

# Mudra Tradition of Vedic Recitation in Kerala

## Introduction

Learning the Vedas with the movements of hands has been considered as the proper way of pedagogy. Pāṇinīya śikṣā explains this idea as follows -

हस्तहीनं तु योऽघीते स्वरवर्णविवर्जितम् ।  
ऋग्यजुःसामभिर्दग्धो वियोनिमघिगच्छति ॥  
ऋचो यजूंषि सामानि हस्तहीनानि यः पठेत् ।  
अनृचो ब्राह्मणस्तावद्यावन्तो विन्दति स्वरम् ॥

( पाणिनीयशिक्षा - ५४, ५५ )

These verses exhibit the importance of hand in the learning process of the Vedas. All Vedas - ऋग्यजुःसामानि - should be studied with the accompaniment of hand gestures and accents. One who studies the Vedas without these will burn himself according to Pāṇinīya śikṣā, causing irreparable damage to the quintessential essence of the Vedas.

Indian tradition and culture are deeply influenced by the principles and practice of mudras in divergent areas like performing art, dance and so on.

From time immemorial, hasta mudras have been used by Kerala Brahmins – Nambutiris - in the Vedic recitation. The function of hastamudras are avoid ambiguity in reciting Samhitāpāṭha. Mover over a pupil of the Vedas, who is normally a child of ten or eleven years age, may not be aware of Sanskrit grammar and its usages. When he is taught the Vedas, accompanied by hastamudras, the Samhitāpāṭha and Padapāṭha will become much clearer and more intelligible. Ambiguity in accentuation is also classified with the help of hastamudras. For e.g., :- in the samhitā portion -

“ अजोषा वृषभं पतिम् ” the word अजोषा may be dīrghavisarga or dīrghānta. Here the meaning of the hymn is not taught to the pupil at that age. For dīrghavisarga and dīrghānta, different mudras are used. Hence the problem can be solved with the help of hastamudras: i.e., the ambiguity in the knowledge of correct word can be solved

Hastamudras help to clear many doubts that might arise, when there is a change in the study of Samhitāpāṭha and Padapāṭha.

Some words like दुद्ध्यः, सिषासति and so on under go a change in their forms while studying Samhitāpāṭha and Padapāṭha. These changes are explained with the help of hastamudras.

## Origin of Hastamudras

There is no documentary evidence with regard to the origin of the hastamudras. Dr.Mannur Jatavedan Nambuthiri, an authority in the Vedas, remarks about the origin in his article published in Bhaktapriya. While roughly translated to English, it goes as follows :

“ It is said that it was the sage Paraśurāma who lead the formation for the customs and rituals (non- rituals) of Kerala Nambutiris, while it was Śankaracarya who reformed them. Legend has it that it was the sage Vaikhānasa, who lead by sage Paraśurāma, formulated the Kerala style of chanting of

Japasvara and Matrāsvara in udātta and anudātta accents.

Prof.Frits Staal opies about the origin of hastamudra -

“ A Nambuthiri tradition ascribes their invention to Rāvaṇa. Nothing is known of their history, however, and it is uncertain whether Vedic mudras are older than any of others.”

Sri.P.M.Damodaran Nambutirippad in his book Vedavikṛtivivaraṇam, quotes from the text Madhuśikṣā of Madhusūdanasūri, thus -

भगवान्‌ संहितां प्राह पदपाठं तु रावणः ।  
बाभ्रव्यऋषिः क्रमं प्राह, जटां व्यालिरवोचत ॥

In this verse, the authorities of Samhitā and other Vedavikṛtis like kramam, jaṭā etc., are illustrated. Here padapāṭha is attributed to Rāvaṇa. In the commentary of the same verse Sri.P.M.Damodaran Nambutirippad says that the hastamudra tradition is also explained by Rāvaṇa.

The views of all these scholars help us to conclude that – Rāvaṇa's authority of padapāṭha confirms the legend that Rāvaṇa is the authority of hastamudras. Because in the Ṛgveda tradition of Kerala, hastamudras represent padapāṭha, not samhitāpāṭha.

