras in Mohiniattam. This research critically examines the differences and similarities in the execution of mudras as described in classical treatises and their current choreographic interpretations. It also

aims to introduce lesser-known or rare mudras, contextualizing them within Mohiniattam's evolving performance tradition. The study offers insights for dancers, choreographers, and scholars interested in gesture-based performance systems.

Historical Origins and the origin of mudras can be traced to Vedic rituals and Tantric iconography, where they functioned as symbolic representations in spiritual and ritualistic contexts. Over time, these gestures were incorporated into performative traditions, giving rise to Natya Mudras. In Mohiniattam, the ritualistic and aesthetic functions of mudras converge, creating a layered symbolic expression. One significant finding is the identification of the Hruswa Sarga Mudra, found in Vedic rituals, as being functionally equivalent to a Kathakali mudra denoting the number eight. This highlights the common cultural foundation present in Kerala's art forms and underscores the importance of exploring mudras beyond just theatrical texts to their ritualistic roots. The Natya Shastra outlines a classification of mudras, including Asamyuta (single-hand) and Samyuta (double-hand) styles, whereas the Hastha Lakshana Deepika provides a more localized and ritual-oriented terminology. In Mohiniattam, both systems are adapted contextually. For example:

- *The Pataka Mudra (flag) is used to denote clouds, blessings, or halting depending on the scene.*
- *Alapadma (lotus) in Mohiniattam often conveys beauty or divine femininity, with more circular and soft wrist movements than in Bharatanatyam.*

This diversification underscores Mohiniattam's choreographic fluidity, where the essence of Lasya is preserved by adapting mudras to gentler transitions and rounded kinetics.

Bhava and Rasa through Mudras-Mohiniattam emphasize the expression of Sringara Rasa (romantic mood) through nuanced hand gestures paired with evocative facial expressions. The mudras act as vessels for Bhava (emotion) transmission, turning abstract feelings into communicable signs. For instance:

- Sarpashirsha is employed to suggest serpentine grace or delicate acts such as applying sandal paste.
- Hamsasya and Mrigashirsha convey the act of looking into a mirror or admiration, key to Nayika portrayal.

Thus, mudras serve not only narrative but emotive functions, bridging external gestures with internal feeling.

**Theoretical Framework** -The foundation of mudras in Indian classical dance can be traced to the *Natyashastra*, authored by Bharata, and the *Hashta Lakshana Deepika*, a seminal text followed predominantly in Kerala traditions. While the *Natyashastra* classifies mudras into *Asamyutha* (single-hand) and *Samyutha* (double-hand) hastas, the *Hashtalakshana Deepika* presents a codified system more specific to traditions like Mohiniattam and Kathakali. These mudras are not merely decorative but carry semantic weight, incorporating emotions, objects, deities, and conceptual ideas.

**Application in Mohiniattam.** In Mohiniattam, Abhinaya Hasta Mudras are used extensively in both *nritya* (expressive dance) and *natya* (dramatic representation). Choreographers draw upon these gestures to illustrate poetic verses, depict mythological narratives, and portray various emotional states. The elegance of Mohiniattam lies in the subtle and continuous flow of movement, where mudras are seamlessly woven into the choreography, maintaining aesthetic continuity and emotional depth. For instance, the use of the gesture "*Hamsasya*" hasta to depict beauty or delicacy, or the "*Pataka*" hasta to denote the act of blessing or the opening of *a lotus*, *reflects how mudras align with the lyrical quality of Mohiniattam*. Gestures or hastas, when combined with appropriate facial expressions and rhythmic footwork, create a holistic portrayal of *bhava* and *rasa*.

