



## Tantric Alchemy of Nāths and Kānpḥaṭa Yogis: Interface between Chemistry and Theology

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### Abstract

Most of the images of Nāth Siddhas and Kānpḥaṭa Yogis floating in the popular culture are negative and aligns them with various kinds of superstitious and criminal activities. However, the intensive research done by many scholars foregrounds that historically Nāths and Kānpḥaṭa Yogis were associated with various philosophical schools and they were also trained in alchemy. The research shows that there is an amalgamation of alchemy, medicinal expertise, and philosophies made them popular among the rulers and aristocracy of the time. Ontological and epistemological self in the philosophy of Nāths and Kānpḥaṭa Yogis revolve around three lines—the divine, the perfected, and the human. The major Nāth Siddhas and Kānpḥaṭa Yogis who deal with the ontology and epistemology of self through alchemy are—Gorakh Nāth, Matsyendra Nāth, Carpati Nāth, Dattātreya, Nāgnāth, ādināth etc. Their works abound in treatises on alchemical findings and yoga, and their role in understanding the self.

**Keywords:** tāntrikas, mercury and sulfur, Lord Śiva, transmutation, alchemy and medical science, rasayana sastra, amalgamation.

### Quality Education



Any reference to Nāths and Kānpḥaṭa Yogis invokes a very derogatory and negative image which is sometimes appalling and sometimes exotic. David Gordon White in his book *The Alchemical Body: Siddha Traditions in Medieval India* tries to foreground the common perception of the Yogis:

The Yogis are defined (like the tāntrikas of an earlier time) by their nonconformity to and exclusion from orthodox categories: they are that troubling aggregate of sectarian groups and individuals whose language and behavior subvert the canons of Vedic, devotional, and “high” tantric religion. On the other hand, they are defined by certain features of their sectarian affiliations and practices: heirs to the heterodox Pāśupatas and Kāpālikas of an earlier age,

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they are devotees of terrible forms of Śiva (usually Bhairava) who besmear themselves with ashes, leave their hair uncut, and continue to adhere to the practices of “primitive” tantrism. As such, their “yoga” is more closely identified, in the jaundiced eyes of their critics, with black magic, sorcery, sexual perversion, and the subversion of alimentary prohibitions than with the practice of yoga in the conventional sense of the term. In recent times, “Yogi” has been most specifically applied to the Nāth Siddhas, who are widely known as Kānpḥaṭa (Split-eared, for the very visible earrings they wear in holes bored through the thick of their ears, the hallmark of the order) Yogis or Jogis—a term that they themselves eschew. (25)

In the imagination of common people from Indian subcontinent they may be seen as charlatans or mere conjurers and sometimes as Jogis. Many a times in contemporary India people especially belonging to orthodox Brahmanical religion see them as “tāntrika,” “Kāpālika,” and “heretic”. Orthodox Brahmanical religion has always seen them as part of Śaiva religious sect and suspected them as heterodox, and many a times heretical because of their doctrines and practices which are not compatible with orthodox Brahminism. While highlighting Brahmanism’s perception of Nāths and Kānpḥaṭa yogis David Gordon White in his book *The Alchemical Body: Siddha Traditions in Medieval India* says, “their “yoga” is more closely identified, in the jaundiced eyes of their critics, with black magic, sorcery, sexual perversion, and the subversion of alimentary prohibitions than with the practice of yoga in the conventional sense of the term” (25). In the same book David Gordon White deliberates on different connotations and variants of Nāth and Kānpḥaṭa Yogis:

As a common noun, *siddha* means “realized, perfected one,” a term generally applied to a practitioner (*sādhaka*, *sādhū*) who has through his practice (*sādhana*) realized his dual goal of superhuman powers (*siddhis*, “realizations,” “perfections”) and bodily immortality (*jīvanmuktī*). As a proper noun, *Siddha* becomes a broad sectarian appellation, applying to devotees of Śiva in the Deccan (*Māheśvara Siddhas*), alchemists in Tamil Nadu (*Sittars*), a group of early Buddhist tāntrikas from Bengal (*Mahāsiddhas*, *Siddhācāryas*), the alchemists of medieval India (*Rasa Siddhas*) and, most especially, a mainly north Indian group known as the *Nāth Siddhas*. (4)

