



Alchemies of Nāths and Kānphaṭa Yogis: Ontology and Epistemology of Self

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Abstract

Nāth Siddhas and Kānphaṭa Yogis were alchemists, philosophers, and yogis all rolled into one and they used the knowledge culled from these diverse disciplines to develop the ontology and epistemology of self. Various writers, dramatists, travelers from India and abroad discuss yogis as alchemists sometimes in a derogatory manner like Bāṇabhaṭṭa, a dramatist and author from the seventh century in his *Bāṇa's Kādambaṇī* and sometimes positively and in a romantic manner like Marco Polo, the thirteenth-century travel writer in his *The Travels of Marco Polo* another European traveller from France, François Bernier visited India in the Seventeenth century during the reign of Dara Shikoh and Aurangzeb and described Nāth Siddhas and Kānphaṭa Yogis very romantically. This paper looks into the various aspects of Ontology and Epistemology of Self as understood by Nāth Siddhas and Kānphaṭa Yogis.

Keywords: Alchemy, Marco Polo, Bāṇabhaṭṭa, Kādambaṇī, François Bernier, Kundalinī Śakti.

Quality Education



The practices of various kinds of alchemies such as transmutational alchemy, religious alchemy, siddha alchemy, tantric alchemy, elixir (dehavāda) alchemy, and magical alchemy are associated with the Nāth Siddhas and Kānphaṭa Yogis. Most of the scholars working on the alchemical practices of Nāth Siddhas and Kānphaṭa Yogis agree that these practices are means of developing the ontology and epistemology of self by these ancient philosophers. From the ancient times to the modern times many creative writers, historians as well as critical thinkers foregrounded this aspect of Nāth Siddhas and Kānphaṭa Yogis. For instance, Bāṇabhaṭṭa, a dramatist and author from the seventh century gives a full length description of an Alchemist in his *Bāṇa's Kādambaṇī*. However, he looks at the Alchemist in a comic manner and describes him as a person with distorted character when he describes him:

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He had a tumor growing on his forehead that was darkened by (constant) falling at the feet of the Ambiká... As he had one of his eyes destroyed by the magic ointment (*siddhāñjana*) given him by a quack ...He had stored medicines and ointments in the hollowed nuts of the Ingudī tree. He had brought a untimely fever on himself with an improperly prepared mercurial elixir [*rasāyana*] used as a vermifuge ... He had a collection of palm-leaf manuscripts containing material on conjuring, *tantra*, and *mantra*, which were written in letters of smoky-red lacquer. He had written the doctrine of Mahākāla as such had been taught to him by an old Mahāpāsupata. He was afflicted with the condition of babbling about buried treasure and had become very windy on the subject of transmutational alchemy (*dhātuvada*) ... He had increased his grasp on the *mantra-sādhana* for becoming invisible, and knew thousands of wonderful stories about Śrīparvata. (339-340)

Though the description of a Siddha alchemist given by Bāṇabhaṭṭa is negative and derogatory as he makes fun of the Siddha alchemists however this description serves as a reliable and an important source with regard to Nāth Siddhas and Kānphaṭa Yogis because it provides us an important information that alchemy as a discipline existed at the time of Bāṇabhaṭṭa and Siddhas were present in the seventh century. The presence of Nāth Siddhas and Kānphaṭa Yogis is also attested by the international scholars who visited India, for instance Marco Polo who visited India in the thirteenth century and who also gave the account of Nāth Siddhas and Kānphaṭa Yogis in his memoirs which were published as *The Travels of Marco Polo Greatly Amended and Enlarged* by Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, Tweeddale Court and that records the account of a Yogi:

Who are called *ciugi* [Yogis, Jogis] who certainly live more than all the others in the world, for they commonly live from 150 to 200 years ... And again I tell you that these *ciugi* who live so long ... eat also what I shall explain ... I tell you that they take quicksilver and sulphur and mix them together with water and make a drink out of them; and they drink it and say it increases their life ... They do it twice on the week, and sometimes twice each month ... and without mistake those who live so long use this drink of sulphur and quicksilver. (306)

Marco Polo, a European from Italy, visited India as a foreign emissary of Kublai Khan's to India and Burma in the thirteenth century. Marco Polo's record of Yogis is quite romantic and just opposite of the account given by Bāṇabhaṭṭa. In the seventeenth century one more European from France visited India name of this French traveller is François Bernier, and visited India during Mughal reigns of Dara Shikoh and Aurangzeb, he also wrote about Yogis in detail in his, *Travels in The Mogul Empire A.D 1656-1668*.