### **Hastamudras – A General View :-**

Three systems of Vedic recitations are prevalent in Kerala -

1. Śākala recension of Ṛgveda.
2. Taittiriya recension of Kṛṣṇayajurveda.
3. Jaiminīya recension of Sāmaveda.

Among these three systems, Ṛgvedic recitation of Kerala has occupied a well-established methodology of hastamudras. In Ṛgveda, hastamudras are used to represent sounds, accents and lengthening of syllables. Yajurveda chanting accepted the mudras of Ṛgveda to a great extent, or Yajurvedins accepted only some features of hastamudras of Ṛgveda to recite and to teach. Apart from these two systems of chanting, Sāmaveda uses hand gestures or movements to represent accents and their mātras. In the Sāmaveda chanting the forearm is fully made use of.

The Tamil Brahmins of Koduntarappilli village in Palakkad District in Kerala state have a distinct style of Jaiminīya Sāma chanting, though basically rooted in Tamil culture. I have therefore included in my presentation, various aspects of this style also.

### **Hastamudras in Ṛgveda**

According to Dr. Mannur Javedan Nambuthiri, there are about 30 types of hastamudras in Ṛgveda. In Ṛgveda tradition, some mudras are named based on the mantras of the syllables – For e.g. :-

ह्रस्वमुद्रा, दीर्घमुद्रा ।

While others are pronunciation-related or named based on the place of articulation, such as - ओष्ठ्यमुद्रा,

मूर्धन्यमुद्रा । Some are named after the letter itself – such as - आकारमुद्रा, नकारमुद्रा ।

I have tried to put in order these Mudras on the basis of order of syllables.

Staal has given a detailed description of the hastamudras as Ṛgveda in his *AGNI*, which is as follows-

## LIST OF RGVEDA MUDRAS

**1.Hrasvamudrā** : Mudra for short (*hrasva* ) syllables.

All fingers are extended in all joints and all fingers except the thumb are in apposition with each other.

EXAMPLES : Devāyá, asāvi, gāyata.

The position of the hand is supine, i.e., with the palm up, for sarvānudātta ( a sequence of anudatta accents, e.g., gāyata), and prone, i.e., with the palm down, for pracaya (e.g., asāvi). There are ten exceptions, viz., case where the syllable is short but where other mudras are used: *mūrdhanya, ghoṣa, dīrghavisarga, udātta, tithi, si, ukāra, svarapūrvakatakāra, hrasvavisarga and prathamānta.*

This is *hamsapaksa* in Kathakali.

**2.Ākāramudrā** : Mudra for all syllables ending in *ā*. The ring finger is flexed at the metacarpophalangeal joint. All other joints are extended. Hand is in pronation.

EXAMPLES : ā, vṛṣā, manasā.

This is *patāka* in Kathakali.

**3.Tālavyadiṅghamudrā** : Mudra for long, palatal ( *tālavya* ) vowels, viz., *ī* and *ē*, unless they follow retroflex consonants ( viz., *ṭa, ṭha, ḍa, ḍha, ṇa, ṣa, ḷa*).

Ring, middle and index fingers are flexed at metacarpophalangeal and first interphalangeal joints; thumb rests on the outer surface of the middle phalanx of the index finger. The little finger is extended in all joints.

EXAMPLES : havāmahē, dadhatī, urvī, ārē .

This is *bāṇa* in Kathakali.

**4.Aikāramudrā** : Mudra for *ai*.

Same as tālavyadiṅghamudra, but with rotating movement of the tip of the little finger.

EXAMPLES : etavai, yajadhyai.

**5.Oṣṭhyadiṅghamudrā** : Mudra for long, labial ( *oṣṭhya* ) vowels, viz., *ū, ō, and au*.

Same as ukāramudra, but the little finger is also in apposition with the others.

EXAMPLES : vasū, vasō, indo, ubhau.

This is *mukūḷa* in Kathakali.

**6.Ukāramudrā** : Mudra for syllables ending in *-u*.

Ring, middle and index fingers flexed at metacarpophalangeal joints and kept in apposition ; tip of the thumb rests upon the inner surface of the tip of the index finger. All other joints are extended. Hand is in pronation.