**Choreographic Insights and Observations,** Contemporary Mohiniattam practitioners often blend classical mudras with innovative interpretations to enhance expressivity. This is especially evident in thematic productions where traditional gestures are adapted to suit new contexts or modern narratives. Through interviews with seasoned dancers and observation of performances, this study reveals that while the core vocabulary of mudras remains rooted in tradition, their execution and sequencing exhibit significant creative flexibility. Moreover, the relationship between mudras and other elements like body posture (*anga*), glances (*drishti*), and rhythm (*tala*) amplifies the emotional intensity of performances. A well-executed Abhinaya sequence demonstrates how synchronized integration of all these elements contributes to the immersive storytelling experience Mohiniattam is known for.

**Variations and Innovations** -Across different schools (*banis*), there are noticeable variations in the usage of Abhinaya Hasta Mudras. While some adhere strictly to *Hashtalakshana Deepika*, others

incorporate influences from Natya Shastra or even borrow mudras from Bharatanatyam for enhanced clarity and visual appeal. In contemporary choreographies addressing social or philosophical themes, mudras are sometimes abstracted to convey modern symbols and metaphors, showing the adaptive capacity of Mohiniattam's gestural language.

## Research Objective

The study of mudras in classical dance forms, particularly in Mohiniattam, offers a profound understanding of how hand gestures function as essential components of storytelling, emotional expression, and cultural communication. This research aims to:

- A comparative examination of the usage and interpretation of mudras as outlined in classical texts, including the *Natya Shastra*, *Hashtalakshana Deepika*, and other regional variations that inform Mohiniattam.
- To analyze how mudras have evolved within Mohiniattam, how they have been integrated into the dance form over time, and how various traditions have diversified them for different expressive and aesthetic purposes.
- Angikabhinaya, the non-verbal form of expression through the body, is central to the Mohiniattam tradition, particularly through the articulation of mudras. This research aims to understand how different prescriptive texts inform the gestures and movements that constitute Angikabhinaya in Mohiniattam, enabling a deeper understanding of the dance's emotive vocabulary.

## Scope of Study

This research delves into the **differences in mudra usage** across various classical dance forms, with particular emphasis on the distinct approaches seen in Mohiniattam. The significance of these gestures is explored in detail, and the study introduces **rare mudras** that have been historically underrepresented or misunderstood within the performing arts community. Additionally, it aims to illuminate the integration and use of mudras within contemporary Mohiniattam performances, enhancing our overall comprehension of their importance in both classical and modern settings.

The study examines how different mudras are **prescribed** across texts, while also analyzing their **functional evolution**, drawing attention to their symbolic and aesthetic implications in both

classical rituals and artistic expression. The research also explores how new interpretations and combinations of traditional mudras are emerging in the context of modern performances, thus maintaining the continuity of tradition while embracing innovation.

## Methodology

The methodology adopted for this research is multifaceted, allowing for a comprehensive examination of the role of mudras in Mohiniattam. This includes a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches, such as detailed literature reviews, interviews with practitioners, and observations of performances. By integrating these various methods, the study aims to capture the intricate ways in which mudras contribute to the storytelling and expressiveness inherent in Mohiniattam. Furthermore, the research will explore the historical context and cultural significance of these hand gestures, providing a holistic understanding of their impact on this classical dance form.

1. **Observation Method:** This research involves direct observation of live performances, workshops, and teaching sessions. By engaging with practicing dancers and observing how mudras are executed in various contexts, we gain insights into the practical application and evolution of these hand gestures within Mohiniattam.
2. **Interview Method:** Interviews with renowned dance practitioners, instructors, and scholars of Mohiniattam provide valuable insights into the theoretical and cultural contexts surrounding mudras. These interviews help uncover the lived experience of dancers who incorporate these gestures into their art form, offering a perspective on how traditional practices are maintained, modified, or adapted.
3. **Comparative Study:** A critical aspect of this research involves comparing mudras as outlined in key dance texts such as the *Natya Shastra*, *Hashtalakshana Deepika*, and *Vishnudharmottara Purana*, among others. This comparative approach facilitates the identification of common patterns, regional variations, and the diversification of mudras across classical dance traditions, with a particular focus on their relevance in Mohiniattam.
4. **Historical Method:** The historical development of mudras in Mohiniattam is traced through classical texts, performance practices, and the evolution of regional dance traditions. This historical analysis offers a timeline of how mudras emerged from early

ritualistic practices, through Tantric and Vedic influences, to their eventual codification in dance forms like Mohiniattam.

