

A STUDY OF MUDRALAKSANAM IN ARTS AND RELIGION

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Introduction

Gesture language is as old as man. Its provenance is almost unlimited. It could be related to all sorts of things and activities in ordinary parlance gross, subtle, simple and complex, it may also be connected with religious, spiritual and mystic matters. When used in art and religion, gestures are naturally stylized.

In the Hindu traditions they are defined and codified along with their uses for distinct purposes (viniyogas) In special treatises.

Sanskrit words like sanketa, ingita, anga - viksepa, sūcana, abhinaya and mudrā are synonyms conveying different levels of meaning. Although abhinaya and mudrā are quite well - known in the fields of art and religion, the deeper meanings of these terms need to be more clear. Hence, this article will be concerned with the nature of mudrā in religion especially Salvism.

The term of "Mudrā"

The word mudrā is of frequent occurrence in Sanskrit Literature and bears several meanings like seal, imprint, passport, badge mystery, code language and hand posture. The word does not occur in the early lexicon: like these of Amara and Hemacandra. Medieval rhetoricians recognize a figure of speech (alamikara) called mudra referring to the expression of things by significant names that deliver a second dimensional meaning.

Pāṇini does not mention mudra in his Astadhyāyī but in his Uṇādi Sūtra 11.3, he derives the word from the root "mud" "to be happy" with the addition of the termination "rā" (mud-rā). The fact that the gramarians like Pāṇini and Hemacandra explain mudrā by Uṇādi, also suggest that it

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is not a regular expression and “mud” may or may not be its original word. Bharata's *Natyāśāstrā* talks of the abhināyas of the angas and upangas, but does not mention the word “mudra” in any context. But in the present times “mudra” is used freely.

In Śaivite and Śakta texts the etymology of the term is explained in varied fanciful ways, according to the distinct meanings assigned to the two component syllables of the word. Accordingly the following are some of the connotations of *mudrā*.

- i. It gives ("ra" to give) pleasure (*mudam*)¹.
- ii. It gives pleasure to gods and also melts their heart with pity (*drāvayati* causal of “dru” to melt)².
- iii. It dissolves or destroys the bonds (*mudam drāvayati*, “muh” here meaning “bondage”).
- iv. It releases (*mocayati*) the performer from adverse effects and also dissolves bondage³.
- v. It is the very potentiality of Śiva with power to stamp or seal all obstacles⁴.

In fact all the above meanings give a broad picture of the different types of *mudrā* or ritual handpostures as prevalent in Śaivite rituals. This is a vast area and in fact all the Śaivāgamas and their recastes called *Paddhatis* deal with this subject.

Saccidānanda aspects in Śiva forms

Before going to the specific *mudrās* it is to be noted that three distinct forms of Śiva represent the triune aspects of the Supreme Being as constituting pure Existence, Consciousness and Bliss (*sat, cit and ānanda*).

These three distinct forms are the *Bhikṣāṭana* (the lord going about for alms) or the related *Kaṅkālāmūrti*, *Dakṣiṇāmūrti* (the lord facing the south or the lord of wisdom) and *Natyarāja* (the lord of dancers). These gods are said to represent the aspects of *sat, cit and ānanda* respectively, especially from their handposes, and their symbolism.

In the *Bhikṣāṭanakañkāla* forms the lord has four hands, three of

them carrying triśula, damaru and kapāla. The loosely suspended right hand is holding the darva grass shoots in the mṛgimudrā and offering it to the deer standing nearby and looking up at the lord.

mṛgimudrā is defined as:-

माध्यमानामिके चैव अङ्गुष्ठाग्रे नियोजयेत् ।^१

(Here the middle and ring fingers are fixed on to the thumb, resulting in the lifting of the pointed and little fingers. This handpose itself looks like the face of a deer, and is hence rightly called the Mṛgimudrā)

In this pose the bent middle and ring fingers are said to represent the puṇya and pāpa, the thumb, of Lord Śvara and the dūrvā grass held between the three fingers, the fruit of actions.

The Pūrāṇas explain that the Lord took up the Bhikṣāṭana form to instruct the sages in the Dārūka Forest, that he alone and not the rituals performed by them intently, would release them from the wordly sufferings in the Bhikṣāṭanamūrti, the mṛgimudrā and the uplifted face of the real deer, together indicate the sat - tattva of the Lord, hence it is also called tattva or Śivasattābhivyañjaka-sanmudrā.

The form of Dakṣiṇāmūrti, facing south, and imparting supreme knowledge in well known. The right hand that represents the way in which the divine teacher taught in silence to his spiritual student, the way to obtain final release is called variously as jñāna or Vyākhyāna or Cinmudrā.

In śaivite tradition it is called Śivajiva - tādātmya, śuddha - advaitaabhivyañjakacinmudrā, the hand pose that explains clearly the non - difference between the Supreme Śiva and the individual soul. This unity is symbolised in the joining of the thumb (that represents the self luminous Siva) and the human soul (the pointed finger). When this happens the other three fingers get separated naturally. this natural disposition is explained as the human being getting rid of three pāśas, namely, mala, māyā and karma represented respectively by the little, ring and middle fingers.

