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CONCEPT OF *MAHAVISHA–UPAVISHA ŚHODHANA* IN *AGADTANTRA*: AN ANCIENT INDIAN KNOWLEDGE SYSTEM

***Dr. Sarang Paulzagade**

Assistant Professor, Department of Agadtantra, Bhojraj Bhondekar Ayurved Mahavidyalaya, Sirsi Bhandara, Maharashtra, India.

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***Corresponding Author: Dr. Sarang Paulzagade**

Assistant Professor, Department of Agadtantra, Bhojraj Bhondekar Ayurved Mahavidyalaya, Sirsi Bhandara, Maharashtra, India.

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ABSTRACT

Ayurveda, the traditional Indian medical system, emphasizes not only the treatment of disease but also the promotion of **health** and longevity. Within *Ashtanga Ayurveda*, *Agadtantra* holds a distinct position as the branch dealing with poisons, their effects, and their management. Several Ayurvedic formulations employ potentially toxic herbs, metals, and minerals (Visha and *Upavisha*), which require proper purificatory procedures (*Śhodhana*) to render them safe and therapeutically useful. Classical texts describe detailed methods of *Śhodhana* for various *Mahavisha* and *Upavisha* drugs using media such as cow's urine, cow's milk, ghee, plant decoctions, and other agents to reduce toxicity while enhancing efficacy. This article presents an overview of the concept of *Mahavisha–Upavisha* classification, the importance of *Śhodhana* in Agadtantra and *Rasashastra*, and the classical purification procedures of selected poisonous plants like *Vatsanabha*, *Kuchala*, *Dhattura*, *Bhallataka*, *Jaipala*, *Ahiphena*, and *Bhanga*, with reference to contemporary scientific support.

KEYWORDS: *Agadtantra, Mahavisha, Upavisha, Śhodhana, Visha dravya, Rasashastra, Ayurvedic* toxicology.

INTRODUCTION

Plants form the major source of medicines in *Ayurveda*, and numerous bioactive compounds have been isolated and utilized for human benefit. However, many of these drugs were abandoned or restricted because of their inherent toxicity or serious adverse effects. Ayurvedic texts acknowledge and systematically employ several poisonous plants and

minerals, such as *Bhanga* (Cannabis sativa Linn.), *Ahiphena* (Papaver somniferum Linn.), *Vatsanabha* (Aconitum ferox), *Kuchala* (Strychnos nux-vomica Linn.), and *Dhattura* (Datura metal Linn.), usually after proper *Śhodhana.*

Agadtantra, a specialized branch of *Ashtanga Ayurveda,* deals with the identification, properties, actions, and management of poisons, emphasizing preventive and curative measures against toxic exposure. According to Acharyas, not all medicinal plants are inherently safe; some contain toxic phytoconstituents and are grouped as Visha (highly poisonous) and *Upavisha* (lesser poisons), which must be purified before therapeutic use. The principle that "a poison can become a medicine if used and processed properly, and a medicine can become a poison if used improperly" is consistently quoted in classical literature and underlies the concept of *Śhodhana.*

Classification of *Visha* and the Place of *Mahavisha–Upavisha*

Ayurvedic classics classify poisons based on origin, potency, and characteristics. Broadly, Visha is divided into:

- *Sthavara Visha:* plant and mineral poisons
- *Jangama Visha*: animal-origin poisons

Further, Visha is also categorized as:

- *Akritrima* Visha (natural poisons) – including *Sthavara and Jangama*
- *Kritrima or Garavisha* (artificial or chemically produced poisons)

On the basis of toxicity and therapeutic potency, many *Rasashastra and Dravyaguna* texts classify poisonous drugs into *Mahavisha* (highly potent and lethal) and *Upavisha* (relatively less lethal but still capable of producing toxic manifestations). From the Mahavisha group, Vatsanabha is widely used for medicinal purposes after proper *Śhodhana,* while *Upavisha* includes drugs like *Arka, Karavira, Gunja, Snuhi, Kuchala, Jayapala, Dhattura, Bhallataka, Vijaya, Ahiphena, and Langali.*

Upavisha drugs, although less toxic than *Mahavisha,* can still produce serious though generally non-fatal symptoms if used without purification or in higher doses. These substances are highly valued therapeutically for their rapid and potent actions in small doses, which makes appropriate detoxification and dose regulation crucial.

Concept and Methods of *Śhodhana* of Visha Dravya

Śhodhana is a fundamental pharmaceutico-toxicological process described in Rasashastra and Agadtantra for detoxifying and refining poisonous drugs. Beyond mere purification, *Śhodhana* often modifies physicochemical properties, reduces toxic constituents, and may potentiate the desired therapeutic effects of the drug.

General methods of *Śhodhana*, as compiled from classical texts, include:

- *Swedana (*sudation/fomentation in *Dolayantra)*
- *Nimajjana (*immersion/soaking*)*
- *Bharjana* (roasting/frying*)*
- *Bhavana (*levigation with liquids*)*
- *Prakshalana (*washing*)*
- *Nisneha, Nistvachana, Mardana*, and related procedures chosen according to the nature of the drug and medium.

