



Review Article

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CONCEPT OF SWITRA IN AYURVEDA: A COMPREHENSIVE CONCEPTUAL UNDERSTANDING

***Dr. Raghubala Kaviya¹, Prof. (Dr.) Ravi Sharma²**

¹Asso. Prof. Kayachikitsa, Kala Ashram Ayurved Medical college & Hospital, Gogunda, Udaipur, Rajasthan

²Prof. & HOD P.G. Department of Kayachikitsa, MMM Gov. Ayurved college Udaipur, Rajasthan

***Corresponding Author's Email ID: draghubala@gmail.com**

Abstract

Switra, described in Ayurvedic classics as a hypopigmentary skin disorder, is characterized by white patches on the skin due to the vitiation of Tridosha and involvement of Dhatus like Rasa, Rakta, Mamsa, and Meda. It correlates with vitiligo in modern medicine, an autoimmune condition affecting 1-2% of the global population, often triggered by genetic, environmental, and immunological factors. This review synthesizes insights from classical Ayurvedic texts and contemporary studies on Switra's etymology, etiology, pathogenesis, classification, prognosis, and management, emphasizing therapies like Shodhana (purification), Shamana (pacification), and Raktamokshana (bloodletting). The analysis highlights the holistic Ayurvedic approach, including the role of Bhrajaka Pitta in skin pigmentation and the importance of pragmatic clinical interventions for psychological and physical well-being.

Keywords: Switra, Vitiligo, Kushtha, Nidana, Samprapti, Raktamokshana, Ayurveda.

Introduction

Skin, as the largest organ, reflects both physical and psychological health, serving as a mirror for internal pathologies. Worldwide, skin disorders affect 20-30% of the population, causing discomfort, disfigurement, and disability [1]. In Ayurveda, Kushtha encompasses various skin

ailments, categorized into Maha Kushtha (major) and Kshudra Kushtha (minor). Switra is often described as a variant of Kushtha but distinguished by its non-exudative, non-infectious nature, chronicity, and involvement primarily of Twak (skin) [2]. Clinically, Switra manifests as hypopigmented white patches, akin to vitiligo, a progressive autoimmune disorder characterized by melanocyte destruction [3].

Historical evidence of Switra dates back to Vedic periods, with detailed descriptions in classics like Charaka Samhita, Sushruta Samhita, and Ashtanga Hridaya. Charaka first elaborates on Switra in the Kushtha Chikitsa chapter, focusing on Nidana (etiology), types, symptoms, and treatment [4]. Sushruta terms it Kilasa and emphasizes its Doshic classifications [5]. Modern correlations link Switra to vitiligo, affecting 1-2% globally, with 80% genetic attribution and 20% environmental influences [6]. This review draws from classical texts and recent Ayurvedic studies to explore Switra's multifaceted aspects.

Etymology and Definition

The term "Switra" derives from the Sanskrit root "Shvit," meaning "to become white," with the suffix "Rak" implying a white Kushtha [7]. Kashyapa Samhita defines it as "Shweta Bhava Micchanti," denoting a desire for whiteness or color change toward white [8]. Synonyms include Kilasa (white patches), Shweta Kushtha, and Pandura Varna (pale white) [9]. Vagbhata describes it as more severe than Kushtha, rapidly progressing like a burning house [10].

In modern terms, Switra equates to vitiligo, an acquired pigmentation disorder with white macules due to selective melanocyte loss [11]. It is non-contagious, psychologically devastating, and often hereditary.

Historical Review

References to Switra appear in Atharva Veda, where Kilasa denotes white pigmentation treated with Haridra [12]. Charaka Samhita provides comprehensive details in Kushtha Chikitsa, including 15 Yogas for internal and external use [13]. Sushruta differentiates Switra from Kushtha based on absence of Kleda (moisture) and Krimi (microbes) [14]. Bhela Samhita lists it among 11 Kshudra Kushtha as Asadhya (incurable) [15]. Harita Samhita uniquely describes its Samprapti, attributing it to vitiated Vata and Pitta disrupting Rakta Dhatu formation [16]. Kashyapa and Vagbhata emphasize its Pratyatma Lakshana (distinct symptoms) in Sharira Sthana [17].

Nidana (Etiology)

Nidanas of Switra align with Kushtha but include specific factors. Charaka lists Viruddhahara (incompatible foods like fish and milk), Atathyani Vachana (untruthfulness), Kritaghna Bhava (ingratitude), Suranam Ninda (disrespect to gods), Guru Dharsana (insulting teachers), Papa Karma (sinful acts), and Purvakrita Karma (past-life deeds) [18]. Other Aharaja Nidanas include excessive Amla-Lavana Rasa, Madya, Kshara, Ajeernashana (eating during indigestion), Navanna, Dadhi, Masha, and Pishtanna [19]. Viharaja factors encompass Chardi Vega Dharana (suppressing vomiting), Ati Bhojana (overeating), and Ati Santana (excessive sun exposure) [20].

Garbhaja Nidana involves excessive Kaphakara Ahara by pregnant women, potentially causing Switra in offspring [21]. Modern triggers include stress, sunburn, chemical exposure, and autoimmune responses, leading to melanocyte destruction [22].

