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Bharatanatyam

Native name	பரதநாட்டியம் (Tamil)
Etymology	Portmanteau of the Tamil words <i>bhavam</i> (expression), <i>ragam</i> (melody), <i>thalam</i> (rhythm), and <i>natyam</i> (dance)
Genre	Indian classical dance
Origin	Tamil Nadu, India

Sadiraattam remained exclusive to Hindu temples through the 19th century.^[7] It was banned by the colonial British government in 1910,^[11] but the Indian community protested against the ban and expanded its performance outside temples in the 20th century as Bharatanatyam.^{[7][11][12]} Modern stage productions of Bharatanatyam have become popular throughout India and include performances that are purely dance-based on non-religious ideas and fusion themes.^{[6][7]} The **Thanjavur Quartet** developed the basic structure of modern Bharatanatyam by formalizing it.^[13]

In 1932, [E Krishna Iyer](#) and [Rukmini Devi Arundale](#) put forward a proposal to [rename](#) *Sadiraattam* ([Tamil](#): சதிரட்டம்), also known as *Parathaiyar Aattam* or *Thevarattam*, as *Bharatanatyam*, to give the dance form a measure of respect, at a meeting of the Madras Music Academy.^[14] They also were instrumental in modifying mainly the [Pandanallur style](#) of dance. The word *Bharatam* is also seen as a [backronym](#),^[7] with *bha* standing for *bhavam* (feelings, emotions), *ra* for *ragam* (melody, framework for musical notes), and *taṁ* for *talam* (rhythm).^{[7][15][16]} The term *Natyam* is a [Sanskrit](#) word for "dance". The compound word *Bharatanatyam* is seen to connote a dance that harmoniously expresses *bhavam*, *ragam* and *talam*.^[15]

The theoretical foundations of dance Bharatanatyam are found first in Kootha Nool in Tamil and then referred also in *Natya Shastra*, a Sanskrit text of performance arts.^{[6][18][19]}

Dancers at Thanjavur, **Brihadeshwara temple** dedicated to **Shiva**. The temple has been a center for dance since about 1000 CE [17]

A Bharatanatyam pose

Dance helped inspire musicians, poets, painters, singers, and sculptors in Indian history.^[29]

Bharatanatyam shares the dance poses of many ancient Shiva sculptures in Hindu temples. The Cave 1 of the [Badami cave temples](#), dated to the 7th century,^[32] portrays the [Tandava](#)-dancing Shiva as [Nataraja](#).^{[33][34][35]} The image, 5 feet (1.5 m) tall, has 18 arms in a form that expresses the dance positions arranged in a geometric pattern.^[35] The arms of Shiva express [mudras](#) (symbolic hand gestures),^[36] that are used in Bharatanatyam.^{[6][37]}

Some colonial [Indologists](#) and modern authors have argued that Bharatanatyam is a descendant of an ancient [Devadasi](#) (lit. 'servant girls of Devas') culture, suggesting a historical origin back to between 300 BCE and 300 CE.^[38] Modern scholars have questioned this theory for lack of any

direct textual or archeological evidence.^{[39][40]} Historic sculptures and texts do describe and project dancing girls, as well as temple quarters dedicated to women, but they do not state them to be courtesans and prostitutes as alleged by early colonial Indologists.^[38] According to Daves Soneji, a critical examination of evidence suggests that courtesan dancing is a phenomenon of the modern era, beginning in the late 16th or the 17th century of the **Nayaka period** of Tamil Nadu.^[38] According to James Lochtefeld, classical dance remained exclusive to Hindu temples through the 19th century, only in the 20th century appearing on stage outside the temples.^[7] Further, the **Thanjavur Maratha kingdom** patronized classical dance.^[41]

With the arrival of the **East India Company** in the 18th century, and British colonial rule in the 19th, classical Indian dance forms were ridiculed and discouraged, and these performance arts declined.^[42] Christian missionaries and British officials presented "**nautch girls**" of north India (**Kathak**) and "devadasis" of south India (Bharatanatyam) as evidence of "harlots, debased erotic culture, slavery to idols and priests" tradition, and Christian missionaries demanded that this must be stopped, launching the "anti-dance movement" in 1892.^{[43][44][45]} The anti-dance camp accused the dance form as a front for prostitution, while revivalists questioned the constructed colonial histories.^{[39][40]}

