

## 7. The Making of Kabīr's Rasa: A Case Study of North Indian Bhakti Intellectual History

**Abstract.** Rasa is one of the core concepts in the Kabīrian poems in early Rajasthani and Punjabi manuscripts. This paper examines the description of the attributes and production process of the Kabīrian rasa and compares these with three fields of knowledge that are known to the poet's predecessors and contemporaries: alchemy, mahua flower wine distillation, and Hathayoga. A number of Kabīrian poems describe rasa as a rejuvenating, gold-making mystic liquid made through a process of distillation that resembles the production of mahua flower wine. Both images were further incorporated into the body-centric yogic practices present in the poems. Though similar expressions are also found in Gorakhnāth's works, Vaishnava imprints and bhaktification distinguishes the Kabīrian version from its predecessors. Rāma/Hari was added to rasa, and the concept of rasa being a material drinkable liquid was also gradually reworked into a metaphor for 'the name of Rāma/Hari' or 'the taste of love/devotion.' This analysis concludes that the word rasa displays how the pre-bhakti thoughts were incorporated into the early modern North India bhakti discourse.

**Keywords.** Kabīr, Rasa, Bhakti, Yoga, Intellectual history.

Early Kabīrian literature is invaluable for the study of medieval North Indian intellectual history, especially that of the bhakti movement.<sup>1</sup> The corpus of poems bearing the poet's *bhaṇitā*, even in its earliest written forms, consists of both pre-bhakti tantric and Vaishnava bhakti elements, marking a significant transition in North Indian intellectual history. Traditional hagiographies such as *Kabīr Paracai* describe the transition as an abrupt yet thorough turn due to Kabīr's personal will and accomplished by Rāmānanda's initiation. Textual studies of the Kabīrian poems, however, show that a gradual evolution of the literary and intellectual tradition took place, either formally or conceptually. The use of Kṛṣṇa's names, an indicator

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of *saguna* Krishnaite bhakti's influence upon Kabīrian tradition, mainly occurs in the refrain and *bhaṇitā* line of Kabīrian pada and often appears to be inserted later.<sup>2</sup> Another sign of bhaktification is the replacement of enigmatic tantric or yogic terms with more straightforward ones.<sup>3</sup>

This paper focuses on one single word—*rasa*—which appears in early Kabīrian poems. The corpus under scrutiny is restricted to the Rajasthani and Punjabi padas in *The Millennium Kabīr Vānī* and the *sākhīs* in Śyāmasundaradās's *Kabīr Granthāvalī* (hereafter KG). *Rasa* is among the most popular words in the early Kabīrian literature under scrutiny. A chapter (*aṅga*) of *sākhīs* is entitled under '*rasa*.' The word also occurs 187 times in forty-three out of 590 sets of early padas. Though Charlotte Vaudeville and Mātā Prasād Gupta mentioned pre-Kabīrian thoughts in their notes respectively, they interpreted Kabīr's *rasa* as the taste of Brahmānanda or Vaishnava devotional sentiments and stress its difference from its predecessors.<sup>4</sup> They are joined by contemporary and later Hindi commentators like Puṣpapāl Siṃh, Jayadev Siṃh, and Rāmakiśor Śarmā.<sup>5</sup> As the following study shows, the word bears different meanings in different contexts and the sole bhaktified explanation does not fit every context. Studying this word not only adds to our understanding of Kabīrian thoughts but demonstrates how the pre-bhakti intellectual heritage was incorporated into the bhakti discourse or, in other words, the bhaktification of pre-bhakti *rasa*.

## The material prototype of *rasa*

The meaning of *rasa* ranges from material liquid—be it fruit juice, milk, or mystical nectar—to abstract aesthetic sentiment including *śṛṅgāra*, *vīra*, *bībhatsa*, and so forth. In the corpus under study, cases of the former interpretation are more frequently found as the *rasa* is often said to 'drip' and can be 'drunk' or 'tasted' with one's tongue. Then, what could this liquid be?

The first possible option is *rasāyana*, a word that appears both in *rasa kau aṅga* (chapters of couplets about *rasa*) and padas discussing *rasa*. For instance:

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2 Hess (1987).

3 Bangha (2013).

4 Vaudeville (1957) and Gupta (1985). Gupta referred to *Gorakh Bānī* when commentating on pada 1.71. Though Vaudeville mentioned both the tantric practitioner's consumption of alcohol and the Nāthyogī's concept of yogic *rasa*, she concluded that Kabīr's *rasa* is nothing but Hari bhakti. See Vaudeville (1957), p. 106, n. 101.

5 See Siṃh (2010 [1971]), p. 127; Siṃh and Siṃh (1976), p. 81; and Śarmā (2010), p. 166.

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सबै रसांइण मैं किया, हरि सा और न कोइ । तिल इक घट मैं संचरै, तौ सब तन कंचन होइ ॥  
(KG *sākhī* 6:8)<sup>6</sup>

Among all the *rasāyana* I made, nothing is like Hari. Even one drop in a pot makes the whole body into gold.<sup>7</sup>

दास कवीरा जुगि जुगि जीवै । रसनां राम रसांइन पीवै ॥ (W283/A251.4)<sup>8</sup>

Drinking the Rāma *rasāyana*, the servant Kabīr lives one *yuga* after another.