David Gordon White in his book *The Alchemical Body: Siddha Traditions in Medieval India* quotes from *Science and Civilisation in China* vol. 5 *Chemistry and Chemical Technology: Spagyric Discovery and Invention—Apparatus, Theories and Gifts* Joseph Needham et al. to foreground how the Nāths and Kānpḥaṭa yogis were seen as exotic beings by the Europeans, “That these Yogis were alchemists is borne out by no less a person than Marco Polo who, describing a group of *ciugi* (Jogis) whom he had encountered on the Malabar coast of India at the close of the thirteenth century, attributed their superhuman life spans of 150 to 200 years to their ingestion of an elixir composed of mercury and sulfur” (26). This exotic description of Nāths and Kānpḥaṭa Yogis also foregrounds their specialization as alchemists along with religious and philosophical specializations. These findings prove that there is an amalgamation

of alchemy and theology in the philosophy of Nāths and Kānphaṭa yogis. This combinations of alchemy, medicinal expertise, and philosophies made them popular among the rulers and aristocracy of the time. This particular aspect of Nāths and Kānphaṭa Yogis is foregrounded by B. N. Goswamy and J. S. Grewal, in their book *The Mughals and the Jogis of Jakhbar: Some Madad-i-Ma'ash and Other Documents* when they translated and reproduced Emperor Aurangzeb's letter written to Anand Nāth, the abbot of Jakhbar, Punjab, in 1661 or 1662,

The letter sent by Your Reverence has been received along with two *tolahs* of quicksilver. However, it is not so good as Your Reverence had given us to understand. It is desired that Your Reverence should treat some more quicksilver and have that sent, without unnecessary delay. A piece of cloth for a cloak and a sum of twenty-five rupees which have been sent as an offering will reach (Your Reverence). Also, a few words have been written to the valiant Fateh Chand to the effect that he should always afford protection. (120-124)

Marco Polo's and Aurangzeb's references are enough to prove that Nāths and Kānphaṭa Yogis are closely associated with the alchemy of Sulfur, Mercury and many other chemicals and their impact of the human body and life. However they just don't stop at the physical level of understanding of these chemicals rather as per David Gordon White's understanding in his book *The Alchemical Body: Siddha Traditions in Medieval India*, "Yoga and alchemy were complementary, interpenetrating disciplines for the medieval Siddhas" (26). Mercury has a very important place in the alchemy as Bhudeb Mookerji in his *Rasa-jala-nidhi or Ocean of Indian Chemistry and Alchemys* says while highlighting the importance of mercury, "the fact that mercury can be made to swallow, by special processes, a considerable quantity of gold or other metals, without any appreciable increase in the weight of the swallowing mercury" (xiv)

This particular property of mercury was acknowledged by of Nāths and Kānphaṭa Yogis as is evident from the following shloka regarding qualities of mercury from *Rasāmava* Ed. P. C. Ray and Hariscandra Kaviratna. *Bibliotheca Indica*:

murcchito harate vyādhiṃ mṛto jīvayati svayam  
baddhaḥ khecaratām kuryāt raso vāyuśca bhairavi. (197)

As per David Gordon White's understanding of this shloka in his book *The Alchemical Body: Siddha Traditions in Medieval India*, "Mercury, when "swooned"<sup>1</sup> drives away

<sup>1</sup> Swooning of mercury (murchhana)

Rubbing and other acts performed with prescribed drugs leading to the transformation of mercury into a cake-like substance is what is called 'murchhana', or swooning of mercury. This operation frees mercury from all sorts of evil properties.

(Another version)

Mercury is in a state of swoon, when it succeeds in curing diseases without producing any after-effect. The processes of causing swoon of mercury, as known to the expert chemists, are many; of all these, heating with six times its weight of sulphur is the best of all.

(Mercury may be brought to a state of swoon, by any of the following and other processes):—

(a) First process.

Mercury, duly, purified by the foregoing processes, is to be rubbed steadily with (an equal quantity of purified) sulphur; and in course of this rubbing, it gives up its dense subtleness and assumes a black appearance. (The rubbing is to be made in stone mortar and to be continued till the whole of the mercury is reduced to black dust). It is then said to be in a state of swoon, and is able to cure diseases by being combined with suitable anupana. (accompaniments).

