

ACHARYA NAGARJUNA AND RASA SHAstra: FROM THERAPEUTICS TO THE ANCIENT SCIENCE OF ALCHEMY

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Article Info:

Received: 22 July 2026,

Revised: 12 August 2026,

Accepted: 01 September 2026

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.22547985>



Citation:

¹Dr. Mukesh Kumar, ^{*2}Dr. Suman Sarkar. (2026). Acharya Nagarjuna And Rasa Shastra: From Therapeutics To The Ancient Science Of Alchemy. International Journal of Clinical and Pharmaceutical Innovations, 1(6), 178-181.

ABSTRACT

Background: Classical Indian medicine underwent a paradigm shift during the early medieval period with the formal integration of Rasa Shastra (Indian iatrochemistry and alchemy). Attributed historically to the polymath and Siddha philosopher Acharya Nagarjuna, this discipline bridged the pursuit of transmutational metallurgy (Dhatuvada) with internal rejuvenation and clinical therapeutics (Dehavada). **Methods:** This historical-analytical paper investigates classical Sanskrit treatises, primarily the Rasaratnakara, Rasendramangala, and relevant chapters of the Charaka and Sushruta Samhitas, alongside contemporary historical, chemical, and pharmacological scholarship. Comparative textual synthesis, historical contextualization, and metallurgical assessment were conducted to trace the philosophical and operational evolution of Nagarjuna's contributions. **Results:** Nagarjuna systematized the eighteen pharmaceutical processing operations (Ashtadasha Samskara) of Parada (mercury), engineered early distillation and heating apparatuses (Yantras), and conceptualized processes such as Shodhana (purification), Marana (calcination), and Jarana (assimilation). These techniques converted toxic heavy metals into stable, bioavailable organo-metallic complexes (Bhasmas). **Conclusion:** Nagarjuna did not treat alchemy as a speculative pursuit of base wealth, but as an empirical science where metallurgical mastery served as the laboratory validation for biological immortality and rapid therapeutic intervention. Rasa Shastra represents one of the earliest systematized traditions of applied materials science and nanomedicine.

KEYWORDS: Acharya Nagarjuna, Rasa Shastra, Iatrochemistry, Dhatuvada, Dehavada, Parada (Mercury), Ashtadasha Samskara, Bhasma, Shodhana, Marana, Yantras, Ancient Nanomedicine.

INTRODUCTION

Classical Ayurveda, as codified in the Brihat Trayi (the great triad of Charaka, Sushruta, and Vagbhata), relied predominantly on Kashthaushadhi (herbal and botanical pharmacology). While minerals, bitumen (Shilajit), and simple metallic preparations were recognized, their processing was basic, and their role remained secondary

to plant-based formulations. Around the 7th to 8th century CE, the Indian medical canon witnessed a major structural transformation marked by the ascendancy of Rasa Shastra—the specialized science of mercury (Parada), minerals (Maharasa, Uparasa), and metallic calces (Bhasma).

At the vanguard of this scientific and philosophical shift stands Acharya Nagarjuna. In Indian historiography, Nagarjuna occupies a dual identity: the foundational philosopher of the Madhyamaka school of Mahayana Buddhism (circa 2nd century CE) and the master Siddha-chemist who codified Rasa Shastra (frequently placed between the 7th and 9th centuries CE, or identified as a continuous lineage). In the metallurgical and iatrochemical tradition, Nagarjuna is celebrated as the visionary who unified two distinct disciplines:

1. Dhatuvada (Metallurgical Alchemy): The transmutation of base metals into noble metals (gold and silver).
2. Dehavada (Iatrochemical Alchemy): The transformation, stabilization, and rejuvenation of the human biological matrix (Rasayana) to achieve longevity, disease immunity, and spiritual liberation (Jivanmukti).

The central doctrine of Nagarjuna's Rasa Shastra posits that mercury is a living, reactive substance capable of absorbing and fixing other minerals. Through systematic thermal, chemical, and herbal treatments, toxic inorganic substances could be altered into biocompatible therapeutic agents.

This paper analyzes the historical, metallurgical, and philosophical contributions of Acharya Nagarjuna to Rasa Shastra, delineating how practical metallurgical experimentation evolved into a sophisticated branch of ancient pharmacology.

METHODS

To reconstruct and assess Acharya Nagarjuna's contributions to alchemy and therapeutic science, a tripartite historical-analytical methodology was applied.

