AN ALCHEMICAL GHOST: THE RASARATNĀKARA BY NĀGĀRJUNA

By Dominik Wujastyk

The study of the history of Indian alchemy should naturally begin with a reading of the earliest available texts of the subject and, at the same time perhaps, a reading of the secondary literature for general orientation.¹ There are at least seventy or eighty primary Sanskrit works written on alchemy. Approximately one fifth of these have been printed, few critically edited and none completely translated.² The main and almost only comprehensive secondary source for the subject is still P. C. Rāy’s two volume History of Hindu chemistry, now usually read in its later revised form as The history of chemistry in ancient and mediaeval India, edited by P. Rāy, a pupil of P. C. Rāy.³ There are several useful studies scattered in the specialist journals, but these are often dependent on Rāy’s work, or unreferenced. Some unpublished dissertations are more original.⁴ P. C. Rāy charted the subject for us, remarkably fully, and for this we must be grateful. In a pioneering work of this kind some shortcomings are to be expected. It is unfortunate, however, that one of these concerns the treatment which Rāy emphatically places at the very beginning of the Indian alchemical tradition, namely the Rasaratnākara of Nāgārjuna.

Rāy begins his History by arguing that an Indian alchemy involving a fairly elaborate use of mineral products, and not merely “herbs and simples and a few readily available products of the mineral kingdom,”⁵ began only after ca. 800 and came into its own with the rise of Tantra. After a long discourse on the rise of Mahāyāna Buddhism, its Tantric phase and the tales concerning Nāgārjuna,⁶ Rāy describes with scarcely suppressed excitement how,

In the course of our search for MSS. of alchemical Tantras we have come upon a precious find in the shape of a Buddhist Tantra, with Nāgārjuna as its reputed author . . . The MS. in question is a mere fragment, but it is calculated to evoke all the zeal and enthusiasm of a Palaeontologist—of an Owen or a Marsh—in his efforts to restore an animal and assign to it its proper place in the economy of the laws of evolution, when he luckily chances upon a fossil impression of its tooth or claws. From this point of view Rasaratnākara, for such is the name of our MS., is of uncommon interest.⁷

In the revised edition of Rāy’s work, his scattered references to Nāgārjuna are gathered together and condensed, and the Rasaratnākara is given an even more prominent position at the beginning of the chapter on the Tantric period, where the earliest texts of a properly alchemical nature are discussed.⁸ The work is tentatively dated to the eighth century.⁹ Rāy also gives an extract from the work, with translation.¹⁰ Clearly this is the very work one should like to read first in a study of the subject, and almost all authors who have discussed Indian alchemy since Rāy have underlined the primacy of this text.¹¹

But Nāgārjuna did not write a work called the Rasaratnākara.¹²

Fortunately it is possible to trace the confusion that led to Rāy’s mistake. Scholars writing on Indian alchemy up to the present time—with the notable exception of Cordier—seem to have looked no further than Rāy, and have based all their remarks about
Nāgārjuna on the very brief passages Rāy quoted. It is important to stress at the outset that Rāy was indeed quoting an alchemical text ascribed to Nāgārjuna which does exist. Now that this text has been correctly identified the way is clear for its proper study.

In brief, I shall show that the confusion arose from the conflation of three different texts: the Rasaratnākara of Nityanātha Siddha, the Kakṣapuṭa of Nāgārjuna Siddha and the Rasendramaṅgala also of Nāgārjuna Siddha. An analysis of these works, carried out almost entirely on the basis of the manuscripts of the first two works held in the valuable Sanskrit collection of the Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine, will show how the confusion arose.\(^{13}\) The contents of these works are listed in full since there is no complete translation of any Indian alchemical work, nor any presentation of the full range of topics covered in such works.\(^ {14}\)

Let us, then, examine the contents of these three works in turn.

**The Rasaratnākara of Nityanātha Siddha**

The Rasaratnākara or “Ocean of Mercury” treats of what we would call alchemy, medicine and magic. The colophons of its numerous manuscripts unanimously ascribe it to Nityanātha Siddha, the son of the goddess Pārvatī. Moreover, in verse 25 of the opening section the author declares himself unambiguously: “Whatever can be found elsewhere is here; what is here cannot be found elsewhere. This is an Ocean of Mercury, composed by Nityanātha.”\(^ {15}\)

The author also informs us that he has cast the work into five sections (khandas):

This discipline, beneficial and dear to aspirants, has five sections. It gives fame to doctors, it is beneficial to the sick. It is of great interest to theoreticians, and it perfects the bodies of the old. It makes the spells of magicians successful, causing many wonders.