5. **Critical Analysis:** A critical approach to the study of mudras is employed to analyze their symbolic meanings, aesthetic functions, and practical uses in the performance of Mohiniattam. This analysis examines how mudras convey emotion, story, and character, and how their usage has transformed over time.

## Findings

### Origins and Early Forms of Mudras

The study reveals that many mudras in contemporary Mohiniattam can be traced back to **Vedik-Tantrik ritualistic practices**. These ancient mudras were initially conceived as a means of invoking divine powers during pooja rituals, and their symbolic meanings were deeply rooted in spirituality and cosmic representations. Over time, these ritualistic gestures underwent significant transformation, evolving into forms of *Natya mudras* used in dance, where the focus shifted from spiritual invocation to expressive and narrative function.

### Integration of Mudras in Mohiniattam

A key finding of this study is how **mudras have been integrated into Mohiniattam choreography**, taking their place as essential components of the dance form's unique expression. In Mohiniattam, mudras are not only used for storytelling but also to express subtle emotions, inner states of consciousness, and interactions with deities or nature.

The exploration of **rare mudras**, such as the Hruswa Sarga mudra from Vedic traditions, which has been recently identified in Kathakali to represent the number 8, points to the need for further research into **lost or underutilized mudras**. This discovery underlines the importance of looking to ritual texts like the *Vishnudharmottara Purana* and the *Hasta Lakshana Deepika* for further insights into mudra usage, both in historical and contemporary contexts.

### The Role of Angikabhinaya in Expression

Another significant finding is the prominent role of **Angikabhinaya** in Mohiniattam, where mudras transcend their technical use and become deeply integrated into the expressive language

of the dance form. Angikabhinaya, which involves the use of the body, especially hand gestures, to convey emotion and narrative, is fundamental to Mohiniattam. Each mudra carries deep emotional significance, allowing the performer to communicate intricate feelings and stories without the need for verbal language. Through Angikabhinaya, the mudra not only becomes a tool for narration but also a means of connecting with the audience on a spiritual and emotional level.

#### Future Research Directions

The study concludes with a call for **further research into the *Hasta Lakshana Deepika* and its impact on modern-day performance**. The deep exploration of its basic mudras, their combinations, and isolations will contribute to a greater understanding of their origins and functions within the context of Mohiniattam. Additionally, further research should focus on the study of how Tantric rituals, which laid the foundation for many Natya mudras, can illuminate the deeper metaphysical aspects of mudras in contemporary dance.

Moreover, **identifying new and rare mudras** that might be hidden within texts or regional practices can help the performing arts community enrich the repertoire of hand gestures, thereby diversifying and expanding the expressive potential of the dance form.

## Conclusion

The exploration of Abhinaya Hasta Mudras in Mohiniattam reveals a multidimensional and evolving landscape where tradition is not only preserved but also constantly reinterpreted in response to contemporary sensibilities. These symbolic hand gestures, which function as both a codified language and an emotive tool, lie at the heart of Mohiniattam's aesthetic and philosophical identity. Rooted in canonical texts like the *Natya Shastra* and *Hashtalakshana Deepika*, the hasta mudras of Mohiniattam are far more than decorative or illustrative devices. They represent an embodied knowledge system that communicates complex emotions, spiritual truths, cultural values, and dramatic nuances. As such, they form the foundational axis upon which the expressive dimensions of Mohiniattam rotate.

