

Critical Study of Hand Gesture Recommendations in Bharatārṇava for Depicting Avatārs of Viṣṇu

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Abstract

Bharatārṇava, authored by Nandikeśvara is one of the invaluable treatises that has ample technical information needed for Indian classical dances. In addition to the fifteen main chapters, *Bharatārṇava* has appendix consisting of details on abhinaya (histrionic representation). The subtopic *Brahmādivēvā* (under an individual appendix topic called *Abhinayaviśeṣā*) has abhinaya recommendations for depicting principal Hindu God/Goddess. The objective of this paper is to perform critical study and analyze the underlying context of hand gestures recommended for depicting the avatārs of Viṣṇu under *Brahmādivēvā*. The results of this study exhibit that the abhinaya recommended for the avatārs is mainly based on the nature, feature, popular act and attributes of the avatārs. Equally significant outcome of this study are the critical observations about the correlation gap between the contents of appendix and the contents of main chapters, thus paves way to new studies and research.

Keywords: *Bharatārṇava*, Nandikeśvara, Abhinaya, Hasta, Sthānaka, Hand gestures

Introduction

Why Bharatārṇava?

It is a known fact that every classical dance follows different dance treatises. As a *Bharatanāṭyam* dancer, I have been embracing the extensive text *Abhinaya Darpaṇa* for various gestures, postures, movements and much more. *Abhinaya Darpaṇa* was authored by Nandikeśvara and is often referred as an abridgment of the text called *Bharatārṇava*. I do believe that comprehending the contents of *Bharatārṇava* is a commencement of gaining rich insight into the rare treatise that has never been part of my dance journey. Yet I must find out if the results of this study would lead me to a broader perspective of theoretical insights enabling the articulation of new ideas enriching our current practices. There is an appendix listing independent topics one of which is *Abhinayaviśeṣā* and I have taken an interest in this topic.

Why Abhinayaviśeṣā?

Abhinayaviśeṣā comprises of *Abhinaya* for various subjects. This topic interests me as the author takes the work that must be depicted and guides us how it can be

represented from the perspective of the end work itself. In other words, instead of listing uses of hand gestures, the author provides details on the application of the hand gesture to depict a subject-matter. As a first step in the search for knowledge, I have taken the subtopic *Brahmādivēvā* that lists the poses for depicting principal deities and analyzed the idea behind the *hasta* (hand gesture) recommendations provided by the author.

Furthermore, as *Abhinayaviśeṣā* is under appendix of *Bharatārṇava*, I'm also eager to see how well this content relates to the main chapters of the text.

Background of Study

Bharatārṇava

Bharatārṇava is a rare treatise and is placed between 11th to 16th century by various scholars. The *Bharatārṇava* used for this study, edited by Sri.K.Vasudeva Sāstri has been gathered by a number of sources. In the introduction of this book, it is mentioned that apart from the original *Bharatārṇava*, this book has contents from other sources namely Guhēśa Bharata Lakṣaṇam, Sumathi Bhōdhaka *Bharatārṇavam* and Pārvatī Prayukta *Bharatārṇava*

Candrikā. Originally, Bharatārṇava is described as a text of 4000 ślokas/verses, however the available ślokas are from 101 to 810.

The Author

Abhinaya darpaṇa is referred as an abridgment of Bharatārṇava and both the treatises are authored by Nandikeśvara.

- The introduction of Bharatārṇava edited by Sri.K.Vasudeva Sāstri indicates the mention of 5 works of Nandikeśvara. The first being Nandikeśvara Samhita and the second being Bharatārṇava itself. In this book, there is no explicit mention of relating Nandikeśvara authoring Abhinaya Darpaṇa.
- In the book “Nandikeśvara’s Abhinayadarpaṇam” by Prof. Manomohan Gosh, while discussing the author of Abhinaya darpaṇam it has been mentioned that ‘according to Mm.Ramakrishna Kavi, Abhinaya darpaṇam is one of the chapters and probably the only available chapter of Nandikeśvara’s Nandikeśvara Samhita, while rest of the work is extinct’. According to this statement, Abhinaya darpaṇa precedes Bharatārṇava hinting us Abhinaya darpaṇa may not be the abridgment of Bharatārṇava.