Mercurial success (rasasiddhi) is generated for doctors in the Rasa section, for the sick in the Rasendra section, for theoreticians in the Vāda section, for the old in the Rasāyana section, and for magicians in the Mantra section.\(^ {16}\)

An examination of the manuscripts in which this work is transmitted shows that these five sections are preserved, but that they are not normally all transmitted in a single codex. The first two sections, Rasa and Rasendra, are often found together in one codex. The next two sections, Vāda and Rasāyana, are usually transmitted in separate codices and are rarer. The last section, on Mantra, is more common, and is also normally found separately; it is normally entitled the Siddha section in the manuscript colophons. The contents of these sections are as follows:\(^ {17}\)

**A. The Rasa “Mercury” section has the following ten chapters (upadesas):**

1. Rasapīthikā “The pedestal of mercury”
2. Rasāsodhanamātrānam “Purifying and killing mercury”
3. Rasamāranādhihikāraḥ “On killing mercury”
4. Rasamūrchanādhihikāraḥ “On the swooning of mercury”
5. Vajravaikrāntamāranādhihikāraḥ “On killing diamond and vaikrānta”\(^ {18}\)
6. Abhrakamāranam “Killing mica”
7. Sarvoparasānāmu ddhisattvapātanam “Purifying and extracting the essences of all the secondary rasas”\(^ {19}\)
स्वापिपवविवर्ष्णार्थी भूवनस्योदये यथा।
भवरोगकर्षी वन्धे ग्राणिकातानुरुपश्रीः ॥ १२ ॥
रसोपस्तोलाहां तेषां मूलपलें सह।
असाध्यं प्रत्ययोढं कर्षणं रससाधनम् ॥ १२ ॥
वैद्यानां यशोदारायण व्याधितानां हिताय च।
वाणिज्यानां कौतोकर्षणं वृद्धानां वहसितं ये ॥ १२ ॥
मन्त्रिणां मन्त्रसिद्धवर्यथे विविधाध्यक्षस्ऺरणम्।
पशुहारणमिव भाष्य वा धातोलितहसाधनम् ॥ १२ ॥
रसखण्डु नृ वै दानानां व्याधितानां रसेनः।
वाणिज्यानां वदखण्डं च बुद्धानां च रसेनः ॥ १२ ॥
मन्त्रिणां मन्त्रखण्डु च रससिद्धं प्राज्याते।
युतं नासितं संबेधे तत्तत्तवण्डविलोकनाम् ॥ १२ ॥
हतो हलकि जरामुखु मृत्थितो व्याधितात्क।
धते च खंगाते वदे कांत्येः सूतातकपारः ॥ १२ ॥
जरामुखाध्यच्योगनाशकरोगस्थाते।
मृतिनां हर्ते व्याधीनानां देशे चरननपि ॥ १२॥
मोहयेषु परावर्षे जीवयेषु मृते परामूनी।
मृतिनां वाधयेश्वर्यां सत्तृं को न सेवते ॥ १२ ॥
आयुर्वीणमार्गानां विभिन्नेमा महद्वलम्।
रूपवीणवलवणवर्यां रसपासानां भवेत् ॥ १२ ॥
मार्गयज्ञारितं सूतं गन्धरकेनैव मृत्यूः।
वदे: रसादृष्टिसत्तवयं रसस्येच विविधाना गति:। ॥ १२ ॥
वापघडीनां रघो रघा मृदितस्तु जनाविनं।
मारितो रुढळु: रसादृष्टि: साक्षात्तन्मेक्षरः। ॥ १२ ॥
वादकसं देहतोहक्यों सूतों देविसुराविवः।
दरिविषाकिषु ब्रह्मस्तु: व्यपथति ॥ १२ ॥
स्पष्टीनान्नाश्चेद्वकुलित गोहत्यां नात्र शोष्याय।
कि पुनःस्थापनार्दवर्यां प्राप्तं परमं पदम् ॥ १२ ॥
अल्लामोपपोष्यात्वबन्धज्ञरसवर्घ्यावस्थान।
दितिमार्गस्वाध्यक्षप्रज्ञाएङ्गो रसेऽधिक:। ॥ १२ ॥
युद्धकं शम्भुनाम पूर्वं रसखण्डैः रसायने।
रसादृष्टि स्वर्णार्थेः च दीपिकाः रसेऽर्गनं। ॥ १२ ॥
व्याधितानां हिताय प्रोक्तं नागाजुनेन यत्।
उकं चपंतिसिद्धं स्वर्गविभक्तपलिकं। ॥ १२ ॥
अन्तरकर्षशान्धेषु वहसितस्वागमेषु।
युद्धकं रागभोते तन्न्रे मृतुर्वे वैभवरागे। ॥ १२ ॥
अन्नमेकं बुद्धिः सिद्धियुदतं स प्रतिफळते।
तस्य यदायस्य वर्षेण्यथावर्षेण्यथापनम्। ॥ १२ ॥
तत्तथ्यवर्षेण परित्यजय सार्ब्र्गैं समुद्रसम्।
व्याख्यात्मकनां क्रिया: नासितं क्षमस्वयम न च क्षमित्। ॥ १२ ॥
भूमात्रा युक्तमेकं कविविनासित सम्प्रदायो न च क्षमित्।
तेन सिद्धिनर्तानां रसे वार्थसायने। ॥ १२ ॥
वैयें वार्थ प्रयोगः च यस्मादः मया कृतः।
यथाज्जैमुखयं जातं स्वार्थमभूतं च यथाया।
तत्तलाकारितायथ्र प्रकटीर्णेतस्थुना। ॥ १२ ॥