The word *rasāyana* derives from *rasa* and means specifically the elixir produced by alchemists, in whose jargon *rasa* means mercury. Like their peers in other parts of the world, ancient Indian alchemists sought to produce pure mercury through physical or chemical means. This was first mentioned in the *Arthaśāstra* composed around 300 CE. In the *Arthaśāstra*, it is clearly stated that the superintendent of mines must know how to produce mercury, that is, *rasa*, through distillation and condensation. The metallurgical knowledge in using mercury to produce gold is also mentioned.<sup>9</sup> Such technological knowledge laid the foundations for alchemy. The alchemists viewed metals as living beings; therefore, the chemical stability of gold was viewed as metallic longevity. Since mercury helps in producing gold, why shouldn't it also be helpful in making a 'gold body'—an immortal one? By the eleventh century, systematic and sophisticated alchemical monographs like *Rasārṇava* were already composed by Indian alchemists. By Kabīr's time, such compositions included *Rasapraśāśa Sudhākara* (c. thirteenth century), *Rasa Ratna Samuccaya* (c. thirteenth–fourteenth century), *Rasendra Cintāmaṇi* (c. fifteenth century), among others. The *rasāyana* in the Kabīrian poems above have the same rejuvenating, gold-making properties as that explained in alchemical works.

A second image of Kabīr's *rasa* is as a hard, alcoholic drink sold by liquor dealers. For instance:

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6 When quoting *sākhīs* from Śyāmasundaradās (1956 [1928]), the number preceding the colon indicates the number of the *aṅga* and the number following the colon indicates the number of the *sākhī* in the *aṅga*.

7 If not specified otherwise, the translation of Hindi poems in this paper are the author's own. Reference was made to extant annotated text and translation, including Vaudeville (1957), (1974), (1993); Simh (2010 [1971]); Simh and Simh (1976); Gupta (1985); Strnad (2013).

8 The coding of Kabīrian padas conforms to Callewaert (2000b). The number following W indicates the pada's position in Callewaert. The second capitalized letter (here A) indicates the manuscript to which the pada belongs to, followed by a number that designates its position in the manuscript. A number after a dot indicates the number of the stanza according to Callewaert. For example, W283/A251.4 means this text is quoted from the fourth stanza of the 251st pada of manuscript A, which is grouped under the 283th set of padas in Callewaert (2000b).

9 Rây (1959).

छाकि पर्यौ आतम मतिवाला । पीवत रांम रस करत बिचारा ॥ टेक ॥  
बहुतै मोलि महग गुर पावा । दै कसाव रस रांम चुवावा ॥1॥  
तन पाटण मै कीन्ह पसारा । मांगि मांगि रस पीवै बिचारा ॥2॥  
कहै कबीर फाबी मतिवारी । पीवत रांम रस लागी षुमारी ॥3॥ (W22/S17)

The intoxicated self got totally drunk while drinking the rasa of Rāma [and] meditating. (Refrain)

[I] obtained highly valuable, expensive jaggery. Having added astringent admixture, [I] let the rasa of Rāma trickle down. (1)

I made it spread all over the city of [my] body. The wretched one drinks and asks for more and more. (2)

Kabīr says: ‘I became fond of the intoxication. Drinking the rasa of Rāma, inebriation came over [me].’ (3)

राम रसाइन प्रेम रस, पीवत अधिक रसाल । कबीर पीवण दुलभ है, मांगै सीस कलाल ॥  
(KG *sākhī* 6:2)

The rasa of love, [the product] of the alchemy of Rāma is so sweet to drink! [But] Kabīr [warns]: ‘[This] drinking comes at a very high price: the liquor seller asks for one’s head [in exchange].’

The liquor is made out of mahua flowers (*Madhuca Indica*), an ideal raw material whose sugar content can reach 70 per cent.<sup>10</sup> The pada below displays the whole process of spirit production, mixed with yogic terms:

काया कलाली लांहनि करिहूं, गुरु सबद गुड़ कीन्हां । कांम क्रोध मोह मद मंछर, काटि  
काटि कस दीन्हां ॥1॥  
भवन चतुरदस भाटी पुरई, ब्रह्म अगनि परजारी । मूंदे मदन सहज धुनि उपजी, सुखमन  
पोतनहारी ॥2॥  
नीझर झरै अंमी रस निकसै, तिहि मदिरावल छाका । कहै कबीर यहु बास बिकट अति, ग्यांन  
गुरू ले बांका ॥3॥ (W178/S133)<sup>11</sup>

I shall make my body a liquor seller’s yeast, guru’s word I have used as jaggery. Having chopped thoroughly lust, anger, infatuation, conceit and jealousy, [I have] added [them as] seasoning admixture. (1)

[I have] filled the oven of fourteen worlds [of the body], [and] lit the fire of Brahma. With [the oven] sealed up with wax of passion, the sound [signalling the state] of *sahaja* arose in the cooling [tube of] *suṣumna*. (2)