Scholars have placed both the texts in different centuries and interestingly according to some scholars like Mm.Ramakrishna Kavi, Bharatārṇava seems to be of a later period than Abhinaya darpaṇa.

While we connect the citations from “Bharatārṇava edited by Sri.K.Vasudeva Sāstri” and “Nandikeśvara’s Abhinayadarpaṇam by Prof. Manomohan Gosh”, we could hypothesize that

- Abhinaya Darpaṇa is one of the chapters of Nandikeśvara Samhita
- Nandikeśvara Samhita is the first of the five works of Nandikeśvara
- Bharatārṇava is the second of the five works of Nandikeśvara
- Thus, Abhinaya Darpaṇa and Bharatārṇava are authored by the same author Nandikeśvara

However, there are research and findings that show the authors could be carrying the same name but may not be the same person. Be that as it may, our objective here is

to study the hand gestures used in Abhinaya detailed in the book Bharatārṇava and Nandikeśvara mentioned throughout this study hereafter refers to the author of Bharatārṇava.

Abhinayaviśeṣā

The *Abhinayaviśeṣā* is one of the topics listed under appendix of *Bharatārṇava*. In the introduction of this book, the editor has specified that there are few additional manuscripts focused on *Abhinaya* and cannot be fitted under any chapterization of the book. Thus, they are listed under Appendix.

Abhinayaviśeṣā provides a recommendation of *Abhinaya* for Principal deities, *Dikpālas*, Sun rise through Sunset, *Navagrahas*, *Bhairava-Bhairavī*, apsaras *Ūrvaśī* and five great elements.

Brahmādivē

Brahmādivē (Lord *Brahma* and all other Gods), the pivot of our analysis is a subtopic under *Abhinayaviśeṣā*. In *Brahmādivē*, the poses for depicting the principal deities are explained and I have analyzed the hand gestures provided for the *avatārs* of *Viṣṇu* to discover their embedded intent.

Literature Review

Introduction

As the scope of this paper is to study the hand gesture recommendations, this review is limited to studies that had referred or discussed about hand gestures from *Bharatārṇava*.

Hand Gestures - Bharatārṇava

Ms.Reeta T.Tailor (2011) while studying the *Hastābhinaya* from various treatises with respect to the content of *Nāṭya-Sarvaswa-Deepikā*, quotes the differences in *Bhramara*, *Sandamśa* and *Tāmracūḍa hasta* definitions in *Bharatārṇava* compared to other treatises. Ms.Reeta T.Tailor (2011) while studying the *Devābhinaya* from various treatises with respect to the content of *Nāṭya-Sarvaswa-Deepikā*, mentions the *hastas* to be used for *Vighnēswara*, *Sadāśiva*, *Kārtikēya (Śaṛṇmukha)*, *Viṣṇu*, *Indra*, *Brahma*, *Lakṣmī*, *Saraswati*, *Pārvatī*. Ms.Gauri Subhash Kale (2014) has mentioned *Daśāvatāra hastas*

from *Bharatārṇava* as part of the study of *Daśāvatāra* hand gestures codified in various Indian treatises.

Conclusion

- The past studies have listed the hand gestures from various treatises and *Bharatārṇava* being one of the texts in comparison.
- The *Devābhīnaya hastas* and *Daśāvatāra hastas* are taken from *Brahmādevā*, a subtopic in appendix of *Bharatārṇava*, yet these studies did not attempt to look for *hastas* for those deities if any mentioned in the main chapters of the book.
- The past studies haven't explored the underlying concept for using those hand gestures.

When the root intention for using those hand gestures is explored, it will unfold profound details of *Bharatārṇava*. The current study will serve as an initiative to relate and interpret contents across various chapters of *Bharatārṇava* acquiring comprehensive knowledge of this rare text.

Materials and Methods

A qualitative analytical approach has been undertaken where the available information has been carefully assessed, missing links have been identified, efforts have been spent to discover minute details and bring everything together to produce a meaningful inference.