Samprapti (Pathogenesis)

Though not explicitly detailed in all classics, Switra's Samprapti involves Tridosha vitiation, primarily Pitta, mixing with Ama (toxins) and spreading from Koshta (alimentary tract) to Shakha (tissues). Vitiated Doshas lodge in the Tamra layer of Twak (fourth skin layer), causing obstruction in Rasavaha and Raktavaha Srotas [23]. This leads to Bhrajaka Pitta Kshaya, resulting in Twak Shwetata (skin whiteness) [24]. Deeper Dhatus like Mamsa and Meda get involved, producing specific discolorations: Rakta Varna (red) in Rakta Dhātu, Tamra Varna (coppery) in Mamsa, and Shweta Varna (white) in Meda [25].

Harita attributes it to Vata-Pitta vitiation disturbing Rakta Nirmitti [26]. Sushruta limits it to skin level, devoid of secretions [27]. Modern pathogenesis involves autoimmune destruction of melanocytes, triggered by stress-induced catecholamines and neuropeptides [28].

Classification

Switra is classified based on Dosha, Dhatugatva, Nidana, Sadhyasadyatva, and Uttapati.

- **Dosha-based:** Vatika (dry, Aruna patches), Pittaja (burning, Padma Patra Varna), Kaphaja (thick, white, itchy) [29].
- **Dhatugatva-based:** Daruna (Rakta), Aruna (Mamsa), Shwitra (Meda); Sushruta adds Twak-only type [30].
- **Nidana-based:** Agnidagdha (burn-related), Anagnidagdha (non-burn) [31].

- **Sadhyasadyatva:** Sadhya (curable) vs. Asadya (incurable, deep Dhatu involvement) [32].
- **Uttapati-based:** Sahaja (congenital), Jatottara (acquired) [33].

Sadhyasadyatva (Prognosis)

Switra is Kashtasadya (difficult to cure) due to chronicity and relapsing nature [34]. Asadya Lakshanas include deep Dhatu involvement, lesions on palms/soles/genitalia/lips, matted patches, and old origin [35]. Sadhya types are non-matted, newly originated, thin patches with black hairs, or burn-related [36].

Chikitsa (Treatment)

As a Raktapradoshaja Vikara, treatment includes Langhana, Virechana, and Raktamokshana [37]. Shodhana (Virechana with Bakuchi-Snuhi) removes Dosha Sanga [38]. Shamana involves internal medicines like Bakuchyadi Churna, Khadirasaradi Churna, Kanakabindvarista, and Ghritas (Neeli, Mahatikta) [39]. External therapies: Lepas (Ankollakandi, Avalgujadi, Bhallakadi), oil application followed by sun exposure [40].

Raktamokshana is emphasized for Rakta Dushya, using Jalauka (leech therapy) or Shringa (horn) [41]. Pragmatic approaches include Bahiparimarjana (local applications) post-Shodhana for Varnaropana (wound healing) [42]. Modern correlations include PUVA therapy, but Ayurveda offers safer alternatives with fewer side effects [43].

Discussion

Switra's Ayurvedic framework integrates psychosomatic elements, with stress (Papa Karma) mirroring modern autoimmune triggers. Bhrajaka Pitta's role in pigmentation aligns with melanocyte function. Raktamokshana's efficacy in purifying Rakta Dhatu addresses vitiligo's vascular aspects. Holistic management, combining Shodhana, Shamana, and lifestyle (Pathya: aged rice, Mudga; Apathya: Viruddhahara), offers superior outcomes over symptomatic modern treatments. Further research is needed to validate Ayurvedic protocols scientifically.

Switra, an Ayurvedic hypopigmentary disorder akin to vitiligo, manifests as white patches due to Tridosha vitiation, primarily Pitta, affecting Bhrajaka Pitta and Dhatus like Rasa, Rakta, Mamsa, and Meda. Pathogenesis involves Nidanās such as Viruddhahara (e.g., fish-milk), stress (Papa Karma), and suppression of urges, leading to Ama formation, Srotas obstruction, and melanocyte dysfunction. Modern parallels include autoimmune melanocyte destruction

triggered by genetics (80%) and environment (20%), with stress elevating catecholamines [44].

Classified by Dosha (Vatika: Aruna, dry; Pittaja: burning, coppery; Kaphaja: thick, itchy, white) and Dhatugatva (Daruna: Rakta; Aruna: Mamsa; Shwitra: Meda), prognosis deems superficial, recent lesions Sadhya, while deep, chronic, or genital ones Asadhya. Treatment emphasizes Shodhana (Virechana with Bakuchi) to expel vitiated Doshas, followed by Shamana (e.g., Khadirasaradi Churna, Mahatikta Ghrita) and Raktamokshana (Jalaukavacharana) for Rakta purification, enhancing circulation and wound healing via leech enzymes like hirudin [45].

Pragmatic approaches integrate Lepas (e.g., Bakuchyadi, Avalgujadi) post-Shodhana for Varnaropana, leveraging herbal anti-inflammatory and melanogenic properties. Unlike modern PUVA's side effects, Ayurveda offers holistic, safer management, addressing psychosomatic burdens. Research validates immunostimulation and photoreaction, but scientific trials are needed to bridge traditions, potentially improving outcomes for 1-2% affected globally [46].

Conclusion

Switra, a Tridoshic disorder with Pitta predominance, requires prompt, multifaceted Ayurvedic intervention. By addressing Nidana, Samprapti, and Dhatu involvement through purification and pacification, Ayurveda provides a pragmatic, patient-centric approach, alleviating both physical depigmentation and psychological burden.

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