Textual & Philological Analysis

A comparative evaluation was performed across classical Sanskrit works explicitly attributed to Nagarjuna or his immediate tradition

- Rasaratnakara (The Jewel-Mine of Mercury), focusing on its four sections: Rasa Khanda, Rasayana Khanda, Vada Khanda, and Arogya Khanda.
- Rasendramangala, analyzing laboratory design, chemical reactions, and mineral categorization.
- Sushruta Samhita (specifically the Uttaratantra recension, historically credited to redactor Nagarjuna).
- Later corroborative texts, including Somadeva's Rasendra Chudamani and the 12th-century compendium Rasaratna Samuccaya.

Equipment & Process Mapping

Sanskrit procedural descriptions of laboratory apparatuses (Yantras), crucibles (Mushas), and heating grades (Puti) were extracted and mapped to early chemical principles (e.g., sublimation, closed-vessel calcination, reflux condensation, and oxidation-reduction cycles).

Historiographical & Chemical Verification

The historical timeline was correlated with archaeological, numismatic, and cross-cultural records (including the accounts of Chinese pilgrims Xuanzang and Yijing, and Persian scholar Abu Rayhan al-Biruni). Modern chemical and metallurgical data were applied to evaluate the safety, mineral structural shifts, and nanoscale properties of Nagarjunian Bhasma processes.

RESULTS

Categorization of Substances in Nagarjunian Alchemy
Nagarjuna organized the vast inorganic and organic materia medica into a structured taxonomy centered around mercury:

Rasa / Maharasa (Primary Minerals): Eight premier minerals essential for mercurial processing, including Abhakra.

(Mica), Vaikranta (Tourmaline/Fluorite), Makshika (Chalcopyrite), Vimala (Iron Pyrites), Shilajit (Bitumen), Sasyaka (Copper Sulfate), Chapala (Bismuth/Selenium ores), and Rasaka (Calamine/Sphalerite).

Uparasa (Secondary Minerals): Secondary reagents used for purification and processing, such as Gandhaka (Sulfur), Gairika (Red Ochre), Kasis (Ferrous Sulfate), Kankshi (Alum), and Tala (Orpiment).

Sadharana Rasa (Auxiliary Agents): Minerals like Kampillaka, Gauri Pashana (Arsenic Trioxide), and Navasagara (Ammonium Chloride).

Dhatus (Metals): Divided into Shuddha Lauha (Pure metals: Gold, Silver, Copper, Iron), Puti Lauha (Low-melting metals: Zinc, Lead, Tin), and Mishra Lauha (Alloys: Brass, Bronze, Bell metal).

The Chemistry of Parada (Mercury) and the Ashtadasha Samskaras

Mercury (Hg) was viewed not merely as a metal, but as the active liquid core of alchemy. Nagarjuna asserted that unrefined mercury contains natural impurities:

- Visha (Toxicity)
- Vahni (Corrosiveness/Heat)
- Mala (Physical dross/Foreign ores)
- Doshajas (Volatile/Gaseous defects)

To neutralize these traits and activate therapeutic potential, Nagarjuna structured the Ashtadasha Samskaras (18-stage purification and potentiating processes):

Innovative Laboratory Instrumentation (Yantras)

The practical realization of Nagarjuna's chemistry relied on specialized laboratory engineering. Treatises attributed to him document an array of apparatuses:

- Dola Yantra: A suspension apparatus where raw minerals are wrapped in cloth (Pottali) and suspended in liquids/decoctions without touching vessel walls, ensuring uniform boiling during Svedana.

- Damaru & Vidyadhara Yantras: Dual-vessel sublimation apparatuses where one pot is inverted over another with joint seals (Sandhibandhana). Water cooled on the upper pot forces volatile mineral vapors (such as cinnabar sublimation) to condense.
- Tiryakpatana Yantra: An early retort distillation device where vaporized mercury travels horizontally through a delivery tube into an adjacent cooled receiver flask.
- Koshthi & Puta Systems: Controlled heating systems categorized by fuel load (Varaha Puta, Gajaputa, Kukkutaputa), using standardized cow-dung cake counts to produce precise internal temperatures for metal oxidation.