Bhavaprakasha Nighantu (Dhatvadi Varga) and *Rasatarangini (Vishopavishavijñaniya Adhyaya)* describe specific *Śhodhana* procedures and therapeutic indications for various *Mahavisha* and *Upavisha dravyas*. Media commonly used include cow's urine, cow's milk, ghee, herbal decoctions (e.g., Acacia catechu bark), Kanji, and other traditional liquids that help extract or neutralize toxic principles.

Classical *Śhodhana* of Selected *Upavisha* and *Mahavisha*

1. ***Ahiphena* (Papaver somniferum Linn., excluding seeds)**

- The raw latex is dissolved in water and filtered through cloth, followed by gentle cooking with cow's milk to form a paste.
- This paste is triturated 7–21 times with ginger juice and dried in shade before medicinal use, aiming to reduce narcotic toxicity and improve digestibility.

2. ***Bhanga* (Cannabis sativa Linn., seeds excluded)**

- Method 1: Leaves are tied in cloth and washed repeatedly under water until the green color stops leaching, then shade-dried, fried in cow's ghee, and used.
- Method 2: Swedana in cow's milk for about 3 hours, followed by washing, drying, and frying in ghee.
- Method 3: Boiling in Acacia catechu bark decoction, sun drying, then levigation with cow's milk and drying again.

3. ***Dhattura*** **(Datura metel Linn.)**

- Method 1: Seeds are tied in a potali and subjected to Swedana in cow's milk or cow's urine in Dolayantra for about 3 hours, then washed with warm water, sun-dried, and used after removing the seed coat.
- Method 2: Swedana of seeds in cow's urine followed by grinding and filtration to further reduce tropane alkaloid toxicity.

4. ***Bhallataka (*****Semecarpus anacardium Linn.)**

- Method 1: The top of the fruit is cut, mixed with brick powder, and kept in a potali; when oil saturates the brick powder and the fruit skin opens, it is washed with hot water to obtain Śuddha Bhallataka.
- Method 2: Cut fruits are tied in a potali and subjected to Swedana in coconut water in Dolayantra for 1–2 hours to reduce irritant oil content.

5. ***Kuchala*** **(Strychnos nux-vomica Linn.)**

- Method 1: Seeds are soaked in cow's urine for seven nights with daily renewal, washed, then subjected to Swedana in cow's milk for about 3 hours.
- The seed coat and embryo are removed; the cotyledons are fried in cow's ghee and powdered. Alternative methods include direct frying in ghee or soaking in Kanji for 3 days before drying and powdering.

6. ***Vatsanabha*** **(Aconitum ferox)**

- Roots are cut into small pieces, tied in a potali, then kept in cow's urine for three days or processed by Swedana in cow's or goat's milk for 3–6 hours, followed by washing in warm water and drying.

7. ***Jaipala*** **(Croton tiglium)**

- Seeds are soaked in water overnight; the outer coat and inner cotyledons are removed.
- The de-oiled parts are tied in cloth and subjected to *Swedana* in cow's milk in *Dolayantra*, then washed, sun-dried, and further pressed between blotting papers to remove residual oil.

  These classical protocols aim to selectively remove or transform toxic constituents (such as aconitine, strychnine, brucine, croton oil) while retaining therapeutic potency.

DISCUSSION

Ayurvedic science shows remarkable caution regarding the potential hazards of medicinal substances and therefore prescribes detailed safeguards, including indications, contraindications, and strict *Śhodhana* procedures for *Visha dravyas.* Modern analytical and

experimental studies support the classical view that *Śhodhana* significantly reduces toxic alkaloid content and modifies pharmacological activity.

For example, studies on *Kuchala* seeds demonstrate that sequential processing in cow's urine and cow's milk causes substantial reduction in strychnine and brucine levels, aligning with classical prescriptions. Similarly, aconite (*Vatsanabha*) treated with cow's urine or milk exhibits markedly reduced toxicity compared to raw drug, with functional changes from cardiac depressant to safer stimulant profiles. In *Bhallataka* and *Jaipala,* removal or reduction of irritant oils after *Śhodhana* correlates with improved safety margins for therapeutic applications.

Śhodhana media such as cow's urine, cow's milk, ghee, and herbal decoctions seem to act through physicochemical mechanisms like extraction, hydrolysis, and conversion to less toxic derivatives, as reflected in changes in chromatographic profiles and toxicity assays. Yet, despite growing evidence, systematic comparative studies correlating different classical methods with quantitative reduction in specific toxins and clinical outcomes remain limited and constitute an important area for future research.

CONCLUSION

Mahavisha and *Upavisha dravyas*, though inherently poisonous, hold significant therapeutic potential when processed according to classical *Śhodhana* procedures. The Ayurvedic dictum that properly processed poisons become potent medicines and improperly used medicines become poisons is strongly supported by both textual evidence and emerging experimental data.

Cow's urine, cow's milk, ghee, herbal decoctions, and other traditional media used in Śodhana play a key role in detoxification, reduction of toxic alkaloids, and enhancement of safety and efficacy of drugs like *Vatsanabha, Kuchala, Dhattura, Bhallataka, Jaipala, Bhanga*, and *Ahiphena.* There is a need to systematically compare classical *Śhodhana* processes with modern analytical techniques to establish standardized, evidence-based protocols that can increase confidence in the safe clinical use of Visha and *Upavisha* in contemporary Ayurvedic practice.

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