EXAMPLE : kṛṇu, vidu, vīḷu, apsu, suṣṭhu ( RV 8.22.18 ).

This is *kartarīmukha* in Kathakali.

**7. Anusvāramudrā** : Mudra for short anusvāra.

Ring, middle and index fingers flexed at metacarpophalangeal and first interphalangeal joints, extended at last interphalangeal joints. Thumb rests on the outer surface of the middle phalanges of the middle and index fingers. Little finger is extended at the metacarpophalangeal, and flexed at all other joints. Hand is in semipronation.

EXAMPLES : tam, devam, agnim, purohitam, vibhum (RV 6.15.8 ).

This is *muṣṭi* in Kathakali.

**8. Dīrghānusvāramudrā** : Mudra for long anusvāra.

Anusvāramudra in pron position.

EXAMPLES : nāsatyābhyām, gacchatām, urvīm.

**9. Hrasvavisargamudra** : Mudra for short syllables ending in visarga.

Tip of the index and thumb are kept in apposition, forming a ring that is opened at the sounding of the visarga.

EXAMPLES : saḥ, agniḥ, divaḥ, viprebhiḥ.

This is *mudrākhya* in Kathakali.

**10. Dīrghavisargamudrā** : Mudra for long ( *dīrgha* ) syllables ending in visarga ( *ḥ* ), and for syllables ending in *-na* and *-ni*. Little, ring, and middle fingers flexed at metacarpophalangeal and first interphalangeal joints, while the thumb rest on the outer surface of the middle phalanx of the ring and middle fingers. Hand is in pronation, except for sarvānudātta, where it is in supination.

EXAMPLES : devāḥ, tayoh, bahvīḥ, devīḥ, ratnāni, ahani, dhattana.

If the visarga is preceded by *ai* or *au*, the index finger is moved slightly up and down.

EXAMPLES : devaiḥ, gauḥ.

This is *sūcimukha* in Kathakali.

**11. Prathamāntamudrā** : Mudra for syllables ending in “first” ( *prathama* ) consonants, viz., *-k* and *-t*, or ending in *-t* immediately preceded by *r*. Same as *ākāramudra* , but with the tip of the thumb touching the root of the ring finger.

EXAMPLES : samrāt, viṭ, arvāk, baṭ, avart ( RV 7.59.4 ).

**12. Ghoṣamudrā** : Mudra for unaspirated consonants with voice ( *ghoṣa* ), viz., *gha*, *jha*, *ḍha*, *dha*, *bha* and *ha*.

All joints extended except metacarpophalangeal joints of little, ring and middle fingers, which are flexed. Hand in semipronation.

EXAMPLES : gha, adhi, tastambha, abhi, nahi.

This mudra is also used when the padapāṭha is aspirated, though the samhitāpatha is unaspirated, e.g., dakṣat, padapāṭha : dhakṣat ; jugukṣataḥ ( RV 8.31.7 ), padapāṭha : jughukṣataḥ.

**13. Svarapūrvaka-takāramudrā**: Mudra for syllables ending in *-t* ( *takāra* ) preceded by a vowel ( *svara* ).

Index finger flexed at the metacarpophalangeal joint ; tips of index and thumb kept in apposition. Al

other joints extended.

EXAMPLES : āt, tat, yat.

If the preceding vowel is short, the hand is in supination, e.g., tat, yat.

If the preceding vowel is long, the hand is in pronation, e.g., āt.

**15.Mūrdhanyamudrā** : Mudra for retroflex ( *mūrdhanya* ) consonants, viz., *ta, ṭha, ḍa, ḍha, ṇa, ṣa* and *ḷa* followed by short vowel or *e*. Ring finger flexed at metacarpophalangeal joint and first interphalangeal joint, extended at last interphalangeal joint; all other fingers extended and separated from each other. Hand in supination.

EXAMPLES : pṛṇa, rakṣa, trīṇi, aiḷa ( RV 10.95.18-1 ), kāṇe ( RV 10.155.1 ), vikaṭe ( RV 10.155.1 ) papṛkṣe, īḷe.

The same mudra is used for syllables ending *ṣya* or *ṣva*, unless they are accented with svarita, e.g., uruṣyá, kṛṇuṣva

For syllables ending in *ṣya* or *ṣva* and marked with svarita, the hrasvamudra is used, e.g., amuṣyá.