For further information in this regard one can visit the website: <https://www.wisdomlib.org/hinduism/book/rasa-jala-nidhi-volume-1/d/doc219209.html>

disease, "killed" revives itself, and "bound" affords the power of flight, is the presence in the mineral world of the sexual essence of the Absolute" (22). With the emergence of this particular interpretation overlapping of chemistry and theology becomes evident in the philosophy of Nāths and Kānphaṭa Yogis. In the alchemical practices of Nāths and Kānphaṭa Yogis wherein they use Mercury extensively practically as well as metaphorically it becomes the symbol of Lord Śiva, who is also *all absorbing* like mercury. The theological aspect of mercury and Lord Śiva is evident from the process of swooning mercury David Gordon White foregrounds in his book *The Alchemical Body: Siddha Traditions in Medieval India*,

This is precisely what occurs in alchemical reactions. A "seed" (*bīja*) of gold or silver is planted in mercury (whose powers of absorption have been massively enhanced through a series of treatments in sulfur, mica, and other mainly "female" elements), which then becomes possessed of a "mouth" capable of "swallowing," of absorbing into itself, according to the alchemical scriptures, millions, even billions and trillions, of times its mass in base metals. These are thereby transmuted into gold. (22)

David N. Gellner in his *Monk, Householder, and Tantric Priest: Newar Buddhism and its Hierarchy of Ritual* foregrounds that this understanding of alchemy belongs to the philosophical tradition wherein "gold is immortality," (45-48). David Gordon White in his book *The Alchemical Body: Siddha Traditions in Medieval India* highlights that "All that remains is for the alchemist to swallow the mercury in question to himself become a second Śiva, an immortal superman (Siddha) whose every bodily secretion becomes transmutative and transubstantiating" (22-23). This statement clearly indicates the position of Nāths and Kānphaṭa Yogis as practitioners of alchemy and medical science in its medieval form.

The philosophy of Nāths and Kānphaṭa Yogis is an amalgamation of theology, Chemistry, Biology, and physiological practices. Ontological and epistemological dimension of the writings of Nāths and Kānphaṭa Yogis is foregrounded by A. M. Sastri and S. Y. Dave in their edited book *Paraśuraāmakalpasūtra* "three *oghas* (streams)—the divine, the perfected, and the human—but the dividing line between them was a dotted one that could be crossed through a systematic body of esoteric practice" (149). The major Nāth Siddhas and Kānphaṭa Yogis who deal with the ontology and epistemology of self through alchemy are —Gorakh Nāth, Matsyendra Nāth, Carpati Nāth, Dattātreya, Nāgnāth, ādināth etc. Their works abound in treaties on alchemical findings and yoga, and their role in understanding the self. During the medieval period along with Nāth Siddhas and Rasa Siddhas there was one more branch alchemists which was known as *pāścimāmnāya* (Western Transmission). The western branch i.e. *pāścimāmnāya* belonged to a Śākta sect. This sect was ardent worshipper of the goddess Kubjikā based mainly in Nepal. The philosophy of this sect as well amalgamated tantric, yogic, and alchemical elements into its doctrine and practice.

There are many points of convergence between Nāth Siddhas and Rasa Siddhas on the one hand and *paścimāmnāya* and Śākta sect on the other hand. One major point of conjunction between them is their common mystic doctrines and many a times practices as well regarding the sexual fluids released by male and female bodies respectively. Both of them were interested in the alchemical properties of these fluids and both of them associated these fluids with mysticism and the understanding of self. Fluid i.e. *rasa* is the foundation of *rasayana sastra* i.e. alchemy when the amalgamation of *rasayana sastra* and mysticism takes place it includes various kinds of fluids. No life is possible without these *rasas*. All living organisms contain vital fluids i.e. *rasas* of specific types. Some of the *rasas* studied in *rasayan sastra* include important fluids contained in human body like blood, bile, sexual fluids along with other fluids secreted by other life forms such as plant resins, water, rain etc.

Nāth Siddhas and Rasa Siddhas were aware of the role played by the sexual fluids in the procreation of life, Doris Meth Srinivasan, in her research paper, "Significance and Scope of Pre-Kuśāṇa Śaivite Iconography" foregrounds this aspect when she says that, Indians have known that the miracle of conception occurs through the union of male and female vital fluids, semen and uterine blood. With early tantrism, these procreative fluids came to be conceived as "power substances" for the worship of and ultimately the identification with gods and goddesses whose boundless energy was often portrayed as sexual in nature. Nearly always, the god in question was some form of Śiva, the god whose worship in the form of a *liṅga* (phallus) dates from at least the second century B.C. (18-19)

The research done by Doris Meth Srinivasan highlights that Nāths Siddhas and Kānphaṭa Yogis tried to understand the process of procreation as an amalgamation of different Rasas: semen and uterine blood having different chemical composition and lead to the creation of new life inside the body of female. They knew that the absence of any one of these fluids (*rasas*) stops the procreation of life and at that time it was a great achievement to understand the process of procreation and its chemical nature. Nāths Siddhas and Kānphaṭa Yogis were not like modern scientists who are well trained in the scientific processes that is why they did the amalgamation of not only biology and chemistry but an amalgamation of chemistry, biology, mysticism, and religion that makes it difficult to understand what they exactly meant in their writings. On the metaphorical, philosophical, and religious levels they identified these fluids with the God Śiva and his wife, the Goddess Śakti.