Thus the Śiva, form of Dakṣiṇāmūrti stands for the cit - aspect of Supreme Being.

Having noted the two above forms of sat and cit aspects as revealed through their mudrās, we may go to the hand poses used by devotees on various occasions like worship, japa, meditation and special rituals (pūjāprakāśa)

अर्चनाजपकाले च ध्याने काम्ये च कर्मणि।

तत्तन्मुद्राः प्रयोक्तव्याः देवतासन्निधापकाः ॥^१

In fact, it is emphatically stated that when mudrās are not performed the rituals bear no fruit,

मुद्रां विना तु यज्जप्यं प्राणायामः सुरार्चनम् ।

योगाध्यानासनं चापि नो फलानि तु भैरव ॥^२

Symbolism of Hands and Fingers.

How do the mudrās become so important and potential in worship and other rituals In this connection the texts emphasise that in the Śaivite context the hands are not to be considered as mere limbs in the physical body. They are to be imagined as the Sun and Moon or Śiva and Śakti.^३

Similarly the five fingers from the little finger to the thumb are said to be associated respectively with the five elements - earth, water, fire, air, and ethereal space. (pṛthvi, ap, tejas, vayu, and ākāśa) Rāghava Bhaṭṭa in his commentary on Sāradātilaka makes a clear statement about this.

स्वाङ्गुल्यो हि पञ्चभूतात्मिका अङ्गुष्ठाद्याः आकाश-वायु-अग्नि-सलिल-भूरूपाः तासां मिथः संयोगरूपसंकेतान् कोऽपि देवनप्रगुणो भावपूर्वको मोदः सन्निध्यकरो भवति।

तदुक्तम् -

पृथिव्यादीनि भूतानि कनिष्ठाद्याः क्रमान्मताः।

तेषामन्योन्यसम्भेदप्रकारैः तत्प्रञ्चता ॥^४

Thus the performance of the mudrās with hands and fingers, associated with the five elements actually create esoteric joy in the devotee.

The fingers, specially the thumb and the ring fingers are also associated respectively with Lord Iśāna and amṛta or some kalā.

However, all texts are agreed in associating thumb with Lord Śiva. While explaining the forms of Bhikṣātana and Dakṣiṇāmūrti, it was seen earlier that anguṣṭhasinnifies the Lord in the Mrgi and Cinmudrās.

The above symbolism of the hands and fingers is not purely textual and traditional. The placement (nyāsa) or recitation of specific mantras on them while performing the mudrās reiterate this fact.

Now some specific mudrās are considered.

Few mudrās that indicate an object, action, or some quantity structurally

1. Pañcamukhi: This mudra, indicative of an object, is defined as:

कृत्वान्योन्यगताङ्गुल्योः पृष्ठतो हस्तयोर्द्वयोः ।

तिर्यक्स्थौ कन्यसौ कृत्वा ह्यङ्गुष्ठाभ्यां समाक्रमेत् ॥

देशिनी-मध्यमे रुद्धानामिके सोच्छ्रिताङ्गुले ।

कृत्वा पञ्चमुखी ख्याता मुद्रेयं शङ्करस्य तु ॥ १०

In this mudrā the hands with upturned palms are interlocked, the thumb of one hand presses at its tip the little Finger of the other, so also the bent pointed Finger touches the tip of the middle finger, so that the tips of each of these pairs occupy the four directions. The two ring fingers are brought together for standing erect in the middle. The Pañcamukhi mudrā is to be used to denote the composite form of Sadāśiva with Five Faces.

2. For denoting the quantities of things (dravya) required for worship and other rituals there are the following mudrās:
 - a. Grains like rice and yava are to be offered as could be contained within the five fingers joined together -पञ्चशाखाश्रितं व्रीहियवम्। This is called Sūkari mudrā as the hand pose resembles a pig's Face."
 - b. Offering of sesamum, mustard and other similar things is a could be between the bent thumb, middle and ring Fingers in mṛgi

mudra.¹²

3. Mudrās denoting action:

a. **Śikhara** hasta used for ringing the bell.

b. **Añkuśa** or **Sṛṅgi**: In this mudrā, the tip of the finger in the First position is curved, since the hand pose resembles a hook it is appropriately called Sṛṅgi or Añkuśa. This is used in many daily (nitya) and occasional (naimittika) rites. Three such instances are given below.

i. In the daily routine of a Śaivite, after his bath and before the performance of morning or evening abtution (sandhyāvandana) he is instructed to symbolically draw the nectar from the bindusthāna (forehead section between the eyebrows) with the Ankuśamudra while reciting the hṛdaya - mantra : Om hām hṛdayaya vaṣat. This amṛta is mixed with the water for sandhyavandana so that it is converted in to Śivatirtha.

ii. In Viśeṣa Dīkṣā it is used for enkindling the student's soul by the samskāra of offering it symbolically in the sanctified fire into the womb of Vāgīśvari.