The stream of the liquid comes in trickles, *amṛta* oozes out; with this liquor the king has become intoxicated. Kabīr says: ‘[Even] the smell [of it] is very strong; [only] a guru of true knowledge [may] take such a strong thing.’ (3)

Seen from the pada above, Kabīr’s mahua flower wine is made through distillation rather than fermentation. In hypoxic conditions, yeast converts the carbohydrates contained in the raw material into alcohol. The production process for fermented

10 Mahua flower wine is still produced today. See Benerji et al. (2010).

11 A similar version of this pada is also found in *Ādi Granth*. See W178/AG968–969;1.

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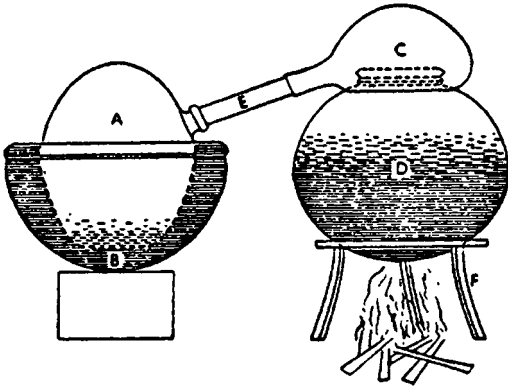


FIGURE 7.1 An oblique type of still.<sup>12</sup>

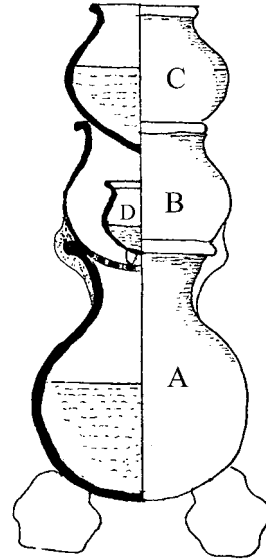


FIGURE 7.2 A vertical type of still

Source: Allchin (1979), pp. 58 and 57 respectively. Copyright © 1979 by Royal Anthropological Institute. Reprinted by permission of John Wiley and Sons, Inc.

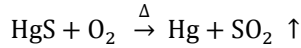
liquor is relatively easier than that of distilled liquor, but the alcohol content can hardly exceed 20 per cent. The distillation of alcohol makes use of the difference between the boiling point of alcohol (78.5°C) and that of water (100°C). By controlling the temperature inside the distillation devices, the alcohol evaporates and then condenses in the receptor. Distilling and condensing repeatedly, the alcoholic content of the distilled liquor can reach 60 per cent.

Two distilling apparatuses resemble what the poem describes. Using the first still apparatus, the material prepared for distillation is put into container D. As it is heated the spirit evaporates and transfers into container A via conduit E. As it cools the liquid drips into B. The same principle applies to the apparatus in Figure 7.2. Container A is filled with material prepared for distillation while C is filled with cold water to cool down the vapour that rises through B. The condensed liquid then flows along the bottom of container C and drips down into container D. The two still apparatuses illustrate the distillation process described in the padas above. The materials include: 1) 'dregs,' the slightly fermented mahua prepared for distillation, 2) jaggery, 3) 'sexual desire, anger, confusion, infatuation, and jealousy,' all kinds of seasoning ingredients, especially spices. The mixture is

<sup>12</sup> The figure is reconstructed from an archeological discovery in Gandhara and a similar apparatus is still used today by tribal peoples in India. Figure 7.2 is used by tribal peoples in Bihar. Allchin argues that distillation technology was first applied for alcohol production.

to be put into the ‘oven,’ which is heated with the ‘fire of Brahma.’ As the spirit evaporates, it generates the sound of boiling, or ‘the sound of *sahaja*.’ The vapour is condensed in the cooling device and drips down as a ‘waterfall.’ Thus, the intoxicating drink is produced. This pada is not an isolated case in describing the distillation of mahua flower wine. The still apparatus and the production procedure described by the poet fits well with what it is known has been used by North Indian distillers. Therefore, it is fair to say that the distilled mahua flower wine is also a material prototype of *rasa*. The intoxicating property of Kabīr’s *rasa* originates in this spirit.

The two prototypes of Kabīr’s *rasa*, mercury and mahua flower wine, though distinguishable from each other, share the same outer form as purified liquid and the same technological knowledge of distillation. Both alchemists and alcohol producers were early distillers. For the alchemists, mercury is distilled out of the various compounds available in nature. One of the most popular techniques is to heat cinnabar, the main ingredient of which is mercury sulphide (HgS). Condensing the mercury vapour, alchemists procured the purified liquid mercury. The formula is:



The production of alcohol and mercury bear many similarities. In the alchemy manual *Rasa Ratna Samuceya*, various still apparatuses (*yantra*), including those resembling Figures 7.1 and 7.2, are named *tiryak pātana yantra* (oblique lowering apparatus) and *vidyādhara yantra* (expert’s apparatus). *Rasa Ratna Samuceya* describes the two apparatuses as below:

A taller vessel is taken and a tube is connected to its neck. The other end of the tube is projected into the body of another vessel on a lower plane. After depositing the necessary substances into the first vessel and water into the second, the mouths of both are closed and sealed (the connecting portions of the tube are also sealed). Then, the first vessel is placed on a fire and heated. The scholars of *Rasaśāstra* named it *tiryak pātana yantra* (*Rasa Ratna Samuceya* 9/10–12). A *samputa*, which is prepared by joining two vessels, is called *vidyādhara yantra*. To use this *vidyādhara yantra* a suitable stove is constructed in accordance with the size and shape of the vessels. A vessel is kept on the stove and another vessel is placed upon that, the joints being sealed (*Rasa Ratna Samuceya* 9/27–28).<sup>13</sup>

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13 Both paragraphs from *Rasa Ratna Samuceya* are paraphrased from Reddy (2014), pp. 89–90.

