

## 8. Scientific Literature

Title: Rasa and Rasāyana in the Abhinava-cintāmaṇi of Cakrapāṇi-dāsa : two chapters in a late pre-colonial Āyurvedic encyclopedia.

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Under conditions which are specific for the Indian world, the various knowledge systems (from medicine to astronomy and from grammar to natural philosophy) have preserved precious theories and viewpoints which have proven their appropriateness through numerous generations. The oral transmission and the transmission through manuscripts over numerous centuries have privileged and reinforced certain forms of knowledge whereas other forms could not survive beyond one or a few generations. Mixed with valuable observations and perceptive analyses the Indian knowledge systems have also conserved "mythical" objects and unprovable ideas, such as the *śarabha*, an animal with eight legs (it is said to be like a deer, and stronger than a lion and than an elephant). Whereas the European knowledge systems<sup>1</sup> have succeeded in getting rid of the unicorn, after several centuries and only after the printing press had created a world-wide intellectual network for the fast and efficient exchange of observations and informations, the Indian knowledge systems have never given up, nor, according to available texts, questioned the *śarabha* (cf. Zimmermann 1987 and Houben 2009).

Against this background, the process of transmitting knowledge within a knowledge system such as Āyurveda, "knowledge of longevity," the classical medical system of South Asia – in modified form still formally and financially supported by the Government of India and trusted by many even outside India and South Asia for the solution of their health problems – deserves close scrutiny and analysis. The transmission of valuable and testified elements together with apparently wrong and unreliable ones is here more than just an academic problem.

Among the most spectacular but also, if taken seriously, potentially most risky topics in Āyurveda are that of *rasa*, in the sense of metallic and other non-vegetable substance, and *rasāyana*, in the sense of life-promoting 'elixir'. Both in the chapter on the preparation of *rasa* and in the chapter on *rasāyana* of the late pre-colonial Abhinava-cintāmaṇi of Cakrapāṇi-dāsa an important position is occupied by preparations involving mercury and other heavy metals to which exceptional properties are attributed. I will study in this paper the relationship between the material presented in these chapters and earlier texts in Āyurveda and Rasāsāstra. More specifically, I will try to detect and trace quotations and see which previous texts are the apparent sources of the knowledge presented in the Abhinava-cintāmaṇi. Subsequent questions will be asked, to which only very preliminary but no final answer can be given: are the changes in apparently quoted texts improvements or rather deteriorations in formulation and/or in substance; do the recipes and functions of the preparations discussed in the Abhinava-cintāmaṇi, that has continued to be of importance among traditional Vaidyas in Orissa till recently, represent a knowledge verified in practice or rather a more or less arbitrarily transformed mass of half-understood formulas.

Houben, Jan E.M. 2009. "Penser les êtres – plantes et animaux – 'à l'indienne'." In: *Penser, dire et représenter l'animal dans le monde indien* (textes réunis par Nalini Balbir et Georges-Jean Pinault): 21-45. Paris: Librairie Honoré Champion.

Zimmermann, Francis. 1987. *The Jungle and the Aroma of Meats : An Ecological Theme in Hindu Medicine*. [translation of Zimmermann 1982, with updates and additions.] Berkeley: University of California Press.

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<sup>1</sup> It is perhaps useful to point out that Europe's "knowledge systems" constitutes here a somewhat larger category than "science in the strict popperian sense of the word" and includes for instance the Linnaean systems in botany and zoology which were never important examples of "science" for Karl Popper.