



Review Article

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DETAILED REVIEW OF VISHA DRAVYAS

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Abstract

In essence, Visha refers to substances that, upon entry into the body, disrupt the healthy bodily elements or even cause harm to a person. It can also be seen as anything that brings about sorrow to the world. The term "Visha" is derived from its ability to induce a sense of despondency, even affecting divine beings. Visha is categorized based on factors like origin, composition, properties, and potency. In various Ayurvedic classics and medieval texts, poisons are divided into Mahavisha and Upavisha, considering their level of toxicity and strength. According to their origin, Visha is classified into Jangamavisha (animal-based poisons) and Sthavaravisha (plant and mineral-based poisons). References to Visha can be found in Ayurvedic works like Charak Samhita, Sushrut Samhita, and Rasatrangini. Upavishas, or semi-poisonous substances, are drugs that exhibit a lower level of toxicity but may induce certain toxic symptoms upon consumption. These symptoms are generally less severe and not typically life-threatening, and their harmful effects can be managed through therapeutic interventions.

Key-words: Visha, Sthavaravisha, Jangamavisha, Visha-Upavisha, Rasa-shastra

Introduction

'Visha' refers to a substance that causes distress or sadness in the body. It is described as a destructive element that is rapidly absorbed, possesses qualities like being intense, hot, penetrating, dry, and having the ability to pass through subtle channels. It acts swiftly, has an unclear taste, and isn't easily digested. Substances with these attributes are termed 'Visas', while those less toxic than major poisons are termed 'Upavishas'. According to mythology, both poison (Visha) and ambrosia (Amrutha) emerged from the churning of the milky ocean, illustrating their paradoxical nature.

The concept of poison is multifaceted and has various causes. Charaka emphasized understanding herbs and their therapeutic uses thoroughly. He believed that a potent poison can become a beneficial medicine with proper administration, and conversely, a medicine can turn poisonous if not used correctly. Certain factors determine a substance's suitability as medicine.

Upavisha substances are considered advantageous due to their qualities such as efficient absorption, high effectiveness at low doses, minimal side effects, and strong potency. Ayurveda underscores the need for careful manufacturing, quality standardization, and dosing of these substances to prevent adverse health effects. Ancient texts describe the therapeutic applications of Upavisha substances, particularly in Rasa therapy based on Rasashastra principles. These substances not only act quickly even in small amounts but also offer therapeutic benefits for chronic ailments. However, improper preparation and use can lead to harmful effects. Proper dosing is crucial, as excessive amounts of these substances can be toxic.

The concept of "Vishachikitsa" is discussed in the Brahmavaivarta Purana, while the distinctions between "Sthavara" and "Jangama" poisons are described in the Atharvaveda. The classification of poisons is also outlined in the Kalpa Sthan of Sushruta. Vagbhata categorized poisons as "Sthavara," "Jangam," and "Garvisha." According to the Rasatarangini, poisonous substances are classified based on their origin into two types: those of plant and mineral origin (Sthavara) and those of animal origin (Jangama). The field of Rasashastra literature categorizes "Visha" and "Upavisha" as types of poisonous substances. Various

parts of plants such as roots, fruits, bark, sap, bulbs, and flowers fall under "Sthavara Visha," while respiratory secretions, venom, sight, excrement, and urine are considered "Jangama Visha."

Historical Background:

The history of poison ("visha") and its treatment dates back centuries. Mythologically, poison is believed to have originated during the creation of the universe by Lord Brahma, while others suggest it was obtained during the churning of the ocean. References to poison and its effects can also be found in the Vedas. The Atharvaveda (1500 B.C.) describes two types of poison, "sthavara" and "jangama," along with their management through incantations ("mantrachikitsa"). In the Ramayana (500 B.C.), Rama and Lakshmana were treated for poisoning using the Sanjeevani herb, sourced from the Himalayas, by Vaidya Sushena. The Mahabharata (400 B.C.) recounts the poisoning of Bhima and his subsequent treatment for snakebite poisoning. A conversation between Kashyapa and Takshaka regarding poison treatment ("vishachikitsa") is also mentioned in the Mahabharata. The Brahmapurana (600 B.C. to 700 A.D.) details a conversation between Dhanvantari and Nagadevi that sheds light on the state of "Vishachikitsa" during that era. In Kautilya's Arthashastra (363 B.C.), although not specifically a toxicology text, references to various poisons like kalakuta, vatsanabha, halahala, meshasringa, and others are present. Ayurveda dedicates a branch known as "Danshrachikitsa," "Agadatantra," or "Vishatantra," which solely focuses on the concept and treatment of poison. These references collectively demonstrate the well-developed state of toxicology as a branch of knowledge in ancient India.