In 1910, the **Madras Presidency** of the **British Empire** banned temple dancing, and with it the classical dance tradition in Hindu temples.^[11]

The banning of temple dancing stemmed from the 1892 anti-dance movement and new, liberal colonial perspectives. What the English imagined nineteenth-century modernity to be did not include what they regarded Bharatanatyam to be, which they regarded as indecent.^[46] Coming from a deep orientalist perspective, the morality of people who performed Bharatanatyam was called into question.^[47] Accusations of prostitution were thrown around. Some women from traditionally performing communities were used as a way to showcase obscenity.^[48] New reforms disregarded local issues like production of the arts for the sake of liberalism and felt able to impose disruptive reforms that reshaped lives at all levels and subjected people to new standards. Colonial reforms were largely unsympathetic to local traditions, and dismissive of the industry surrounding producing art.^[46] The adoption of Anglo-Indian laws that imposed certain restrictions and regulations on certain expressions of sexuality, and more so regulations on bodies and sex in general, which in turn affected traditional dance practices.^[48] Temple dancing became caught in a web of multiple political agendas, hoping to bend this burgeoning morality issue to suit their cause.^[49] Colonial denunciations of the practice of temple dancing were caught up in liberal ideals of bringing modernity to India, where modernity was tied to Anglo-Protestant moral ideas about how bodies are viewed and how sexuality was presented.^[48]



Rukmini Devi Arundale, pictured in 1940, proposed Bharatanatyam after Hindu temple dancing was banned by the British colonial government in 1910.

Post-colonial revival [edit]

The 1910 ban triggered protests against the stereotyping and dehumanization of temple dancers.^[11] Tamil people were concerned that a historic and rich dance tradition was being victimized under the excuse of social reform.^{[11][50]} Classical art revivalists such as **E. Krishna Iyer**, a lawyer who had learned from traditional practitioners of Sadir, questioned the cultural discrimination and the assumed connection, asking why prostitution needs years of training for performance arts, and how killing performance arts could end any evils in society.^{[51][52]} Iyer was arrested and sentenced to prison on charges of nationalism, who while serving out his prison term persuaded his fellow political prisoners to support Bharatanatyam.^[53]

While the British colonial government enforced laws to suppress Hindu temple dances, some from the West, such as the American dancer Esther Sherman moved to India in 1930, learned Indian classical dances, changed her name to **Ragini Devi**, and joined the movement to revive Bharatanatyam and other ancient dance arts.^[54]

The Indian independence movement in the early 20th century, already in progress, became a period of cultural foment and initiated an effort by its people to reclaim their culture and rediscover history.^{[43][55][56]} In this period of cultural and political turmoil, Bharatanatyam was revived as a mainstream dance outside of Hindu temples by artists such as **Rukmini Devi Arundale**, **Balasaraswati** and **Yamini Krishnamurti**^{[57][58]} They championed and performed the **Pandanallur style** and Thanjavur styles of Bharatanatyam.^[57]

Nationalist movements that brought revitalizing devadasis up as an issue to focus on viewed it as a way to critique the imposition of colonial morality on India. However, the revival movement was not without Western influence. Nationalist movements that also focused on devadasis revival were influenced by Western ideas of democratization of arts. Part of the revival movement was making the opportunity to dance open to more people.^[49] Nationalist movements that focused on revival were also influenced by Western ideology through their propagation that part of the revival movement is a reassertion of traditional values, as well as a moment to remind people of the country's cultural heritage and reestablish a sense of identity.^[59] Fighting for freedom from the British and fighting for civil liberties included debates about morality, and how gender impacts morality. The revival movement moralized devadasis by democratizing the art, while also decorating it with the female performing class.^[49] Figures like Rukmini Devi Arundale, who are credited with revitalizing Bharatanatyam, also shifted the practice to appeal to middle to upper-class women.^[47] Rukmini Devi Arundale is credited with helping develop the **Kalakshetra style** of Bharatanatyam.^[46] There was an emphasis on building a modern India through Indian nationalism, which tied in with protecting traditional artistic traditions. The decommercialization and sanitation of Bharatanatyam for the sake of protecting the spirit of the art is part of Bharatanatyam's revival.^[49] Bharatanatyam's successful revival meant that it was regarded as a classical dance tradition specific to India, as opposed to a cultural dance that had been changed by colonial censorship.^[46] It was becoming a modern nation to have a traditional dance that was practiced recreationally and was nationally recognized.^[59] With the standardization of Bharatanatyam, there came books based on historic texts, like **Natya Shastra**, which described the different movements.^[60] Evidence of a successful revival movement of Bharatanatyam through **Indian Nationalist movements** was the introduction of state-sponsored dance festivals in 1955 in an independent India. These festivals were put on to display art with religious, social, and cultural connotations that have some regional diversity on a common national platform.^[59]