1. The main source used for this study is the text *Bharatārṇava* edited by *Sri.K.Vasudeva Sāstri*. The information provided under *Brahmādevā* for the *avatārs* of *Viṣṇu* has been carefully studied.
 - To understand the hand gestures mentioned for each *avatār*, chapter I (Single hand gestures), chapter II (Double hand gestures), chapter III (*Nṛtta hastas*) in this book are referred for their definitions.
 - The use of *hastas* under chapter IV, miscellaneous uses of hands under chapter VI, Chapter X (*Nānārtha hastas*) and special uses of *mudras* under appendix 1 are referred as an aid for interpreting the idea behind the recommendation of those hand gestures from the author's perspective.

- To understand the standing pose mentioned for each *avatār*, Chapter V (Standing poses), Chapter VI (The uses of standing poses and of hands in different poses), Combination of *Sthānakas* and *Hastas* under chapter XII (Secrets of the Techniques of *Sṛṅga Nāṭya*) are referred for their definition and to understand if any role in further enhancing the depiction of each *avatār*.
2. The author has also suggested certain hand gestures and postures that are not available in our main source text. For such occurrences, the meaning of the Sanskrit word was devised with the help of Sanskrit dictionary.

Analysis and Results: The *Avatārs* of *Viṣṇu*

The recommendations on hand gestures and standing posture for depicting the *avatārs* of *Viṣṇu* are studied. Though only hand gestures are thoroughly analyzed, definitions for standing postures are given alongside from the main chapters to provide a holistic view of author's proposal.

Matsya

Hand Gesture: *Makara Mudra*

Standing Pose: *Vaiṣṇava* (Keeping one leg (usually left leg) in normal posture and other leg slightly bent and extended diagonally)

Makara is one of the *Nṛtta hastas* where *Sarpaśirṣa hastas* of both hands are placed one over the other and thumbs are shaken up and down indicating a fish swimming in water. The only mentioned usage of this hasta is to denote the fish.

Kūrma

Hand Gesture: *Śukatunḍa* over *Patāka*

Standing Pose: *Vaiṣṇava* (Refer "5.1.MATSYA" for definition)

Here left hand and right hand *hastas* are not mentioned separately, so we can assume *Śukatunḍa* on right hand held over *Patāka* on left hand to depict tortoise. It is not specified if the palm of the hands should be pressing against each other or both be facing down, so we can assume either way.

Varāha

- Hand Gesture: *Sarpaśīrṣa* about the chin
- Standing Pose: *Vaiṣṇava* (Refer "5.1.MATSYA" for definition)

Both hands to be held in *Sarpaśīrṣa* near the chin or over the chin to show the long blunt snout of the boar. It is not specified how to hold the hands with respect to each other, leaving space for our creative vision.

Narasimha

- Hand Gesture: *Vardhamāna Mudra* in both hands and thrusting them out apart (OR) *Rēcita hasta*
- Standing Pose: Standing on one leg

Vardhamāna mudra is a double hand gesture where *Śikhara hasta* is held on both hands. To depict *Narasimha avatār*, the *Śikhara* hands must be pulled apart aggressively indicating the action of tearing demon *Hiraṇyakaśipu*'s stomach.

Rēcita hasta is one of the *Nṛtta hastas* where hands holding *Alapadma hasta* are rotated and quickly thrust out towards the side as required by the occasion. This gesture is an alternative way to indicate the action of tearing demon *Hiraṇyakaśipu*'s stomach. In *Bharatārṇava*, *Alapadma hasta* is referred as *Alapallava hasta* under single hand gestures.

Standing on one leg is suggested to express the action of holding *Hiraṇyakaśipu* on the thighs of the other leg. *Ēkapāda* is one of the *Sthānakas* mentioned in this book where one foot is placed in normal position and the other foot is held such that the back of its knee is raised to the level of arms. However, the author has not made any reference to *Ēkapāda* here.

Vāmana

- Left Hand Gesture: (Holds) *Kamaṇḍalu*
- Right Hand Gesture: *Arāla* at the heart
- Standing Pose: *Vaiṣṇava* (Refer "5.1.MATSYA" for definition)

As description for hasta named *Kamaṇḍalu* is not available in this text, we shall interpret that the author recommends enacting holding a *Kamaṇḍalu* (oblong water pot) in the left hand. This action is usually shown using a

Muṣṭi hasta. The right hand *Arāla* is to show the action of holding umbrella.