In this context the teacher draws out the student initiate's soul by Ankuśa mudrā along with the recitation of the mantra Om ham ham ham ātmane namah.

iii. In NirvāṇaDīkṣā for tying the student's soul with the rope symbolistic of the binding noose (pāśa), the teacher draws out the student's ātman with Ankuśa mudrā along with the recitation of om ham ham ham svāhā and takes it to the student's Dvādaśanta level.

c. **Nārāca** : In Nārāca mudrā flowers kept on the thumb of the two hands, are thrown out forcefully by the respective pointed Fingers. By this flower-throw the mantras that are offered to Siva earlier by the worshipper are lifted. The mantra to be recited now, is the astra mantra, namely, om aha astrāya phaṭ.

The mention above of "raising the mantras" by Nārāca mudrā may require some explanation. It is as follows- from the invocation till

the Final cordiality of showing camphor - light, various mantras are offered to - Śiva, including those of his entourage (āvaraṇa) and the presentation of japa mantras by udbhava mudrā.

Now that the puja is completed these different mantras are symbolically lifted by Nārāca and joined with Śiva at the respective levels. The arrow like activity involved in this connection, and use of the powerful astra mantra give the real significance to the name nārāca given to this mudrā.

Owing to the violent activity involved in the Nārāca mudrā it is appropriately used during other daily and occasional rites like the following:

- i. To remove the obstacles that may prevail in ethereal space (antariṣa) and that may hinder the smooth performance of the puja.
- ii. In striking hard the pāśa - sūtra tied from head to foot on to the disciple to be given the Nirvāṇa Diksā, also in purifying the five kalās.
- d. Kumbhaka

कुम्भकमुद्रा अन्योन्यसम्बद्ध

अङ्गुष्ठद्वया सजलवामहस्ततलोपरि

न्यस्तसव्यपाणितला अर्धेन्दुवत्

पृष्ठादौ वक्राङ्गुलिपाणिद्वयात्मिका

सन्ध्यायां मन्त्राभिषेकादौ कार्या।”

In this hand - pose the right palm is placed over the left containing water. In this position the two thumbs touch each other, while the other fingers are in contact with each other in a bent manner so that the whole looks like the digital moon.

This is used while performing sandhyāvanda and mantrabhiṣka. The mantra to be recited while doing this is om ham haumśivāya vausat.

Some highlights of the preliminaries and actual worship of Śivaliṅga

- i. सकलीकरण (Sakalīkaraṇa) of the worshipper
- ii. Nyāsa on śivalinga
- iii. Mudrās for the five faces of Śiva, for āvāhana etc.
- iv. Ending with Mahāmudrā

Conclusion

In all these rituals the recital of mantras along with the appropriate mudrās becomes absolutely necessary. This series of rituals would also show their

Ultimate purpose of elevating the devotee gradually to a status almost equal to that of Śiva, and prove the basic tenet of śaivism that a devotee should worship Śiva only by becoming Śiva,

शिवीभूय शिवं यजेत् ।^{१४}

Of course this purpose will be achieved only in the event of the devotee performing the rituals as prescribed in the śaivāgamas and with the necessary purity (śuddhi), faith (śraddhā) and visualisation (bhāvanā).

Notes

1. Pūrvakaraṇagama,
mudam karoti devānām
(mudra delight the Gods)
Edited by mayillai Alagappa
Mudaliar, Madras, Śivañānapota
Yantrasalai 1921, p. 130.
2. Purvakaranagama
मोदनात् द्रावणाच्चैव मुद्रेयं परिकीर्तिता, P. 136
3. Kamākalāvilasa
मोचयन्ति ग्रहादिम्यः पाशौघान् द्रावयन्ति च।
मोचनं द्रावणं यस्मात् मुद्रास्ताः परिकीर्तिताः॥

4. विघ्नौघमुद्राणान्मुद्राः कथ्यन्ते हरशक्तयः।
Mṛgendrāgama, kriyāpada and
caryāpāda with the commentary of Bhatt Nārayana Katha
Institute francais, D, Indologic Pondichery 1962, P. 120.
5. Mudrālakṣanam edited, by Anna, Ramakrishna Mission
Publication, Mylapure Chennai. 4, p. 30.
6. Ibid p. 48
7. Ibid p. 52
8. वामदक्षिणहस्तौ सोमसूर्यात्मकौ शक्तिशिवौ वा विचिन्त्य.....।
Sivārcanacandrika of Appayya p. 6
Dharmapuram 1930, p. 6
9. Saradatilaka-xxiii. 108
10. Mudrālakṣanam, p. 59
11. Ibid, p.62
12. Ibid. p. 72
13. Ibid p.80
14. Somasambhupaddhati, vol I. edited by Helene Brunner, Institute
of Francais, D, Indologic Pondichery, 1963, p. 136