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The similarities between the outer form and production procedures enabled the poet to accommodate both into the single word, *rasa*—a magical gold-making, rejuvenating, and intoxicating liquid, so dear to the master practitioner. Moreover, there are also clues of a practical connection between the two prototypes and the Kabīrian tradition. In an alchemist work called *Siddha Vandanām*, Kabīr was accepted as the fiftieth master alchemist,<sup>14</sup> something which differs from all major Kabīrian biographies. Though today's Kabīrpanthīs strictly prohibit alcohol consumption, mahua spirit is particularly popular among the hill residents in northern Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, a region where Kabīrpanth has a remarkable presence. We can also read infer from Anantadās's *Kabīr Paracai* that alcohol was popular among the social group to which Kabīr belongs.<sup>15</sup> Besides, the seeds of mahua contains 55 per cent stable oil and are used to make soap.<sup>16</sup> The oil extractor, despised by orthodox high castes, also follows Kabīrpanth in many parts of India, including Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh. The historical Kabīr need not himself have been an alchemist or alcohol producer to include these images in his poems. Knowledge of alchemy, distillation, and alcohol production was commonplace among the Kabīrian followers, which the author of these poems may have been familiar with. Such adoption of indigenous knowledge also reflects the grass-rootedness of the Kabīrian composition.

### Rasa and yogic practice

Though we cannot rule out the possibility that some alleged followers of Kabīr consumed mahua flower wine or practised alchemy, the theory that Kabīr's *rasa* is more of an internal yogic *rasa* than external elixir or alcohol is better supported by such lines as 'keeping the mind motionless, the *āsana* motionless; *rasa* is generated upon the tongue' (W290/S229.1). According to Strnad, 'rasa' is among the yogic terminologies Kabīrian compositions inherited from the Nāthyogic tradition, *padas* related to which form a distinct yogic-centric thematic block in the early manuscript.<sup>17</sup> In many Kabīrian poems, the description of *rasa* is closely connected with other characteristic yogic terminologies, such as *susumnā*, *idā*, and *piṅgalā*, suggesting a strong linkage between the two disciplines of knowledge. For instance:

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14 White (2007 [1991]), p. 85.

15 According to the legend, Kabīr pretended to be drinking alcohol, popular among the low castes, in order to avoid the mass group of admirers. This upset the Vaishnava followers. To the orthodox Brahmins, however, this proved a low-caste weaver like Kabīr could not be a genuine devotee.

16 Gogte (2012 [2000]), p. 687.

17 Strnad (2013), p. 489.

बोलौ भाई राम की दुहाई । इह रसि सिव सनकादिक माते । पीवत न अजहूँ अघाई ॥  
टेक ॥  
इला पिंगुला भाठी कीन्ही । ब्रह्म अगनि परजारी । ससिहर सूर द्वार दस मूँदे । लागी जोग  
जुग ताली ॥1॥  
मन मतिवाला पीवै राम रस । दूजा कुछ न सुहाई । उलटी गंग नीर बहि आया । अंभ्रित  
धार चवाई ॥2॥  
पंच जने सो संगि करि लीन्हा । चलत षुमारी लागी । प्रेम पियाला पीवन लागा । सोवत  
नागिनी जागी ॥3॥  
सहज सुनि मैं जिनि रस चाष्या । सतगुर तैं सुधि पाई । दास कबीर इहि रसि माता । कबहूँ  
उछकि न जाई ॥4॥ (W20/S16)<sup>18</sup>

O brother, call for Rāma! Śiva, Sanakādi are intoxicated with this rasa; they keep drinking till now but are still unsatisfied. (Refrain)  
*īdā*, *piṅgalā* were made into the furnace, the fire of Brahma lit up. The ten doors of the sun and moon were closed. Thus began the yogic trance. (1)  
Drinking the Rāma rasa, the mind is intoxicated, enjoying nothing else. The Ganges flew in the opposite direction (i. e., upwards), with the immortal flow dripping. (2)  
Five men who accompanied me got drunk. I began to drink from the cup of love. Thus the sleeping snake lady wakes up. (3)  
Having drunk the rasa from the *sahaja śūnya*, [I] obtained consciousness from the *sadguru*. Kabīr the servant is intoxicated with the rasa, never to sober up. (4)

If we compare this pada with yogic descriptions of the body and practice, we cannot miss the resemblance. The subtle yogic body consists of various channels and chakra. Among the channels, *suṣumnā*, *īdā*, and *piṅgalā* are the most important. The number of chakras varies from one work to another. One of the prevalent descriptions includes seven chakras (from top to bottom): *sahasrāra cakra*, *ājñā cakra*, *viśuddha cakra*, *anāhata cakra*, *maṇipūra cakra*, *svādhiṣṭhāna cakra*, *mūlādhāra cakra*.