In the late 20th century, Tamil Hindu migrants reintroduced the traditions of temple dancing in British Tamil temples.^[61]

Elements [edit]

Bharatanatyam is traditionally a team performance art that consists of a **solo dancer**, accompanied by musicians and one or more singers. It is described as classical art because the theory of musical notes, vocal performance, and the dance movement reflect ideas of the Sanskrit treatise **Natya Shastra** and other Sanskrit and Tamil texts, such as the **Abhinaya Darpana**.^{[62][63]}

The solo artist (**ekaharya**) in Bharatanatyam is dressed in a colorful **sari**, adorned with jewelry and presents a dance synchronized with Indian classical music.^[62] The hand and facial gestures are a coded **sign language** able to recite legends and spiritual ideas from the **Mahabharata**, the **Ramayana**, the **Puranas** and historic drama texts.^{[62][64]} The dancer deploys turns or specific body movements to mark punctuations in the story or the entry of a different character in the play or legend being acted out through dance. **Abhinaya** is the art of expression in **Indian aesthetics**; footwork, body language, postures, musical notes, the tones of the vocalist, aesthetics and costumes integrate to express and communicate the underlying text.^{[62][65]}

In modern adaptations, Bharatanatyam dance troupes may involve many dancers who play specific characters in a story, creatively choreographed to ease the interpretation and expand the experience by the audience.^[66]

The repertoire of Bharatanatyam, like all major classical Indian dance forms, follows the three categories of performance in the **Natya Shastra**. These are *Nritta* (Nirutham), *Nritya* (Niruthiyam) and *Natya* (Natyam).^[64]



Rama Vaidyanathan using expression and posture

- The *Nritya* performance is an abstract, fast, and rhythmic aspect of the dance.^[69] The viewer is presented with pure movement in Bharatanatyam, wherein the emphasis is the beauty in motion, form, speed, range, and pattern.^[64] This part of the repertoire has no interpretative aspect, no telling of the story. It is a technical performance and aims to engage the senses (Prakriti) of the audience.^[70]
- The *Nritya* is a slower and more expressive aspect of the dance that attempts to communicate feelings, and storyline, particularly with spiritual themes in Hindu dance traditions.^[69] In a *nritya*, the dance-acting expands to include silent expression of words through gestures and body motion set to musical notes. The actor articulates a legend or a spiritual message. This part of a Bharatanatyam repertoire is more than sensory enjoyment, it aims to engage the emotions and mind of the viewer.^{[64][70]}
- The *Natyam* is a play, typically a team performance,^[10] but can be acted out by a solo performer where the dancer uses certain standardized body movements to indicate a new character in the underlying story. A *Natyam* incorporates the elements of a *Nritya*.^[64]

The purpose

Bharata Natyam is an art which consecrates the body (...) the dancer, who dissolves her identity in rhythm and music, makes her body an instrument, at least for the duration of the dance, for the experience and expression of the spirit.
The traditional order of Bharata Natyam recital viz. *alarippu*, *jatiswaram*, *varnam*, *padams*, *tillana* and the *shloka* is the correct sequence in the practice of this art, which is an artistic *Yoga*, for revealing the spiritual through the corporeal.