**16.Tithimudrā or timudrā**: Mudra for syllables ending i *-ti* and *-thi*. Ring and middle fingers kept in apposition, flexed at the metacarpophalangeal joints and extended at other joints ; tip of the thumb resting on the tip of the ring and middle fingers at their inner surface. Other fingers are extended.

EXAMPLES : iti, patanti, pathi.

This is *mṛgaśīrṣa* in Kathakali.

**17.Udāttamudrā** : mudra for syllables with udātta accent. Thumb extended, all other fingers at metacarpophalangeal and first interphalangeal while the last interphalangeal joints are kept extended. Hand in supination.

EXAMPLES : ūta, vi, adya, pra.

**16.Nakāramudrā** : Mudra for *n*.

Index finger flexed at metacarpophalangeal joint with distal phalanx of the thumb resting on the outer surface of the first phalanx of the index. All other fingers extended.

EXAMPLES : mahān, kavīn, arhan, devān.

**17.Ñakāramudrā** : Mudra for *ñ* and *ṇ*.

Middle finger flexed at metacarpophalangeal joint, the tip of the thumb touching its first interphalangeal joint at its inner surface.

EXAMPLES : pratyāñ, akṣaṇ ( vantaḥ, RV 10.9.7 )

**20.Akārasūcakamudrā** : Mudra for initial *a* in doubtful situations. Same as *dīrghavisargamudrā* for *ai* and *au*, with the index finger moving up and down ( viz., *aikāraavisargamudra* ).

EXAMPLES : gopamāguḥ ( RV 10.61.10 ) with padapāṭha : gopam / ā / ahuḥ /, not gopam / ā / guḥ / vidharmaṇāyatraiḥ ( RV 10.46.6 ) with padapāṭha : vidharmaṇā / ayantraiḥ /, not vidharmaṇā / yantraiḥ /

utāhaḥ ( RV 10.137.1 ) with padapāṭha : uta / āgaḥ /, not uta / agaḥ / or uta / gaḥ /

This mudra is also used in order to distinguish some other cases where the sandhi is similarly doubtful :

naijan ( RV 1.63.1 ), padapāṭha : na / aijan /, not na / ejan /

apauhat ( RV 10.61.5 ), padapāṭha : apa / auhat /, not ohat /

uṣasām ivetayaḥ ( RV 10.91.4 ), padapāṭha : uṣasām iva / etayaḥ /, but not uṣasām iva / itayaḥ /, or / itayaḥ /

yathohiṣe ( RV 8.5.3 ), padapāṭha : yathā / ohiṣe /. The expected from in the saṃhitā is yathauhiṣe, since yathohiṣe would correspond to yathā / uhiṣe /, or ūhiṣe /

### **21.Mudra for repha, vikāra, prakṛti and utpatti.**

Same as svarapūrvakatakāramudra, but with a “pin-rolling” movement between the tips of the thumb and index finger.

EXAMPLES : *repha* : punaḥ, padapāṭha : punar iti /

antaḥ, padapāṭha : antar iti /

*vikāra* : dūḍhyaḥ ( RV 10.44.7 ), padapāṭha : duḥ'dhyaḥ //

vṛṣapānāsaḥ ( RV 1.139.6 ), padapāṭha : vṛṣa'pānāsaḥ /

siṣāsati ( RV 1.133.7, etc. ), padapāṭha : sisāsati /

*prakṛti* : initial *gh, d, dh, n, r, ś* or *s* may be due to sandhi or may be original :

sruk ghṛtavatī ( RV 6.11.5 ), padapāṭha : sruk / ghṛtavatī /, not / hṛtavatī /

udyām, padapāṭha : ut / dyām /, not / yām /

tasminnṛmṇam ( RV 1.80.15 ), padapāṭha : nṛmṇam, not ṛmṇam

aruṣī rathe ( RV 1.14.12 ), padapāṭha : rathe, not athe

madhvaḥ ścotani ( RV 4.50.3 ), padapāṭha : ścotanti, not cotanti

mahaddhanam, padapāṭha : mahat / dhanam, not : hanam

*utpatti* : when a sound is added in the padapāṭha :

cit kambhanena ( RV 10.11.5 ), padapāṭha : cit / skambhanena

**22.Vikāraṇiṣedhamudrā** : mudra used when an expected modification following a modification from retroflex to dental as marked by *vikāramudra* does not take place.<sup>1</sup>

Same as mūrdhanyamudra, but index finger moves slightly up and down.