Kundalini yoga is one such practice that involves the chakras and the channels, the ultimate goal of which is to generate a yogic elixir. To practise it, the yogi needs to control the flow of the vital breath (*prāṇa*) in *īdā*, *piṅgalā* so as to awaken the sleeping kundalini. Then, the kundalini moves upwards along the *suṣumnā*, crossing the different chakras, and finally reaches the *sahasrāra cakra*, which looks like an upside-down lotus hung from the head. Upon the union of kundalini and the *sahasrāra cakra*, the immortal elixir drips down, to be drunk by the yogi who can roll the tongue backward.

This yogic practice is not unfamiliar to Kabīrian writers. Besides the use of terminology like *suṣumnā*, *īdā*, and *piṅgalā*, some other typical yogic images are also found in the early padas under study. The channels and chakras are mentioned

<sup>18</sup> A similar version of this pada is also found in two early Sikh manuscripts. See W20/AG1123;3, M45.



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on various occasions, amid instructions on how to obtain the immortal rasa. In the pada W231/S180, the poet used the metaphor of an upside-down hanging well to indicate the *sahasrāra cakra* from where the rasa drips down; in pada W4/S4, lotuses with different numbers of petals were used to indicate the numerous chakras. The Kabīrian poems describing distillation convey similar secret instructions on yogic practice. The subtle yogic body is considered to contain all the messages of the universe, therefore 'the fourteen worlds were to be built into the furnace' (W178/S133.2) means to use the body in practising the yogic distillation. On other occasions, emphasis was laid more on the *idā* and *piṅgalā*. Thus we have sayings like '*idā, piṅgalā* were made into the furnace, the fire of Brahma lit up' (W20/S16.1). The actual fire is needed to heat the raw materials required for distillation, while the 'fire of Brahma' is, according to the poet, the force that awakes the kundalini, either referred to as 'the sleeping snake lady' (W20/S16.3) or '*yoginī*' (W16/S12.1). After her reaching the *sahasrāra cakra*, either termed as '*sahaja śūnya*' (W20/S16.4) or '*gagana*' (W16/S12.1), the intoxicating rasa pours down.

Kabīr is not the first to adopt such distillation-yogic expressions. Tantric Buddhists and Nāthyogī had mingled liquor distillation with yogic practice even before Kabīr. The Kabīrian distillation-yogic poems apparently share same inspiration with their Buddhist and Nāthyogic counterparts:

एक से शुण्डिनी दुइ दुइ घरे सान्धअ । चीअण ण बाकलअ बारुणी बान्धअ ॥1॥  
सहजे थिर करी बारुणी बान्ध । जे अजरामर होइ दिढ कान्ध ॥2॥  
दशमि दुआरत चिह्न देखिआ । आइल गराहक अपणे बहिआ ॥3॥  
चउशठी घडिये देत पसारा । पइठेल गराहक नाहि निसारा ॥4॥  
एक घडुली सरुइ नाल । भणन्ति बिरुआ थिर करि चाल ॥5॥ (*Caryāpada* 3)<sup>19</sup>

There is one female wine-seller. She enters into two houses. She ferments wine with fine barks (of trees). (1)

Fixing by the *sahaja*, ferment wine; so that the body may be free from old age and death and be strong. (2)

Seeing the sign at the tenth door, the customer came himself walking. (3)

Let her display the shop during sixty-four hours. The customer entered. There is no departure. (4)

There is one small pot. The pipe is narrow. Biruā says: 'Move it quietly.' (5)

ईकीस ब्रह्मांड भाठी चिगावै पीवत सदा मतिवालं । मनसा कलालिनि भरि भरि देवै आछा आछा मद नां प्यालं ॥0॥

अमृत दाषी भाठी भरिया ता मधैं गुड झकोल्या । मन महुवा तन धाहुवा बनासपती अठरै मोल्यां ॥1॥

भ्रमर गुफा में मन थरि ध्यानैं बैस्या आसण बाली । चेतनि रावल यह भरि छाक्या जुग जुग लागो ताली ॥2॥

19 Shahidullah (1966 [1960]), p. 9.

तृकुटी संगम कृपा भरिया मद नीपज्या अपारं । कुसमल होता ते झडि पडिया रहि गया तहाँ  
तत सारं ॥3॥  
एवहां मद श्री गोरष केवट्या बदंत मछींद्र ना पूता । जिनि कैवट्या तिनि भरि पीया अमर भया  
अवधूता ॥4॥  
(*Gorakh Bānī*, pada 28)<sup>20</sup>

Drinking from the furnace of twenty-one *brahmāṇḍa*, [I] remain intoxicated;  
will the liquor dealer offer a whole cup of marvelous liquor. (Refrain)

The furnace is filled up with the nectar of grapes, within which the sugar is  
stirred. [Take] mind as mahua, body as yeast, together with which are eighteen  
plants. (1)

In the cave of the bee, the mind is fixed in meditation, and [I] sit as the *āsana*.  
The king's consciousness is fully intoxicated with this and remains in trance  
from *yuga* to *yuga*. (2)

Boundless liquor being generated, the small pot at the *trikūṭī saṅgam* got  
filled. Having thrown away any possible grass or dirt, what remains is the true  
essence. (3)

Śrī Gorakh drank such liquor, which Macchendra does not know. Those who  
drank have been taken across, becoming immortal Avadhūta.