Balasaraswati, a devadasi^{[67][68]}

Arangetram [edit]

A Bharatanatyam *arangetram* is a solo debut performance that signifies the completion of initial formal training of a young dancer, female or male in Indian classical dance. The term *Arangetram* translates to "ascending the stage". This performance is typically done ten to twelve years after a dancer begins learning Bharatanatyam. Still, more importantly, it is done when the *guru* believes the student is ready for a solo performance. This solo debut is synonymous with a "coming-of-age" celebration. The arangetram is a culmination of multiple years of hard work by the student and the guru, and it is an opportunity for the dancer to showcase his or her dedication and skills developed over the years. Throughout this debut, the dancer performs a series of dances. The dancer must build up his or her concentration and stamina to perform solo dances for approximately three hours. Each dance performed symbolizes various aspects of Hindu religion.^{[72][73]}

Sequence of dances [edit]

A traditional Bharatanatyam arangetram dance performance follows a seven to eight-part order of presentation. This set is called *Margam*.^{[67][74]}

Pushpanjali

The Arangetram performance typically begins with a dance called the *Pushpanjali*, which translates to "offering of flowers". In this dance, the performer offers flowers and salutations to the Hindu deities, the *guru*, and the audience as a mark of respect. The beginning of the dance symbolizes supplication, from which the dancer then commences the rest of the performance.^[75]

Alarippu

The presentation can also begin with a rhythmic invocation (*vandana*) called the *Alarippu*.^[16] It is a pure dance, which combines a thank you and benediction for blessings from the gods and goddesses, the *guru* and the gathered performance team. It also serves as a preliminary warm-up dance, without melody, to enable the dancer to loosen their body, and journey away from distractions and towards single-minded focus.^[67]

Jatiswaram

The next stage of the performance adds melody to the movement of *Alarippu*, and this is called *Jatiswaram*.^{[16][67]} The dance remains a prelim technical performance (*nritya*), pure in form and without any expressed words. The *drums* set the beat, of any Carnatic music *raga* (melody). They perform a sequence (*Korvai*) to the rhythm of the beat, presenting to the audience the unity of music, rhythm and movements.^[67]

Shabdham

The performance sequence then adds *Shabdham* (expressed words).^[76] This is the first item of Margam where expressions are introduced. The solo dancer, the vocalist(s), and the musical team, in this stage of the production, present short compositions, with words and meaning, in a spectrum of moods.^[77] This performance praises God (such as Krishna, Shiva, Rama, and Murugan) and their qualities.^{[78][79]}

Varnam

The performance thereafter evolves into the *Varnam* stage.^[76] This marks the arrival into the sanctum sanctorum core of the performance.^[67] It is the longest section and the *nritya*. A traditional Varnam may be as long as 30–45 minutes or sometimes an hour. Varnam offers huge scope for improvisation and an experienced dancer can stretch the Varnam to a desirable length. The artist presents the play or the main composition, reveling in all their movements, silently communicating the text through codified gestures and footwork, harmoniously with the music, rhythmically punctuated. The dancer performs complicated moves, such as expressing a verse at two speeds.^[80] Their hands and body tell a story, whether of love and longing or of a battle between the good and the evil,^[81] as the musicians envelop them with musical notes and tones that set the appropriate mood.^[77]

Padam

The *Padam* is next.^{[76][82]} This is the stage of reverence, of simplicity, of *abhinaya* (expression) of the solemn spiritual message or devotional religious prayer (*bhakti*). The music is lighter, the chant intimate, the dance emotional.^{[80][83]} The choreography attempts to express *rasa* (emotional taste) and a mood, while the recital may include items such as a *keertanam* (expressing devotion), a *javali* (expressing divine love) or something else.^{[80][82]}

Tillana

The performance sequence ends with a *Tillana*, the climax.^[76] It closes out the *nritya* portion, the movements exit the temple of expressive dance, returning to the *nritya* style, where a series of pure movement and music are rhythmically performed. Therewith the performance ends.^{[67][80][note 1]}

Shlokam or Mangalam

The seventh and final item in the sequence can be either a *Shlokam* or a *Mangalam*. The dancer calls for blessings on the people all around.^[86]

The overall sequence of Bharatanatyam, states Balasaraswati, thus moves from "mere meter; then melody and meter; continuing with music, meaning and meter; its expansion in the centerpiece of the varnam; thereafter, music and meaning without meter; (...) a non-metrical song at the end. We see a most wonderful completeness and symmetry in this art".^[87]

Costume and attire [edit]



Bharatanatyam Student with Guru in Arangetram Ceremony^[71]



A girl performing a Bharatanatyam dance at a Pongal Festival in Namakkal, Tamil Nadu, India



The Varnam part of Bharatanatyam emphasizes expressive dance.