The Conversion: Shodhana, Bhavana, and Marana

The operational core of Nagarjuna's therapeutic metallurgy rests on transforming elemental metals into non-toxic oxides and sulfides (Bhasmas):

Shodhana (Purification & Quenching): Metals are heated to red heat and repeatedly quenched in liquids (sesame oil, buttermilk, cow urine, Triphala decoction, Kulatthi extract). This cyclic thermal shock creates micro-cracks and initiates intergranular corrosion.

Bhavana (Wet Trituration): The fractured metal particles are ground with acidic herbal juices (such as Aloe vera, Citrus acida) for days, coating metal surfaces with organic phytochemical chelators.

Marana (Calcination): The material is formed into flat pellets (Chakrikas), dried, sealed in clay earthen saucers (Sharava Samputa), and subjected to high-temperature Puta firing (400°C to 900°C).

Repeated through 10 to 100 cycles, this process incinerates free elemental metal, yielding a stable, fine metal oxide or sulfide compound.

DISCUSSION

The Convergence of Dhatuvada and Dehavada

In European alchemy, chrysopoeia (the production of gold) often stood in conflict with theological and rational frameworks, oscillating between esoteric mysticism and early industrial chemistry. In Nagarjuna's Rasa Shastra, Dhatuvada (transmutation) and Dehavada (cellular rejuvenation) were two expressions of the same physical law.

The operational philosophy held that base metals—such as lead (Naga), tin (Vanga), and copper (Tamra)—were "diseased" minerals that lacked stability and purity. Treating them with mercury, sulfur, and high-heat calcination eliminated their vulnerabilities, raising them to the status of gold (Suvarna), which is impervious to corrosion.

By direct clinical analogy, human pathology and cellular aging were seen as structural decay within biological tissues (Dhatus). Introducing transformed, stable organometallic preparations was believed to arrest this

breakdown. Transmuting base metals in a crucible served as proof-of-concept for transmuting vulnerable human biology into a disease-resistant state (Siddha Deha).

Modern Scientific Re-Evaluation of Nagarjunian Bhasmas

Modern materials science and analytical pharmacology provide clear insight into the physicochemical mechanics of Nagarjuna's methods. Advanced characterization techniques—including X-Ray Diffraction (XRD), Transmission Electron Microscopy (TEM), and Energy Dispersive X-Ray Spectroscopy (EDS)—demonstrate that properly synthesized Bhasmas are not crude metal powders, but complex micro- and nano-crystalline compounds:

- Nanocrystalline Structure:

Repeated Puta heating cycles reduce particle sizes to the nanometer scale. This dramatic increase in surface-area-to-volume ratio facilitates absorption across cellular membranes and gastrointestinal barriers.

- Elimination of Free Metallic Toxicity

Raw heavy metals in their native elemental or unrefined state disrupt enzymatic pathways and cause toxicity in renal and hepatic tissues. Calcination converts elemental metals into stable sulfides (such as cinnabar-derived Kajjali, a crystalline black mercuric sulfide, or stable metal oxides.

- Phytochemical Functionalization

The Bhavana step coats the mineral core with plant-derived functional groups (flavonoids, polyphenols, organic acids), enhancing targeted delivery, biocompatibility, and cellular uptake while mitigating systemic toxicity.

Historical Identity and Legacy

Historiographical debates persist regarding whether Acharya Nagarjuna represents a single individual or a lineage of master alchemists. Buddhist records credit the 2nd-century Madhyamaka philosopher with metallurgical mastery, while internal chemical evidence from the Rasaratnakara suggests a later, distinct alchemical master of the same name living between the 7th and 9th centuries CE.

Regardless of this distinction, the Nagarjunian Corpus redefined Indian medicine:

- It shifted therapeutics toward rapid, micro-dose, long-shelf-life formulations, addressing the instability and degradation common to raw herbal juices and powders.
- It established systematic alchemy (Rasa Shastra) as an independent, empirical discipline that laid the foundations for Indian metallurgy, mineralogy, and pharmacological chemistry.

CONCLUSION

Acharya Nagarjuna transformed Indian alchemy from an erratic search for physical gold into a systematic discipline of iatrochemistry and materials science. By

instituting the Ashtadasha Samskaras, developing precise thermal and distillation apparatuses, and standardizing the Shodhana-Marana protocols, Nagarjuna converted toxic heavy minerals into potent, biocompatible medicines. His synthesis of Dhatusvada and Dehava stands as an early, highly sophisticated precursor to modern pharmaceutical nanotechnology and targeted organometallic chemistry.