Despite the indebtedness to the real mercurial *rasāyana* and mahua flower wine for intoxicating and rejuvenating properties, distillation-yogic writing and yogic knowledge illustrated in other means in Kabīrian literature supports the argument that Kabīr's rasa is a yogic elixir prepared inside the human body, to be attained via the kundalini yogic practice. However, Kabīrian literature exposes the relationship between external and internal practice. It is not difficult to notice the similarities between the descriptions of the kundalini yoga and the distillation apparatus, especially that of Figure 7.2. Both require the elevation of a certain substance passing through certain conduits. Reaching the upper part of the apparatus, this substance meets another substance and generates liquid, which eventually drips down. Moreover, the design of the alchemical furnace also corresponds to the idea of chakras and channels. According to *Mañjusrīmūlakalpa*, a furnace has three *vajra* that support the structure from inside, and clay-made lotus petals were also attached to the outskirts of the furnace.<sup>21</sup> The three *vajras* resemble the channels of the subtle body, and the lotus is also a common image used to indicate

20 The translation is based on the text in Callewaert and Op de Beeck (1991). The translation in Djurdjevic (2005) is also referred to.

21 ‘其炉祇阔二肘，或圆或方或半月样。周围泥饰作莲花缘，于中间安三股金刚杵。安置杵已。仍备一切护摩所用之物’（‘大方广菩萨藏文殊师利根本仪轨经’卷11, T20, no. 1191, 874b12–14): ‘The furnace is only two elbow wide. Its shape is either round, square or half-moon like. Clay made lotuses are decorated around the exterior. Inside the furnace three vajras are set up. Then, other materials are prepared for the homa.’ *Dafangguang Pusazang Wenshushili Genben Yiguijing*, a partial Chinese translation of the Sanskrit text by Kashmirian Monk Tianxizai (d. 1000) in 986 CE. For more information about the text, see Delhey (2012), pp. 55–75.

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the chakra. The incorporation of the actual distillation process into internal yogic practice reflects the trend of 'internalization' of alchemy or a shift from 'lohavāda' to 'dehavāda.' This started to reshape the spiritual life of Indians no later than the eleventh century. The *Kālacakra Tantra* claimed the 'inner alchemy' to be better than the 'exterior alchemy.' It is difficult for an outsider to judge which path is better, but the 'inner alchemy' would have advantages in the following aspects: firstly, it avoids the risks of consuming lethal mercury elixir; secondly, for ordinary practitioners and householders not funded by generous patrons, practising 'inner alchemy' is more economically feasible than conducting sophisticated alchemical experiments.

Thus, Kabīr's rasa can be traced to three interconnected fields of pre-bhakti knowledge: 1) alchemy, 2) mahua flower wine distillation, 3) Haṭhayoga. By studying Kabīr's description, we can see that the first two external practices share some similar technologies, and were both absorbed into the body-centric yogic narrative.

### The bhaktification of rasa

Strictly speaking, alchemy, alcohol distillation, and yoga were not initiated by Kabīr, but rather by his non-Vaishnava predecessors and contemporaries. Alchemy was dominated by the Shaiva. According to the prevalent myth, mercury itself is a product of sexual copulation between Śiva and Pārvaṭī when they were requested by the deities to create a son, later called Skanda, to defeat Tārakāśura. *Vidyādhara*, the name given to possessors of secret knowledge, including alchemists, were mentioned in the epic *Mahābhārata* as demigods following Śiva, which demonstrates the unfamiliarity of the epic writers with them. Following the incorporation of once unorthodox beliefs and practices, *vidyādhara* became known as powerful magic practitioners by Buddhists and Hindus alike. According to a tantric ritual text dedicated towards Vajrabhairava, *Foshuo Miaojixiang Yujia Dajiao Jingang Peiluofulun Guanxiang Chengjiu Yiguijing (The Rituals of the Practices and Achievements of Vajrabhairava Maṇḍala)*, *vidyādhara* are followers of Vajrabhairava, who conducts rituals in front of his image and knows how to make images of the deity.<sup>22</sup> In alchemical works, building a mandala dedicated

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22 '持明之人于金刚陪啰嚩前用人肉和酒，诵大明，日日作护摩一百八遍，满六个月'（佛说妙吉祥瑜伽大教金刚陪啰嚩轮观想成就仪轨经'卷1, T21, no. 1242, 206b20–22): 'The vidyādhara consumes human flesh and alcohol in front of the vajrabhairava. He recites the mahāmantra, and conducts homa 108 times a day. This continues for six months.' The text is translated into Chinese by Indian Monk Faxian (probably another name of Tianxizai) in 995 CE. Bhairava is here seen as a form of Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī.

to Śiva is also taught as a part of necessary preparation work, and the mercury is personified as *rasa bhairava*.<sup>23</sup> Consuming alcoholic drink had been prohibited by orthodox Brahmins and Buddhists alike, but it entered the religious life as the strict *vinaya* loosened. The Chinese traveller Yijing noted the existence of alcohol in Nalanda,<sup>24</sup> also a centre for alchemy. Later Tibetan folklores recorded that *siddhācārya* deliberately drank alcohol to break the bondage of the rules.<sup>25</sup> The Bhairava worshipping *vidyādhara* are also known to have consumed alcohol. Gorakhnāth was a spiritual successor of the early *siddhācārya*. His followers, that is, the Shaiva Nāthyogī, played a vital role in promoting Haṭhayoga in medieval times and were mainly Shaiva.