I have now to give an account of certain *Fakires* totally different from the *Saints* just described, but who also are extraordinary personages. They almost continually perambulate the country, make light of everything, affect to live without care, and to be possessed of most important secrets. The people imagine that these favoured beings are well acquainted with the art of making gold, and that they can prepare mercury in so admirable a manner that a grain or two swallowed every

morning must restore a diseased body to vigorous health, and so strengthen the stomach that it may feed with avidity, and digest with ease. This is not all : when two of these good *Jauguis* meet, and can be excited to a spirit of emulation, they make such a display of the power of *Janguisism*, that it may well be doubted if *Simon Magus*, with all his sorceries, ever performed more surprising feats. (321)

Both European travellers Marco Polo and François Bernier gave a romantic account of Nāth Siddhas and Kānphaṭa Yogis. Both of the European travellers refers to the supernatural powers possessed by the Yogis. According to Marco Polo they can live for 150-200 years and according to François Bernier they have the power to make gold. However there is one common feature of both of these observations, both of them refer to the relationship between Nāth Siddhas and Kānphaṭa Yogis and the practice of alchemy that involved the use of mercury. According to Marco Polo these Yogis consume mercury mixed with sulphur that makes them live so long and this observation is not surprizing because in China (where he spent a long time before being appointed a foreign emissary of Kublai Khan's to India and Burma) also people believed in the power of mercury. François Bernier also refer to the alchemical practices of Nāth Siddhas and Kānphaṭa Yogis while talking about their power to make gold. Like Marco Polo, François Bernier also refer to the practice of mercury consumption by the Yogis that restores the diseased body and makes a healthy body vigorous. The account of yogis by the international travel writers from Europe is completely opposite from the account of yogis given by writers from Indian side.

All the above mentioned three references from three different sources belonging to three different periods, foreground that the alchemical practices of Nāth Siddhas and Kānphaṭa Yogis revolved around the proper use of mercury. Later on Āyurveda also incorporated many of the alchemical practices developed by Nāth Siddhas and Kānphaṭa Yogis. In Āyurveda; this mineral based *śāstra* is studied under *rasa śāstra* and is considered a part of disease related science called *rogavāda*. As is evident the same knowledge system serves different purposes for āyurveda and Nāth Siddhas and Kānphaṭa Yogis; for the second group it becomes a medium to understand the ontology and epistemology of the self through the amalgamation of trans-mutational alchemy (*lohavāda*), and elixir alchemy (*dehavāda*).

The Nāth Siddhas and Kānphaṭa Yogis were philosophers, yogis, and alchemists and included Nāgārjuna, Vyāḍi, Gorakha, and Matsyendra and they became prominent around eleventh and twelfth centuries. From fourteenth century onwards the two branches of alchemy i.e. Nāths (Śaiva groups—Pāśupatas, Kāpālikas, and Śāktas) and Siddhas (Māheśvara and Rasa Siddhas and Sittars, as well as the Buddhist Siddhācāryas) merged into Nāth Siddhas that accepts the ancient Śaiva and Siddha origins of the sect, ancestries conjured in the Yogabīja of Gorakhnāth, which suggests both the siddha-mata (Siddha canon), and the nātha mārga (Nāth pathway). The two relics belonging to Nāth Siddhas are burial tumuli (samādhis) and the order of institutional structure wherein the disciples are initiated by the gurus. Rasa Siddhas have left us the mass of alchemical literature. There are bindings on the guru as well who should be dedicated to the *kula-mārga*. Their ontology and epistemology invokes the image of

womb even while describing sampradāya and connects it with the process of alchemy related to mercury. In a way the ontology and epistemology of Nāth Siddhas and Kānphaṭa Yogis revolve around mercury that stands as a symbol of Lord Śiva. The Māheśvara Siddhas, a branch of Nāth Siddhas were devoted to Śiva (Maheśvara). The ontology and epistemology of self for this group is also based on alchemical practices but they did not pursue physical immortality (*jīvanmukti*) as the final goal of their practice, rather they aspired for spiritual liberation (*parāmukti*). Their ontology and epistemology of self was not to attain a perfect body (*siddhadeha*) or strong body (*vajradeha*), rather they strived for (*divyadeha*).