Classification of poison

Visha, is based on its origin, yielding two main categories: Jangamavisha (derived from animals) and Sthavaravisha (from plants and minerals). These are further broken down into subcategories; for instance, Sthavaravisha is divided into ten types based on plant parts, such as kanda (root), Sara (exudate), niryasa (oleoresin), pushpa (flower), mula (root), phala (fruit), patra (leaf), twacha (skin), dugdha (milky exudates), and khanija (minerals). On the other hand, Jangamavisha encompasses poisons from animals, including snake venom,

scorpion stings, rodent bites, dog bites, leech bites, and insect stings. Symptoms associated with this category often include dizziness, burning sensations, swelling, and diarrhea.

A further classification is introduced: Akritrimavisha (natural poison) and kritrimavisha/Garavisha (unnatural or chemically prepared poison). Akritrimavisha is again divided into two subcategories: sthavara and jangama. Rasashastra and Dravyaguna texts also provide alternative classifications like mahavisha-upavisha.

In the Sthavaravisha category, poisons derive from plants and minerals, and they are grouped into ten types based on the specific plant part. These encompass kanda (root), Sara (exudate), niryasa (oleoresin), pushpa (flower), mula (root), phala (fruit), patra (leaf), twacha (skin), dugdha (milky exudates), and khanija (minerals).

Jangamavisha comprises poisons originating from animals, encompassing snake venom, scorpion stings, rodent bites, dog bites, leech bites, and insect stings. These often lead to symptoms like dizziness, burning sensations, swelling, and diarrhea.

The third classification, Krutrima Visha, represents poisons that don't fall into the plant or animal categories. Among these three, plant-based poisons are more frequently used in medicine. When incorporating poisonous plants into medicines, they act swiftly at lower doses. However, to mitigate toxicity and enhance safety, these plants undergo a process known as "Shodhana Samskara," involving techniques like boiling and frying. For instance, Datura is immersed in gomutra, boiled with cow's milk, and husk is removed. Incorrectly performed procedures in medicinal plant preparation can result in fatal consequences.

Upavisha

Upavisha mean sub poisons or those which are moderately & mildly poisonous.

Vanaspatija (herbal) Vishadhishtanas

• Kanda (tuber) • Sara (pith) • Niryasa (exudate) • Pushpa (flowers) • Patra (leaf) • Dugdha (letex) • Phala (fruit) • Twak (bark) • Moola (root)

Visha Qualities

Acharya Charaka and Sushruta have both outlined ten similar characteristics of visha, although with a difference – apaaki (Sushruta) is replaced by anirdeshya rasa (Charaka). Acharya Vagbhata has attributed eleven characteristics to a visha substance by including apaki and Avyaktarasa (instead of anirdeshya rasa). Sharngadhara has introduced additional qualities of visha substances such as chhedi, madavaha, jivitahara, and yogavahi.

Significance of Purifying Visha

The toxic plants documented in ancient Ayurvedic texts continue to be widely used for various ailments following proper processing through Shodhana. Ayurvedic practitioners have effectively utilized these substances after appropriate purification. The concept of Shodhana was initially introduced in Charaka Samhita in the context of Danti Dravanti Kalpadhyaya. To mitigate the 'Vikasi' property of Danti root, Charaka referred to it as 'Samaskara'. Acharya Vagbhata also provided detailed instructions on purifying plant-based drugs in the context of Bhallataka Rasayana for 'Bhallataka' (*Semecarpus anacardium*). It's noted that Aconite (*Vatsanabha*), when purified with cow urine, transforms into a cardiac stimulant, whereas raw Aconite acts as a cardiac depressant. 'Bhava Prakasha' explicitly states that the adverse effects associated with 'Ashodhita Vishas' (unpurified poisonous substances) are minimized when they undergo Shodhana before therapeutic use. Therefore, it is imperative to subject 'Vishas' to purification through Shodhana prior to their application in medical treatments.