Costumes in Bharatanatyam

The costume of a female Bharatanatyam dancer resembles a Tamil Hindu bridal dress. It typically consists of a [sari](#) in bright colors with golden or silver [zari](#) embroidery on the borders. The costume can be stitched from the [sari](#), with individual pieces for a bottom (either a skirt or [salwar](#)-shaped pants), a pleated piece which falls in front and opens like a [hand fan](#) when the dancer flexes her knees or performs footwork, a hip piece that covers the seat of the pant/skirt, and a torso piece that looks like an [aanchal](#) (i.e. the draped part of a regular sari). Some dancers also opt for an **unstitched sari** that is draped specially, with the single piece of cloth starting around the legs like a [dhoti](#), then upwards along the front torso, over the left shoulder, and then down the back with its end held at the waist by a jeweled belt.^[88] The costume of a male Bharatanatyam dancer is usually either a [sari](#) or a white cotton cloth draped around the legs and bottom half of the body like a [dhoti](#). During performances, the upper body of the male dancer remains bare. Male dancers typically do not wear stitched costumes.

Both female and male dancers wear elaborate jewelry on their ears, nose, neck, and wrists. Female dancers wear additional jewelry on their heads that emphasizes their hairline and parting. They also wear a smaller piece of jewelry on each side of their parting. These represent the sun and the moon.

Long hair on both male and female dancers is either secured by a bun or a braid. Female dancers with short hair often use braid extensions or bun hair pieces to simulate long hair. Female dancers also wear imitation flowers made of either cloth or paper around their braids or buns. These are known as (or [gajra](#)).

Both male and female dancers wear makeup, including foundation, blush, lipstick, and thick eyeliner or [kohl](#), which helps the audience see and understand their facial expressions.^[89]

All dancers wear leather anklets on each foot, which are called [salangai](#) or [ghungroos](#).^{[90][91]} These are made of small bells attached to a broad leather strap with belts that secure them at the back of the ankle. The bells are arranged in uniform rows and can be heard when the dancer moves their feet. The [salangai](#) helps emphasize the rhythm of the music as well as the dancer's footwork.

Lastly, all dancers outline their hands and feet with red [kumkum](#) powder or [alta](#), a tradition that helps the audience easily see their hand and foot gestures.^[92]

For classes, training, practice, or rehearsals, dancers traditionally wear a special dance sari. These saris are always cotton and have a shorter breadth than normal saris, falling at the knees rather than the ankles. These are paired with cotton pyjamas and blouses. The sari is worn with pleats at the front and tied tightly around the torso and hips. However, in recent times, dancers also opt for [salwar kameez](#) or athletic wear (like T-shirts and leggings) when not performing.^[*citation needed*]

The accompanying music to Bharatanatyam is in the [Carnatic](#) style of [South India](#), as is the recitation and chanting.^[93] The vocalist is called [nattuvanan](#), typically also the conductor of the entire performance, who may be the [guru](#) of the dancer and may also be playing cymbals or one of the musical instruments.^{[84][94]} The recited verses and text in Bharatanatyam are in [Tamil](#), [Telugu](#), [Kannada](#) and [Sanskrit](#).^[95]

The instruments used include the [mridangam](#) (double-sided drum), [nadaswaram](#) (long type of oboe made from black wood), nattuvangam (cymbals), the [flute](#), [violin](#) and [veena](#).^{[84][89]}

Symbolism [edit]

Bharatanatyam, like all classical dances of India, uses symbolism in its [abhinaya](#) (acting) and its goals. The roots of *abhinaya* appear in the [Natya Shastra](#) text, which defines drama in verse 6.10 as something that aesthetically arouses joy in the spectator, through the medium of the actor's art of communication, that helps connect and transport the individual into a sensual inner state of being.^[96] A performance art, asserts *Natya Shastra*, connects the artists and the audience through *abhinaya* (literally, "carrying to the spectators"), that is applying body-speech-mind and scene, wherein the actors communicate to the audience, through song and music.^[96] Drama in this ancient Sanskrit text, thus is an art that engages every aspect of life to glorify and give a state of joyful consciousness.^[97]