EXAMPLES : praṇeṣat ( RV 2.20.3 ), padapāṭha : neṣat, not nesat.

Similarly, pariṣicyamānaḥ ( RV 9.68.10 ).

This mudra is also used for pragṛhya words when the final vowel is not subject to sandhi, e.g., indrāgnī, asme.

**23.Hrasvīkaraṇamudrā** : Mudra for shortening ( hrasvīkaraṇam ) in the padapāṭha. Same as tālavyadīrghamudrā, but the hand makes a tilting movement in semipronated position.

EXAMPLES : vāvṛdhāte ( RV 7.7.5, etc. ), padapāṭha : vāvṛdhāte.

This mudra is also used when a consonant is silent in the padapāṭha, e.g., puruścandra, padapāṭha : purucandra.

**24.Ūṃ-itimudrā** : mudra for ūṃ iti in the padapāṭha.

<sup>1</sup> Note that on the traditional view there is a modification (vikāra ) from retroflex to dental, not the reverse.

The index finger is flexed at the first interphalangeal joint, its tip resting on the phalanx of the middle finger. The middle and ring fingers are slightly bent, the thumb and little finger extended.

25. Avagrahamudra : mudra for separation ( avagraha) in the padapāṭha of a compound word in the saṃhitā.

Same as tālavyadīrghamudra, but the hand is kept in different positions :

a. If the first member of the compound ends in a short vowel accented udātta, anudātta or pracaya, the hand is semipronated, e.g., pra-śāstaye, sūra-patni ( RV 10.86.8 ), aghora- cakṣuḥ ( RV 10.85.44 ).

b. If the first member of the compound ends in a short vowel accented svarita, the hand is pronated, e.g., gārha-patyāya ( RV 10.85.27, 36 ).

c. If the first member of the compound ends in visarga, dirghavisargamudra is used, e.g., puro-hitam, āśīrvantaḥ ( RV 1.23.1 ).

d. If the first member of the compound ends in a long syllable and the second member in iva, the mudra for the final of the first member is used.

EXAMPLES : apasā-iva (RV 6.67.3 ; 10.106.1), akāramudra is used; bhagam-iva ( RV 1.141.6 ), anusvāramudra is used; rasmīn-iva ( RV 1.141.11 ; 8.35.21 ), nakāramudra is used.

In a few cases the mudra for the final of the first member is used, even though it is not long and the second member is not iva :

patilokam ( RV 10.85.43 ), tithimudra is used;

kuvit-sasya ( RV 6.45.24 ), svarapūrvakatakāramudra is used.

**25. Simudrā** : Mudra for syllables ending in -si, -sī, -se, -sya and -sva.

Finger flexed at metacarpophalangeal and first interphalangeal joints ; thumb rest upon the distal half of the index finger at its outer surface. All other joints are extended.

Examples : asi, atasi ( RV 1.30.4 ), devasya, pavasya, navīyasī, sahase. If sya constitutes a single word, it is shown by *hrasvamudrā*, e.g., vi ṣya grathitaṃ ( padapāṭha : vi / sya/ grathitam, RV 9.97.18 ).

This is *bhramara* in Kathakali.

### **Hastamudras in Yajurveda**

In Kerala, Taittiriya Śākhā of KṛṣṇaYajurveda is prevalent. Apart from Ṛgveda tradition, Yajurvedins did not use hastamudras in its deep level. They use only some features of Ṛgveda mudras. While Rgvedins use the mudras in their traditional worshiping systems like, vāramirikkal, jaṭā, rathā and in educational workshops like trīṇi, trisandhā and so on, Yajurvedins gave less importance in using mudras on their worshiping systems and educational workshops. The mudras used by Yajurvedins are enlisted as follows:

akāramudrā, ākāramudrā, ikāramudrā, īkāramudrā, ukāramudrā, ūkāramudrā, ekāramudrā, aikāramudrā, okāramudrā, aukāramudrā, and anusvāramudrā. They also use mudras to represent some syllables like *k, l, n, ṅ* and so on.