In other words, the alchemical understanding of the process of procreation is overlapped by the philosophical and metaphorical dimension in the form of the phallic god Śiva and his wife, the Goddess Śakti. The metaphorical dimension of their procreative activity is echoed at physical level in the field of alchemy in the form of *rasa siddhanta* wherein the fluid transactions and transformations of human sexuality are discussed in details. The same formula is reflected in other dimensions of physical world as well wherein elements with neutral gender are assigned masculine and feminine properties. As a result of this categorization elements and minerals are also assumed to have sexual valences and fluids.

In the philosophy of Nāths Siddhas and Kānphaṭa Yogis the metaphorical interpretation and alchemical interpretation overlap each other for instance the Goddess Śakti in particular and all female in general are the producers of sexual emission, and the seed, that echoes in the field of alchemy with its equivalent mica, similarly uterine or menstrual blood released by female body corresponds with sulfur in alchemy and this entire process of procreation becomes equivalent to the process of Swooning. The interface between chemistry and theology is the main focus of the philosophy of Nāths Siddhas and Kānphaṭa Yogis.

Primarily they were mystics who understood the chemistry as a science of mysticism that can do miracles including the process of procreation. Mastery in chemistry is a path to becoming "second Śiva" as highlights in the following words,

"The way to becoming a "second Śiva"—for this has nearly always been the goal of tantric practice in its various forms—was, in early tantrism, realized through the conduit of a horde of wild goddesses (which the tāntrikas identified with their human consorts), generally known as *yoginīs*. These "bliss-starved" goddesses, attracted by offerings of mingled sexual fluids, would converge into the consciousness of the practitioner, to transform him, through their limitless libido, into a god on earth."(199)

There are many branches of alchemists Nāth Siddhas, Rasa Siddhas, and *paścimāmnāya* (Western Transmission) belonging to Śākta sect, and Yoginī Kaula (transmitted by Matsyendra), they focused on various disciplines such as alchemy, gnoseological or soteriological—metaphysics, and *haṭha yoga* (a system of the six *cakras*). For the Nāth Siddhas, the *siddhis* and *jīvanmukti* were the direct results of the internal combination and transformation of sexual fluids into *amṛta*, the divine nectar of immortality.

On the surface level they are indulged in tantric activities however simultaneously they are also doing the study of the impact of different chemicals like mercury, mica, silver, gold etc. on the human body. J. A. Schoterman in his *The Yonitantra* critically analyses the relationship between the tantric practices, the cult of the *yoginīs*, mysticism, alchemy and their changing relationship in the later centuries in the following words,

For the later "high" tantric schools, the cult of the *yoginīs* and the ritual production, offering, and consumption of sexual fluids were continued, but only within the restricted context of the "secret practice" of an inner circle of initiates. Outwardly, however, ritual sexuality had undergone a paradigm shift. Sexual fluids themselves were no longer the way to godhead; rather, it was in the bliss of sexual orgasm that one realized god-consciousness for oneself. (16)

As J. A. Schoterman foregrounds the process that started with the understanding of various chemicals and their impact on human body and life and chemical nature of various other fluids constituting human body; slowly started transforming into mysticism and abstract religious philosophy as Lakshmi Kapani, in her *La notion de saṃskāra* says,

In certain cases, all such transactions involving sexual fluids became wholly internalized and incorporated into the so-called subtle body (*sūkṣma śāñra*). Here,

all humans were viewed as essentially androgynous with sexual intercourse an affair between a female serpentine nexus of energy, generally called the *kuṇḍalinī*, and a male principle, identified with Śiva, both of which were located within the subtle body. An intricate metaphysics of the subtle body—its relationship to the brute matter of the gross body as well as to the universal divine life force within, the bipolar dynamics of its male and female constituents, etc.—was developed in every tantric school.(422-428)

After a study of the philosophy and treaty of the Nāths Siddhas and Kānpḥaṭa Yogis it can be deduced that they are the technicians of the self on the metaphorical level and experts in alchemy in the field of physical sciences. At the level of alchemy they tried to transmute base metals into gold and in the field of human sciences they tried to transform mortal and prone to aging human beings into perfect and immortal human being with superhuman powers and the metaphysical level they tried to connect the human world with the divine world and hence to elevate the human world at divine level.

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