The political turbulence of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries destroyed the whole system of royal patronage and the education system in North India. The once flourishing tantric religion, either Shaiva or Buddhist, had successfully incorporated religious belief, political life, intellectual work, and yogic practice. Sophisticated academic work that relied on well-established temples and intellectual communities suffered much more than the wandering yogis and their easy-to-practice yoga. The decline of North Indian tantric religion gave more room to the spread of other religions and beliefs including Islam and Vaishnavism. Kabīr's *rasa* is itself a typical confluence of the three intellectual streams: a Muslim saint praising Rāma *rasa* in a way that is similar to the yogis. The later reinterpretation of the word, however, expanded its meaning, thus merging the Kabīrian tradition with the bhakti movement.

Firstly, the Vaishnava imprints formally distinguished Kabīr's *rasa* from the predecessors.<sup>26</sup> Either Rāma or Hari were often added to *rasa* and praised in place of earlier Shaiva notions like *rasa bhairava* or simply neutral technological terms. According to the poet, the Rāma *rasa* is the best *rasa*, and upon obtaining it, one forgets all the other *rasas* (W92/S69.0). Other poems emphasize Rāma's superiority over Śiva, for example:

बोलौ भाई राम की दुहाई । इह रसि सिव सनकादिक माते । पीवत न अजहूं अघाई ॥  
(W20/S16.0)

O brother, call for Rāma! Śiva, Sanakādi are intoxicated with this *rasa*; they keep drinking till now but are still unsatisfied.

23 White (2007 [1991]), pp. 175–179.

24 Yijing (2009), p. 218.

25 Baimasengge (2008), p. 232.

26 Though mostly Vaishnava, the text under study does have some unusual cases where there is a strong Shaiva sentiment, for instance: 'Abandon the Śālagrām, worship Śiva, and chop down Brahma's head!' (W194/S147.1). This internal inconsistency may indicate ideological differences within the Kabīrian tradition.

## 7. The Making of Kabīr's Rasa

और सबै रस फीका भइया । ब्रह्म अग्नि परजारी रे । ईसर गौरी पीवन लागे । राम तणी  
मतिवाली रे ॥ (W18/S14.1)

All the other rasas are tasteless. The fire of Brahma was lit up. Even Īśvara and Gaurī started to drink, intoxicated in Rāma.

This Vaishnava imprint is a result of the revival of Vaishnavism in North India. *Saḡuṇa* Krishnaite bhakti was historically connected with similar traditions that originated in South India, whereas the origin of *nirḡuṇa* Rāma is still open to debate. According to the *Kabīr Paracai* composed by Ānantadās, it is Hari himself who advised Kabīr to seek initiation from Rāmānanda, before which Kabīr was already a firm Hari *bhakta*.<sup>27</sup> Though there has been debate around the relationship between Kabīr and Rāmānanda, Ānantadās's narrative does reflect how non-Vaishnava had been converted to Vaishnava. If we look back in history, it is in the early sixteenth century when Kriṣṇadās, a Rāmānandi saint, defeated the tantric practitioner Tārānāth and established the Rāmānandi *gaddi* in Galta, Rajasthan, to which tradition Ānantadās belonged.<sup>28</sup>

Adding Rāma or Hari to rasa while retaining the whole system of yogic practice and its intellectual connection with the tantric tradition is more like a superficial Vaishnava 'conversion' of the concept. More fundamental changes took place when rasa was accommodated into the typical bhakti dichotomy between reality and illusion, good and evil, devotion and lostness. Instead of one particular rasa that practitioners so keenly pursued, there are in fact two distinct types of rasa, namely the Rāma/Hari rasa and the *māyā/viṣaya rasa* (rasa of illusion or sensual desires).

The bhaktified Rāma/Hari rasa was no more a technical terminology, to understand which one needs specific knowledge, but rather a religious expression, a belief and practice in which any follower may participate. The second *sākhī* of *rasa kau aṅga* dematerializes 'Rāma *rasāyana*' and equates it with '*prema rasa*.' Kabīr's rasa is further connected to other bhakti concepts like sorrowful *virahiṇī* (W349/A289), *sumirana* (W583/AG971;9), and so forth. At a more practicable level, bhaktified Rāma rasa/*rasāyana* is equated with Rāma *nāma*, for instance:

राम कौ नांड अधिक रस मीठौ । बारंबारं पीवै ॥ (W362/S282.4)

The Rāma *nāma* is the very sweet rasa. Drink it again and again.