Paraśurāma

Hand Gesture: Hands hold a *Patāka* pointing upwards or to the front and placed at the left side, to show the act of cutting with an axe.

The author has given enough details justifying the use of *Patāka hasta* on both hands. Note that axe is the weapon of *Paraśurāma*.

Śri Rāma

Left Hand Gesture: *Śikhara mudra* extended to the left side
Right Hand Gesture: *Kaṭaka hasta* near right shoulder (If in *Kapittha hasta*, the thumb is bent, and the first finger is placed at its middle part then it is called *Khaṭakāmukha hasta*)

- Standing Pose: *Ālīdha* (Left foot is planted firm and right foot is placed at a distance of 5 spans forward. The definition expresses the vigilant body posture ready to shoot the target if needed)

The left hand *Śikhara* denotes holding of a bow and right hand *Khaṭakāmukha* near the right shoulder denotes the readiness to pull arrow out of quiver.

Definition for *Kaṭaka Mudra* as such is not available in this text. In the book "*Nandikeśvara's Abhinaya darpaṇam*" by Prof. *Manomohan Gosh*, the author has provided two different definitions for *Kaṭakāmukha* and *Kaṭaka hasta*. Here we will be assuming *Khaṭakāmukha hasta* definition for *Kaṭaka hasta* because *Bharatārṇava* did not present exclusive definitions for these two hastas and both hastas are referred interchangeably by editor of this book *Sri.K.Vasudeva Sāstri*.

(OR)

- Left Hand Gesture: Placed on left kneecap
- Right Hand Gesture: *Patāka* held at heart and then changed to *Sandamśa* (*Sandamśa hasta* is defined as joining index finger, middle finger and thumb together one by one and stretching out other fingers)
- Posture: Seated in *Virāsana*
- Drsti: Look at the edge of the nose

Left hand is just rested over left knee and *Patāka hasta* is held at right hand denoting offering blessings to devotee and then changed to *Sandamśa hasta*.

'Indicating a number' is listed as one of the uses of this hasta, thus we can interpret that here *Sandamśa* indicates the 7th *avatār* of Lord *Viṣṇu*.

Here the author describes *Virāsana* as a seating pose where one leg is folded, and other leg is hung down. However, *Virāsana* is not defined elsewhere in this book. The word *Virāsana* can be translated to a pose expressing heroic nature.

The *dṛṣṭi* mentioned here results in half closed eyes probably denoting relaxed, peaceful, 'deep in meditation' expression.

Balarāma

- Hand Gesture: *Gadā Kaumōdakī*, bow and arrow and then *Muṣṭi* and *Śikhara mudra*
- Standing Pose: *Vaiṣṇava*

Gadā Kaumōdakī is the mace of Lord *Viṣṇu*. Mace and Plough are the weapons of *Balarāma*. The hands suggested by the author is to depict four hands of *Balarāma* where he holds the mace in one hand, bow in one hand, arrow in one hand and then change hands to enact ploughing.

The author has not specified particular hastas to represent holding of a mace, bow and arrow. One of the uses of *Śikhara hasta* is to portray a bow. We could assume *Muṣṭi hasta* to denote holding a mace, then a *Śikhara hasta* on left hand and *Bāṇa hasta* (arrow-like hand) or *Kapittha hasta* on right hand are held simultaneously to indicate bow and arrow, then finally a *Muṣṭi* and *Śikhara hasta* to be assumed simulating the act of ploughing.

Bāṇa hasta definition in *Bharatārṇava*: Assumed by pressing the tips of index, middle and ring fingers against the thumb and stretching out the little finger.

Buddha

- Hand Gesture: Hang down by the side with *Ḍola Mudra*
- Standing pose: Normal

Buddha is depicted with *Ḍola* hands hung down both the sides indicating the state of peacefulness or tranquillity (as this *avatār* do not have a weapon and is associated with

enlightenment) and standing in normal pose with both legs casually planted on ground.

Kalki

- Hand Gesture: *Patāka Mudra* high aloft
- Standing Pose: Stand on one leg

This *avatār* is shown by lifting hand up above the head assuming *Patāka hasta*. The author did not mention if both hands or either one hand to be held high. So, we can assume right hand held above the head denoting a sword (denoting a sword is one of the listed usages of *Patāka hasta*).