Despite the differences between the āyurveda and tantric alchemy there are many overlapping points regarding the knowledge systems pertaining to botanical, mineralogical, chemical, biochemical, geographical, environmental, religious, and technical information. Āyurveda makes use of these knowledge systems to understand the physical self and to elevate its physical health on the other hand tantric alchemy makes use of these knowledge systems to understand the spiritual self however it does not neglect the physical self. In other words both of them were doing a study of various factors like chemicals, environment, minerals, etc. on the human self: physical and spiritual. The age of Nāth Siddhas and Kānphaṭa Yogis witness the overlapping of three different field of knowledge: transmutational alchemy that deals with the transmutation of base metals into gold, "medical alchemy" or *rogavāda* that deals with treatment of disease that afflict physical body, and elixir alchemy that deals with enhancing physical power, sexual power, attaining superhuman qualities, immortality, as well as attaining higher level of consciousness, and both systems make use of mercury. Nāth Siddhas and Kānphaṭa Yogis further evolved the tantric alchemy by combining the concoctions based on mercury on the one hand and various techniques of *haṭha yoga* developed by them. The main purpose behind this amalgamation is the attainment of superhuman powers and immortality.

Nāth Siddhas and Kānphaṭa Yogis tried to transcend from the idea of routine physical wellbeing to attaining superhuman powers as well as the process of attaining cosmic self, a process of becoming "second Śiva". The close relationship between alchemy (revolving around mercury, ontology), epistemology of self, and divinity is explored by B. V. Subbarayappa, in his chapter "Chemical Practices and Alchemy" which is a part of *A Concise History of Science in India* in the following words:

As indicated before, the alchemical literature in Sanskrit is presented as a dialogue between Siva and Parvati in their different forms, of which perhaps the most significant are the forms of Bhairava and Bhairavi. Siva is also worshipped in a form known as *linga*. Of significant interest in this respect is the fact that in Tamil, *lingam* means cinnabar (mercuric sulphide) also, and that cinnabar forms one of the constituents of a composition (*aṣṭabandha*) used during the installation of divine idols. Tradition has it that cinnabar is the source of divine energy and possesses the creative principle. (317)

This observation by B. V. Subbarayappa establishes connections between religious practices, alchemy, architecture, and the ontology and epistemology of self. In a way

this particular dimension links tantric alchemy, religious alchemy, and trans-mutational alchemy and leads to a new understanding of self. Mercury serves as an important ingredient in the process of metallurgy pertaining to transmutation of base metal into gold and it also serves as a metaphor for the transmutation of baser self into higher self as David Gordon White in his book *The Alchemical Body: Siddha Traditions in Medieval India* points out how the practitioners of alchemy are warned against using the mercury indiscriminately on human body:

the alchemist is instructed to first "test out" his mercury on metals before throwing himself into his alchemical cauldron. Only mercury that has proven itself capable of transmuting ten million times its mass of base metals into gold will suffice here.the pithy formula: *yathā lohe tathā dehe*—"as in metal, so in the body ... first test [mercury] on a metal, then use it on the body." Moreover, the two elements placed in relation here, metals (*loha*) and bodies (*deha*), define the two branches of the tantric alchemical synthesis: these are *lohavāda*, "transmutational alchemy" and *dehavāda*, "elixir alchemy." As this verse makes clear, however, the transmutation of base metals into gold is not an end in itself, but rather the necessary means to the ultimate end of bodily immortality. (75)

In this observation by David Gordon White, alchemy serves as a door to understanding the biological aspects of the human body and the spiritual aspects of human life. The process of transmutation of a base metal into gold serves as a metaphor for the transmutation of an ordinary body into a superhuman body and it also serves as a metaphor for the transmutation of an ordinary self to a higher self "second Śiva". Though the relationship seems to be on the metaphorical level it also takes place in real life as mercury plays a vital role in all three processes. In this observation, David Gordon White foregrounds two important aspects of alchemy: "transmutational alchemy" and "elixir alchemy".

Alchemical practices of Nāth Siddhas and Kānpaṭa Yogis overlapped with many other systems focusing on the ontology and epistemology of the self. Some of these practices were developed by the Nāth Siddhas and Kānpaṭa Yogis and some of them were developed by others. David Gordon White in his book *The Alchemical Body: Siddha Traditions in Medieval India* foregrounds some of these practices as:

The alchemical Tantras abound in references to tantric formulae (*mantrās*) and diagrams (*maṇḍalas*), as well as in descriptions of divine hierarchies, yogic and meditative techniques, sexual and ritual practices, and the Śākta Śaiva devotionalism that are the hallmarks of the tantric tradition as a whole. Many of the major alchemical works of the period call themselves Tantras and are cast as the revealed teachings of Śiva (often in his tantric Bhairava form) to some tantric form of the Goddess. (75)

David Gordon White foregrounds different kinds of alchemies such as: transmutational alchemy, religious alchemy, siddha alchemy, tantric alchemy, elixir (*dehavāda*) alchemy, and magical alchemy. Within tantric alchemy *mantrās* and *maṇḍalas* play an important role. In tantric alchemy yogic practices, meditative techniques, as well as sexual and ritual practices play an important role.