According to Yajurveda tradition using mudras for chanting Vedas is decrease the level of excellence and

talent of the chanter.

### **Mudras in Sāmaveda tradition of Kerala**

Frits Staal describes in his book *Agni* about the Sāmaveda mudras in Kerala chanting system. He quotes Wayne Howard, who have done a detailed study on Samaveda tradition of Kerala in his book *Sāmaveda Chanting*. Staal clearly states the importance of svaras in the Samavedic usage of mudras. The sparing usages of mudras stress on the accents pronounced by the chanter. With this paper the photographs of Samaveda mudras are attached. They use malayalam terms like *malarti*, *matakki*, *malarti matakki*, *upari*, *madhyam* and so on.

### **Mudras in Koduntarappilli Sāmaveda tradition:**

In Koduntarappilli village of Palakkad district, revives a unique tradition of Jaiminīya Sāmaveda chanting of Tamil culture. Jaiminīya Sāma which is also known as Talavakāra śākhā, is itself deserves a uniqueness in nature. In Kerala, now the tradition of Jaiminīya sāma is gradually declining. But the scholars of Koduntarappilli village are more or less interested in the preservation of the Vedic chanting system of a unique method. According to the tradition, they follow the rules explained by Sabhapati. This idea is illustrated in the following verse:

स्वर्यपाणिक्रियातन्त्रं धारणं नाम लक्षणम् ।

साम्ना बहुभ्य आदाय विदधाति सभापतिः ॥

The authoritative text of Talavakāra śākhā is *Dharaṇam*. The text explains sixteen svaras with the movements of hands. So in each and every chanting of Sāma, they can use these svaras with the movements of hands. More over the student of Sāmaveda may use the notations of these sixteen svaras. The peculiar thing is that the svaras are illustrated with the hand movements. This method of learning will help to study the unique accents of Sāma chanting to a great extend. The seventeen svaras are as follows:

āvartam (6 mātras), utthānam (7 mātras), udgamam (3 mātras), yānam (ekamātrā), avaroham, anvangulyam, kṣepaṇam, marśanam, plasvaram, phasvaram, nasvaram, daṇḍākāram, mardanam, trasvaram, ṅasvaram, ekāṅguliyamarśnam, and kruṣṭam. These svaras are studied with the different movements of hand and fingers are touched in different ways for various svaras. Here daṇḍākāram is not considered as a svara for ṛk part of the chanting. So it can be considered as there are only sixteen svaras.

### **Conclusion**

The existing style of hastamudras in Kerala tradition of Vedic chanting is a unique mode of teaching learning process. In the ritualistic and worshiping tradition of Vedic cult, hastamudras may not be off much significance, though it plays a pivotal role in the teaching and learning of the Vedas. In the past or



present, not much importance is given to teach the Vedas with their meaning. There have been various types of Vedavikṛtis prevalent in India, that laid stress on byhearting and memory power. There were eight vikṛtis such, jaṭā, mātā, śikhā, rathā, each having its importance depending on the places. Like Tamilnadu, Karnataka, Kerala.

Apart from these methods of learning, the hastamudras are a different entity. They reveal the artistic and creative mind of our ancestors to a great extent. Later on, the performing art forms of Kerala are exploited the possibilities of body language in its deep sense. Mudrābhinaya has great importance in Kerala art forms. Not where else in India can see mudrābhinaya being given such a pride of place as in Kerala. For e.g., - Kūṭiyāttam and Kathalali.

There are no obvious connection between Vaidika mudras which represent sounds and accents, and abhinaya mudras which represent idea as a whole. The tradition of hastamudras which has flourished in Kerala influenced the divergent areas like theatre art, iconography and gave shape to several systematic forms of performance in later years. From a study of this, it is evident that there is a thread connecting the Vedic cult and various artistic forms of Kerala.

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### **Articles**

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