The standing pose is standing on one leg indicating a gesture of riding or sitting on a horse.

D. Śri Kṛṣṇa

- Hand Gesture: Playing flute
- Standing Pose: *Tribhāngi*

'Playing flute' can be enacted in many ways one of the most used is the *Mṛgaśīrṣa hasta* in both hands placed next to each other, left palm facing inwards and right palm outwards.

Tribhāngi is not described in this text, yet it is a popular posture used while representing Lord *Kṛṣṇa* in Indian classical dances as well as in ancient sculptures. In this stance, the waist is raised and bent in one direction, torso is bent in the opposite direction and head is tilted in an angle, thus forming a triple-bend posture.

Discussion

Though the representations are indicated as *Abhinaya* in general, the details provided here are limited to *Āṅgika abhinaya* which is again confined to hand gestures and standing postures.

Hand gestures namely *Khaṭakāmukha* and *Sandamśa* have different definitions compared to the gestures commonly used in *Bharatanāṭyam*. For those *hastas*, I have provided the definitions from main chapters.

Interesting to see both *Balarāma* and *Buddha* listed under the *avatārs* of Lord *Viṣṇu*. This could mean *Bharatārṇava* belongs to the period when *Buddha* was accepted as one of the incarnations of Lord *Viṣṇu*. *Nandikeśvara* has given *Śri Kṛṣṇa* after *Kalki* (10th *avatār*),

probably indicating that *Śri Kṛṣṇa* is not part of *Daśāvataram*. Yet I have followed the footsteps of editor of this book and grouped *abhinaya* for *Śri Kṛṣṇa* under *avatārs* of Lord *Viṣṇu* due to which we have eleven *avatārs* of Lord *Viṣṇu* as opposed to *Daśāvataram*.

- First critical observation is that certain *hastas* and *sthānakas* provided for the *avatārs* of *Viṣṇu* are not part of the main chapters of the book. *Virāsana (Śri Rāma)* and *Tribhangi (Śri Kṛṣṇa)* are recommended without having any definition or reference in the main chapters of this text.
- Second critical observation is that instead of referring to actual *hastas*, the act such as holding *Kamaṇḍalu* for *Vāmana avatār*, holding *Gadā Kaumōdakī*/bow/arrow for *Balarāma*, playing flute for *Śri Kṛṣṇa* has been mentioned. None of these acts are referred anywhere in the usages of *hastas* in the main chapters. So, we have assumed *hastas* justifiable as well as common in practice for respective deities.
- The above two critical observations bring up a discussion point if appendix is an independent work of the same author who wrote the main chapters or work of different author (as *Bharatārṇava* includes a collection of contents from various sources) or part of the contents that has not yet been obtained (out of 4000 *ślokas*, we have 101 through 810 *ślokas*). III.
- The below listed studies could potentially reveal supporting points to the open questions and critical observations made in this original study.

Critical study of rest of the deities under *Brahmādivē*
Study and analyze remaining subtopics of *Abhinayaviśeṣā*
Study and analyze other topics under appendix

Chapter X - *Nānārtha Hastas* lists application of *hastas* to convey a particular idea or situation. This chapter must be studied to appreciate the similarities in the technique of

describing hand gestures compared to the ones in *Abhinayaviśeṣā*.

Conclusion

After performing the critical study and analyzing the underlying meaning of *hasta-s* provided for the *avatārs* of *Viṣṇu*, it's apparent that the author details the hand gesture to be used on right hand and left hand, how and where to hold the gestures and appropriate standing postures (if applicable) to depict a deity. From the results of the study and analysis, we conclude that the *abhinaya* (histrionic representation) recommended for the *avatārs* of *Viṣṇu* is based on the nature of the *avatār*, popular feature of the *avatār*, popular act of the *avatār* and attributes of the respective *avatārs*. This study which is almost like a reverse engineering where the analysis travels from end-recommendations (hand gestures) provided by the author, navigating through the possible thought process of the author and finally discovering and connecting to the initial idea (nature/feature/attribute/act/response to the act of deity), has definitely shed light on the theoretical as well as sensuous aspects from an age-old text. The open questions and critical observations that resulted from this analysis are all worthwhile as they would potentially open up further studies leading to furthermore awareness and discoveries.

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