General processing of poisonous substances before consumption

- Gomutra Nimajjana involves immersing substances in cow urine for a designated duration.
- Swedana entails boiling items in different liquids, such as cow milk, goat milk, cow urine, vegetable extracts, and Kanjika.
- Bharjana refers to frying with or without clarified butter (ghee).
- Bhavana involves macerating and/or grinding with vegetable juices.
- Nihsnehana aims to reduce oily content.
- Kshalana is the act of cleansing with hot water.

- Nistvachikarana is the process of removing outer coverings.

Among the mentioned methods, cow urine and boiling with cow milk are the most prevalent techniques used for almost all 'Vishopavisha' substances [21].

Properties and Effects of Visha

- Ruksha (Coarseness) - Aggravates vata dosha.
- Ushna (Heat) - Aggravates rakta and pitta doshas.
- Tiksna (Sharpness) - Leads to mental agitation (causes unconsciousness) and can harm muscles and limbs.
- Sukshma (Subtlety) - Penetrates even tiny channels, causing physiological damage.
- Asu (Quick Action) - Acts rapidly and can be deadly.
- Vyavayi (Quick Absorption) - Spreads rapidly through the body due to its expansive nature.
- Vikasi (Destructive) - Destroys the body's fundamental elements (dhatus), doshas, and waste products (mala).
- Vishada (Non-Sticky) - Does not adhere to the body.
- Laghu (Lightness) - Becomes incurable due to extreme lightness.
- Avipaki (Indigestible) - Cannot be assimilated due to its inherent indivisibility, causing long-term issues.

Significance of Purification (Sodhana) of Poisonous and Non-Poisonous Substances

Poisonous plants described in ancient Ayurvedic texts are still used for various diseases after proper purification procedures. The concept of purification (Sodhana) was first mentioned in Charaka Samhita, in the 'Danti dravanti kalpadhyaya' context. For example, to mitigate the quick absorption property of Danti root, it was subjected to a process called 'Samskara.' Acharya Vagbhata also elaborated on the purification of plant drugs in the context of Bhallataka rasayana. Sodhana in Ayurveda not only detoxifies substances but also enhances their potency and effectiveness. Aconite (Vatsanabha), when purified with cow's urine, transforms from a cardiac depressant to a cardiac stimulant. The 'Bhavaprakasha' states that

toxic effects of 'Asodhita Vishas' (unpurified substances) are minimized through Sodhana. Therefore, purification is essential before using substances in therapeutic applications. Various purification methods are outlined for Upavishas:

1. Gomutra Nimajjana (soaking in cow's urine) for a specific period.
2. Swedana (boiling) in diverse mediums like cow's milk, goat's milk, cow's urine, vegetable extracts, kanjika, etc.
3. Bharjana (frying) with or without ghee.
4. Nisheshana (reducing oily content).
5. Kshalana (washing) with hot water.

Among these methods, treatment with cow's urine and boiling in cow's milk are the most commonly employed procedures for almost all 'Visopavisha' substances.

Conclusion

The ancient Ayurvedic texts provided insights into the practical uses of toxic substances known as Vishas and Upavishas within Rasa Dravyas. These harmful elements, once purified, could serve as therapeutic remedies known as Rasaushadhi. The unique qualities of these substances, such as their subtle, light, and non-slimy attributes, allowed for rapid effects, easy absorption through narrow channels, and beneficial responses even in small doses. The characteristics and effects of these toxic materials are well-documented in classical Ayurvedic texts. The concept of "visha" can be comprehended by examining its qualities, and with a scientific approach, these substances can also be harnessed as fast-acting medications.

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