The communication through symbols is in the form of expressive gestures and pantomime set to music. The gestures and facial expressions convey the *ras* (sentiment, emotional taste) and *bhava* (mood) of the underlying story.^[98] In the Hindu texts on dance, the dancer successfully expresses the spiritual ideas by paying attention to four aspects of a performance: *Angika* (gestures and body language), *Vachika* (song, recitation, music and rhythm), *Aharya* (stage setting, costume, makeup, jewelry), and *Sattvika* (artist's mental disposition and emotional connection with the story and audience, wherein the artist's inner and outer state resonates).^[98] *Abhinaya* draws out the *bhava* (mood, psychological states).^[98]

The gestures used in Bharatanatyam are called *Hasta* (or *mudras*). These symbols are of three types: *asamyuta hastas* (single hand gestures), *samyuta hastas* (two hand gestures), and *nritya hastas* (dance hand gestures).^[99] Like words in a glossary, these gestures are presented in the *nritya* as a list or embellishment to a prelim performance. In *nritya* stage of Bharatanatyam, these symbols set in a certain sequence become sentences with meaning, with emotions expressed through facial expressions and other aspects of *abhinaya*.^[99] The basic standing position is called as Aramandi.

Bharatanatyam contains at least 20 *asanas* found in [modern yoga](#), including [Dhanurasana](#) (the bow, a back-arch); [Chakrasana](#) (the wheel, a standing back-arch); [Vrikshasana](#) (the tree, a standing pose); and [Natarajasana](#), the pose of dancing Shiva.^[100] 108 karanas of classical temple dance are represented in temple statuary; they depict the devadasi temple dancers who made use of yoga asanas in their dancing.^[101] Bharatanatyam is also considered a form of [Bhakti Yoga](#).^[101] However, Natarajasana is not found in any medieval hatha yoga text; it was among the many asanas introduced into modern yoga by [Krishnamacharya](#) in the early 20th century.^[102]



Example *mudras* – gestures as symbols in Bharatanatyam.

Modern revival: schools and training centers [edit]

Bharatanatyam rapidly expanded after India gained [independence from British rule](#) in 1947. It is now the most popular classical Indian dance style in India, enjoys a high degree of support in expatriate Indian communities, and is considered to be synonymous with Indian dance by many foreigners unaware of the diversity of dances and performance arts in Indian culture.^[103] In the second half of the 20th century, Bharatanatyam has been to Indian dance tradition what [ballet](#) has been in the West.^[103]


When the British government tried to attempt to ban Bharatanatyam traditions, it went on and revived by moving outside the Hindu temple and religious ideas. However, post-independence, with rising interest in its history, the ancient traditions, the invocation rituals and the spiritually expressive part of the dance has returned.^[103] Many innovations and developments in modern Bharatanatyam, states Anne-Marie Geston, are of a quasi-religious type.^[103] Major cities in India now have numerous schools that offer lessons in *Bharatanatyam*, and these cities host hundreds of shows every year.^{[104][105]}

Outside India, Bharatanatyam is a sought-after and studied dance, states Meduri, in academic institutes in the [United States](#), [Europe](#), [Canada](#), [Australia](#), the [Gulf States](#), [Sri Lanka](#), [Malaysia](#), [New Zealand](#), [Bangladesh](#) and [Singapore](#).^[106] For expat Indian and Tamil communities in many countries, it is a source and means for social life and community bonding.^[107] Contemporary Bharatanatyam choreographies include both male and female dancers.^[30]



An expression through gesture in Bharatanatyam.




In cinema [\[edit \]](#)

- 
- One movement in the Bharatanatyam by [Rama Vaidyanathan](#) at the [Guimet Museum](#) (2009).

- Culture of India
- Vazhuvoor (dance)

1. ^A After the Tillana, the dancer may continue to the seventh part, called *Shloka*.^[84] It is a reverential greeting, a thank you or a prayer to one or more gods, goddesses or to one's teacher. This is a post-performance, where a Sanskrit verse (Shloka) is danced out in the form of *nritya*. An example Shloka^[85] "The *Guru* (teacher) is the Brahma, the *Guru* is the Vishnu, the *Guru* is the Maheshwara (Shiva). The *Guru* is the pathway to Supreme *Brahman* (supreme soul), to you the auspicious, I reverentially bow." Original: गुरुर्ब्रह्मा गुरुर्विश्वगुरुर्देवो महेश्वरः । गुरुत्वे परं ब्रह्म तस्मै श्रीगुरुवे नमः ॥

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