From the ritualistic gestures of Vedic and Tantric traditions to their refined expressions in Natya, hasta mudras have undergone a long journey of transformation. This study demonstrates that the



gestures in Mohiniattam have retained their classical purity even as they have adapted to the needs of modern choreography and performance. Whether it is the Sarpasirsha mudra used to show tenderness, or the Tripataka mudra employed to indicate direction, each gesture is imbued with layers of symbolic and affective meaning. The performative application of these mudras integrates seamlessly with other aspects of Angikabhinaya, such as body posture, facial expression, and rhythmic movement, making them indispensable to the overall communicative function of the dance.

One of the key insights emerging from this research is the adaptability of hasta mudras without compromising their authenticity. In the hands of a skilled dancer, these gestures become fluid instruments capable of articulating a wide range of human experiences. Contemporary choreographers and performers have begun to use these mudras to express not only mythological themes but also modern narratives that resonate with today's audiences. This flexibility underscores the timeless relevance of Mohiniattam, positioning it as a classical art form that is both historically grounded and forward-looking.

Interviews with seasoned practitioners and analysis of current choreographies reveal that there is a conscious effort among today's Mohiniattam exponents to stay true to the textual sources while also allowing space for individual creativity and innovation. This dual commitment ensures that the tradition does not stagnate but evolves in a manner that respects its foundational principles. It also affirms the value of practice-led research, where theoretical inquiry and practical exploration inform and enrich each other.

Another significant dimension explored in this study is the pedagogical value of hasta mudras. In the intimate setting of the guru-shishya *Parampara* (teacher-disciple tradition), these gestures are not merely taught but transmitted as lived experience. Each mudra carries within it a philosophy, a worldview, and a lineage.. The act of learning and performing a mudra thus becomes an act of cultural preservation and spiritual engagement. For students of Mohiniattam, understanding the deeper meanings and applications of mudras enhances not only their technical proficiency but also their capacity for emotional expression and narrative clarity.

The text emphasizes the significance of mudras in maintaining cultural continuity and identity. It points out that the mudras associated with Mohiniattam not only represent Kerala's artistic heritage but also act as valuable carriers of the region's aesthetics, rituals, and storytelling traditions. By

studying and reviving lesser-known or rarely performed mudras, this research contributes to the larger project of cultural conservation. It also opens up new avenues for exploration, such as the comparative analysis of mudras across different classical dance forms or their semiotic and cognitive impact on audiences.

The exploration of hasta mudras also points toward their therapeutic and meditative potential. Rooted in spiritual practices, many of these gestures have calming, centering effects on both the performer and the viewer. Their use in dance thus bridges the gap between art and wellness, tradition and transformation. This dimension merits further interdisciplinary research, especially in the fields of dance therapy, cognitive studies, and performance psychology.

Ultimately, the conclusion that can be drawn from this study is that Abhinaya Hasta Mudras are not mere appendages to dance but are core to the epistemology of Mohiniattam. They are the living threads that weave together the sacred and the aesthetic, the personal and the collective, the historical and the contemporary. As the dance form continues to evolve, the challenge and opportunity lie in ensuring that these gestures retain their depth, precision, and resonance.

This study thus serves as both a documentation and a celebration of the enduring significance of mudras in Mohiniattam. It encourages practitioners, scholars, and educators to delve deeper into the expressive possibilities of these gestures. By doing so, we not only enrich our understanding of Mohiniattam but also reaffirm the transformative power of Indian classical dance as a whole.

In conclusion, the Abhinaya Hasta Mudras in Mohiniattam are much more than expressive tools; they are custodians of a vibrant cultural legacy. Their study opens up pathways to understand the form's spiritual depth, artistic refinement, and evolving identity. As new generations of dancers engage with these gestures, guided by both textual knowledge and lived practice, they contribute to a tradition that remains as relevant and resonant today as it was centuries ago. The future of Mohiniattam, therefore, lies in this delicate balancing act between preservation and innovation, and in the hands that continue to speak through the language of mudras.

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