The ontology and epistemology of Nāth Siddhas and Kānphaṭa Yogis revolve around the tantric practices aimed at uniting at the divine male and female principles that have their corresponding analogy in the alchemy i.e. mercury on the one hand and sulfur (or mica) and cinnabar on the other hand. David Gordon White in his book *The Alchemical Body: Siddha Traditions in Medieval India* foregrounds this particular aspect when he says, "sulfur-mica as the menstrual-sexual emission of the Goddess (Gaurī) and mercury as the semen of Śiva" (177). The analogy of mercury and cinnabar and sulphur serves as a powerful tool to understand the alchemy of metals, alchemy of human body, and the alchemy of the self. Gordan Djurdjevic in his *India and the Occult: The Influence of South Asian Spirituality on Modern Western Occultism* foregrounds the relationship between spiritualism, tantric alchemy, and the human body as understood by the Nāth Siddhas and Kānphaṭa Yogis:

The Temple where the Gnostic Mass takes place is arranged in accordance with the symbolic structure of the Tree of Life. In such a setting, the tomb corresponds to the lowest *sephira* Malkuth, which in its turn corresponds to the *mūlādhāra cakra*. According to tantric theory, the semen, which in its original state (and situated at the top of the head) has ambrosial properties, turns into poison when it reaches the lower parts of the body, specifically the genitals (that is, the *mūlādhāra cakra*). In order to remedy this situation, the semen needs to be brought back to the top of the head. (43)

Gordan Djurdjevic also foregrounds the overlapping of transmutational alchemy, religious alchemy, siddha alchemy, tantric alchemy, elixir alchemy, and magical alchemy when he foregrounds the process of upward movement of semen from *mūlādhāra cakra* to the head. Location of semen at the *mūlādhāra cakra* signifies an ordinary life on the other hand its movement towards head signifies higher state of life and spiritual awakening. Ontology and epistemology of self as propounded by Nāth Siddhas and Kānphaṭa Yogis is foregrounded by Akshaya Kumar Banerjea in his *Philosophy of Gorakhnath with Goraksha-Vacana-Sangraha* that reads:

It may be remembered that Life, Mind, Ego and Intelligence have their existence and functions in the Cosmic Order as a whole, in the phenomenal Cosmic Body of Siva-Sakti. The entire Cosmic System is pervaded by Life, Mind, Ego and Intelligence, and the enlightened yogis and philosophers find expressions of them everywhere in the universe. In the Cosmic System they are related to and are the instruments of phenomenal cosmic self-revelations of the Cosmic Soul, the Universal Spirit, Siva. In relation to individual souls they have their particularised functions as instruments of self-expression and self-realisation of the respective souls. Though all of them are phenomenal self-manifestations of Siva-Sakti and as such are spiritual in their essence, they are subordinate and subservient to the soul, in which the character of the pure spirit is substantially retained (although under limiting conditions) and in which there is the inherent possibility of the realisation and enjoyment of the perfectly and unconditionally self-illuminated and blissful character of the Supreme Spirit, Siva. (208)

Akshaya Kumar Banerjea continues the arguent put forward by Gordan Djurdjevic. In Banerjea's argument "mūlādhāra cakra" and "head" become synonymous with the phenomenal Cosmic Body of Siva-Sakti. Cinnabar the ore of mercury is synonymous with Śakti that like the ore has pure metal as well as impurities and similarly the ordinary state of human life has Life, Mind, Ego and Intelligence, and purified mercury signifies Śiva, the highest state of being. As the purpose of an alchemist is to extract the pure mercury so the purpose of a yogi is to obtain the highest state.

Ontology and epistemology of self in the doctrines of Nāth Siddhas and Kānphaṭa Yogis is an outcome of the amalgamation of yoga, tantra, and alchemy. The main intention behind this amalgamation is to understand the purpose of human existence and attain spiritual experience. The yogic practices developed by Nāth Siddhas and Kānphaṭa Yogis acknowledge that within the human body there is an abstract self (*sūksma śāñra*) that consists of energy centres (*cakras*). These energy centres (*cakras*) must be awakened. In its dormant stage the spiritual energy is located at the base of the spine in the form of *kundalinī śakti* however the supreme power of the world is located in the head. With the awakening of *kundalinī śakti* it starts moving upwards and the main purpose of a yogi is to take the *kundalinī śakti* to the highest level and achieve the union of Śiva and Śakti that leads to the process of becoming second Śiva. Nāth Siddhas and Kānphaṭa Yogis make use of the terms and analogies from alchemy, tantra and yoga to develop their ontology and epistemology of self.

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