

21 Indian Alchemy

Alchemy on the India subcontinent was largely about health, medicine and longevity. It was tied in early with other healthful practices, like yoga. There are several ways to refer in Sanskrit to alchemy:

- Dhātuvāda: gold-making and silver-making
- Lohavāda: iron in alchemy and medicine
- Works in Sanskrit: focus on mercury
- Works in Tamil: focus on mercury, salts, and medicine + yoga + alchemy
- Translation of Sanskrit into Tibetan enter the Buddhist canon as rasayana.

The earliest alchemy, about 800 AD, was in Sanskrit, and based on mercury. The prefix "rasa" means mercury, and can be formed into rasavāda "doctrine of mercury," rasaśāstra "discipline of mercury," rasavidyā "knowledge about mercury," or rasāyana "path of mercury." Cinnabar, the source of mercury, is not found in India, so it must have been imported from China or Afghanistan. Rasashastra is still practiced as pharmacological medicine. Rasasatra is the accepted name for Indic alchemy.

A very interesting idea from Indian mythology is the way *soma*, the food of immortality, operates. It does one no good to swallow it; it must be offered as a sacrifice to the gods to benefit the sacrificer. The gods then offer it to each other, benefitting from the giving, not from the receiving.

“ It is not enough to simply possess the *soma* to benefit from it. Rather, as the gods first discovered, it is by offering or surrendering the sacrifice to another (god) that its benefits accrue to the sacrificer.

The Alchemical Body by David Gordon White, 1996, p. 10

[Here is a timeline of indic alchemy](#), from 800 AD to 1650 AD, about 100 years before the end of alchemy in Europe. We don't have any clear sense of where Indic alchemy came from; it's clearly different from Greek, Persian, Arabic and Chinese alchemy. Perhaps it was home-grown, but delayed from the others for some reason. The first alchemy book was written by a Jain monk and already combined mercurial alchemy and medicine in sophisticated ways, so it is unlikely to be a first foray into alchemy. The medical doctrine described is humorism, though the alchemy appears less Aristotelian than Greek and Arabic alchemy.

Significant progress in alchemy was made in [ancient India](#). An 11th-century [Persian chemist](#) and [physician](#) named [Abū Rayhān Bīrūnī](#) reported "[the Indians] have a science similar to alchemy which is quite peculiar to them. They call it *Rasāyana*, a word composed with *rasa*, i.e., gold. It means an art which is restricted to certain operations, drugs, and compound medicines, most of which are taken from plants. Its principles restore the health of those who were ill beyond hope, and give back youth to fading old age..."

Wikipedia, [Rasayana](#)

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9th c.

Kalyāṅakāraka

Written by the Digambara Jain monk Ugrāditya, the *Kalyāṅakāraka* ("The Cause of Welfare") is the earliest Sanskrit medical work with alchemical content. The work gives detailed descriptions for processing mercury and uses specific technical terminology for procedures and apparatuses, demonstrating an advanced stage of alchemical thought.

Alchemy Timeline

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10th c

Rasahdayatantra

When taking mercury, alcohol, sour gruel, sesame oil, or buttermilk are unsuitable. An intelligent person should not oil their body with pungent oil during an elixir regimen. During an elixir regimen, unripe, non-sweet foods, hot milk and spoiled meat should not be eaten. It is also taught in this context that fruit and roots that are not fresh should not be eaten. Moreover, one should not fast,

but one should not eat during the night. One should stay away from what is forbidden. This is how an intelligent person should act during the intake of the king of essences. (RHT 19.45-47)

Alchemy Timeline

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11-12th c.

Rasaraṅga

An important work on alchemy, the *Rasaraṅga* ("The Ocean of Mercury") begins with a systematic discussion of the origins of mercury, attributes and initiation of the alchemist, and appliances to be used in alchemical operations, before moving onto the substances and procedures of making mercurial elixirs. It examines the purification of the body for the ingestion of elixirs to acquire an immortal body that will not become diseased or age. The text teaches that the body must be maintained to facilitate liberation, and that the preservation of the body can be achieved through using mercury and breath control. It also notes the importance of beef (*gomāṃsa*) as an important alchemical ingredient.

Alchemy Timeline

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12th-13th c.

Ānandakanda

A dialog between Bhairava and Bhairavī, the *Ānandakanda* ("The Root of Joy") contains many references to Śaiva deities, mantras, maṇḍalas, and yantras. The text is divided into two parts: *amṛtikaraṇaviśrānti* and *kriyākaraṇaviśrānti*. The first deals with the processing of mercury and the second with the processing of metals, minerals, and gems. The *amṛtikaraṇaviśrānti* focuses on the purification of the body through *pañcakarma*, features dietary and behavioral rules, describes the seven bodily constituents (*dhātu*) discusses elixir regimen (

rasāyana), and details the preparation of mercurial elixirs (*rasāyana*). The *kriyākaraṇaviśrānti* focuses on plants to be used in alchemical operations, and elaborates on eighty-eight medicinal plants.

Alchemy Timeline

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late 15-late 16th c.

Rasendracint?ma?i

The nine chapters of the *Rasendracintāmaṇi* ("The Thought-Jewel of the Lord of Essences") by Ḍhuṇḍhukanātha focus on alchemy, though the last chapter describes the medicinal uses of mercurial and metallic preparations. It takes verses from a variety of sources and adds teachings based on the personal experiences of the author and his guru. The text's eighth chapter describes eighteen poisons that can be used for medicine, elixir regimen (*rasāyana*) and metallurgy. The poisons are divided into four categories based on the four classes of society (*varṇa*) and are identified by their color. It features descriptions of the medicinal use of mercury and other minerals and gives formulae for vitalisation tonics (*rasāyana*) and mercurial preparations (*rasayoga*).

Alchemy Timeline

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late 15-16th c.

Rasendras?rasa?graha

Based on earlier texts, Gopālakṛṣṇa's *Rasendrasārasaṅgraha*'s ("The Collection of the Essence of Mercury") five chapters focus almost entirely on medical alchemy. Major areas of focus are the treatment of various diseases, children's diseases, vitalisation therapy (*rasāyana*), and virility therapy (*vājīkaraṇa*). The text conforms and adds to the list of diseases found in the 8th-century

Mādhavanidāna. Many of the prescriptions are taken from the *Rasendracintāmaṇi*. The text is especially popular in Bengal.

Alchemy Timeline

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16th c.

Rasaparakāśasudhākara

A systematic work, the *Rasaparakāśasudhākara* ("The Nectar Mine Light on Mercury") cites and builds upon earlier texts and provides new information from the experiences of its author Yaśodhara and his teacher. Early chapters highlight iatrochemical procedures, including the purification of metals, gems, and minerals. Chapter eleven describes the making of silver, gold, coral, and pearls. A large part of the work is dedicated to medicine, providing formulae for mercurials (*rasayoga*) to cure various diseases. The text includes uncommon or variant descriptions of alchemical apparatuses (*yantra*) as well as chapters that contain aphrodisiac recipes and those to delay ejaculation. Yaśodhara references disorders due to opium abuse and acknowledges cinnabar originating from the West.

Alchemy Timeline

The authors of the Timeline have also worked to recreate some of the recipes from the *Rasaparakāśasudhākara* and made [YouTube videos](#). For example:

<https://www.youtube.com/embed/6bl7yAnf500>



Many thanks to SHAC and Dagmar Wujastyk for her recent talk on Indic Alchemy, [here](#) on YouTube.

Revision #1

Created 3 October 2023 09:01:45 by bruce

Updated 30 October 2024 13:05:06 by bruce