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Gushing Mercury, Fleecing Maiden: A Rasasāstra Motif in Mughal Painting

SREERAMULA RAJESWARA SARMA, YADUENDRA SAHAJ

1.1. Liquid and at the same time heavy, or solid and yet volatile, mercury (*rasa*, *pārada*) has excited the imagination of mankind in most cultures and times. In India, several amazing qualities were attributed to it. Brahmagupta and other astronomers thought that mercury can overcome inertia and produce perpetual motion.¹ Writers on engineering like Bhoja saw in it the means for overcoming gravity and of enabling ships to fly in the skies.² Alchemists tried to transmute base metals into gold with its help, and doctors of medicine imagined that it would protect the human body from decay.

1.2. The last two notions coalesced into a system of belief called *Rasa-vāda*. In the fourteenth century, Mādhava Vidyāranya summarised this system under the name *Rasēśvara-vāda*.³ The followers of this school believed that liberation was possible within this life (*jīvanmukti*), that the first step on the path of liberation was the preservation of the physical body, and that the body could be preserved by the employment of mercury.

Mādhava stresses that the prime concern of the Rasasāstra is not just alchemical or metallurgical (*Dhātu-vāda*). The ultimate aim of the transmutation of the body is liberation. Thus it is said in the Rasārṇava:

‘Just as mercury is applied to the [base] metal, so it should be applied to the gross body, for its effect, O Goddess, is the same on the body and on the metal. Let it be first tested on

¹ Brahmagupta, *Brāhmasphuṭasiddhānta*, ed. Sudhakar Drivedi, Benares 1902, 22.53-54. See also Sreeramula Rajeswara Sarma, ‘Astronomical Instruments in Brahmagupta’s *Brāhmasphuṭasiddhānta*’, *Indian Historical Review* 13.1986-87: 163-176, and ‘Perpetual Motion Machines and their Design in Ancient India’, *Physis. Rivista Internazionale di Storia della Scienza* 29,3.1992: 665-676.

² Bhoja, *Samarāṅgaṅgāsūtradhāra*, ed. T. Ganapatisastri, rev. Vasudeva Saran Agrawala, Baroda 1966 (Gaekwad’s Oriental Series 25), 31.95-100. See also V. Raghavan, *Yantras or Mechanical Contrivances in Ancient India*, Bangalore 21956 (The Indian Institute of Culture, Transaction 10), pp.24;29.

³ Mādhavācārya, *Sarvadarśanasamgraha*, ed. Uma Shankar Sharma, Varanasi 21978, pp.375-390.

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