कोई पीवै रे रस राम नाम का । जो पीवै सो जोगी रे । संतौ सेवा करौ राम की । और न दूजा  
भोगी रे ॥ टेक ॥ (W18/S14.0)

O! Anybody drinks the rasa of Rāma *nāma*! Those who drink are the real yogi! O Sant, serve Rāma! Nothing else to enjoy! (Refrain)

27 Callewaert (2000a), p. 55.

28 Hastings (2002), p. 61.

अब मैं राम सकल सिद्धि पाई । आंन कहौं तौ राम दुहाई ॥ टेक ॥  
इहि चिति चाषि सबै रस दीठा । राम नाम सा ओर न मीठा ॥1॥  
औरै रसि कैहै कफ बाता । हरि रस अधि अधि सुषदाता ॥2॥  
दूजा बणिज नही कछू बाषर । राम नाम तत दोउ आषर ॥3॥  
कहै कबीर जे हरि रस भोगी । ताकूं मिल्या निरंजन जोगी ॥4॥ (W155/S125)

Now I have obtained all the siddhis [by] Rāma. I call for Rāma, taking oath.  
(Refrain)

Having experienced this heart, having seen all the rasa, nothing is as sweet  
as the Rāma nāma. (1)

The others are called phlegm, wind; Hari rasa is the big bliss giver. (2)

There is no other business or trade [than] just two syllables [which express]  
the essence of the name of Rāma. (3)

Kabīr says: ‘Those who enjoyed the Hari rasa met the *nirāñjana* yogi.’ (4)

Besides the illustration of a religious ‘Rāma/Hari rasa,’ other efforts had been made to construct the image of ‘the other rasa.’ In the above quotation, the other rasa was merely mentioned as ‘tasteless’ or less useful than the Rāma rasa, without it being clearly stated exactly what it is. In the pada below, one specific non- Vaishnava rasa, the rasa of sensual pleasure, *viṣai rasa*<sup>29</sup> appeared as an adverse to the love rasa:

सुमिरंण राम कौ नित कीजै । त्रिमल हरि जस साध संगति मिलि । प्रेम सहित रस पीजै ॥ टेक ॥  
झूठी माया मोहि बिषै रस । सो मन थैं त्यागी जै । हिदा कंवल मैं निसदिन हरि हरि । एह  
अलंबन जीजै ॥1॥  
तन मन धन सब मनसा बाचा । राम समरपन कीजै । कहै कवीर कछू और न जाचौं । चरण  
सरण दत दीजै ॥2॥ (W478/S358)

Rāma is to be remembered every day. Having obtained the pure fame of Hari  
from *satsaṅga*, drink the rasa with love. (Refrain)

The deceptive illusion cheat with rasa of sensual pleasure, which the mind  
should abandon. Hari–Hari should be remembered in the lotus of the heart day  
and night, this is what supports life. (1)

With one’s body, mind, wealth, heart, words, one should dedicate to Rāma. Kabīr  
says, I shall try nothing else. One should cling to the shelter of [Rāma’s] feet. (2)

Thus, the discussion is no longer about one specific rasa but a clear contrast between good and evil, reality and deception, the rasa of devotional love and that of sensual pleasure. This dichotomy gave rise to a typical bhakti teaching, asking people to surrender oneself to the god and not to indulge oneself in worldly pleasures, which is also a major topic of the *vinaya* poems of *saguna* poets like Sūrdās and Tulsīdās. This writing blurs the division between *nirguṇa/saguna* bhakti.<sup>30</sup>

29 As Gupta (1985) indicated in his commentary on pada 10.2, a possible word play is at work between *viṣaya* (sensual pleasure) and *viṣa* (poisonous). See p. 368.

30 Hawley has discussed the similarities between Kabīr and Sūrdās in terms of the *vinaya* sentiment. See Hawley (2012 [2005]), pp. 305–317.

### Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that the Kabīrian rasa has three layers of meaning: the real liquid made from distillation and condensation; the yogic liquid; the emotional sentiment and either sacred or sensual practices related to it. Among the three, the first two were indebted to pre-bhakti intellectual heritage, and were superficially converted to Vaishnava concepts. It is noteworthy that these two imageries are scarce, if not totally absent, in the eastern Kabīrpanthī recension, that is, the *Bījak*. The third layer marked a profound transformation that can be termed as the bhaktification of pre-bhakti intellectual heritage in early modern North India. The earliest Kabīrian literature accommodated all three layers of interpretation, permitting followers to interpret the world from various perspectives: specialized yogis can still understand it as a haṭhayogic concept and endeavour to generate the inner alchemical elixir via yogic practice; ordinary followers can choose to approach the concept either as the devotional sentiment towards the god or the ritual repetition of the god's name. This multifaceted nature of Kabīrian literature may also explain its popularity among a wide range of audiences and readers. Such features of the early Kabīrian literature differs from the tradition of scholarly treatises on a specific topic composed in Sanskrit, the study of which has dominated the writing of intellectual histories of North India before the decline of the 'classic culture.' The Kabīrian literature is more like a sedimentary rock, different layers of which reflect various historical development, rather than a pure crystal with interior consistency.

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