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## A review on therapeutic potential of poisonous herbs in Indian medicine WSR Ayurveda

**Ramakant Marde and Ashish Bharti Goswami**

### Abstract

Evolution in traditional medicine led to medicinal utilization and practice of poisonous plants. Unearthing their therapeutic values can control the burden on endangering medicinal flora up to some extent. Poisonous plants for treating ailments are an age-old tradition in India after they are properly purified. Many compound formulations in AFI (Ayurvedic formulary of India) contain them for their imperative actions<sup>3</sup>. Furthermore a list of poisonous plant has been given in schedule E (1) of the drugs and cosmetics act, 1940. Considering the same said present paper focuses towards reviewing the therapeutic potential of poisonous plants described in Indian medicine. According to *Ayurveda Visha* can be used as medicine due to various properties such as *Vyavayi* (Instantaneous absorption), *Aashukari* (Quick acting), *Yogavahi*, *Vishaghna* (Antidotal). According *Acharya Bhav Mishra* properly purified *Visha Dravya* when taken with *Yukti* will act as *Pranadayi*, *Rasayana*, *Tridoshaghna*, *Yogavahi*, *Brihmana* and *Veerya Vardhaka*. In *Ayurveda* classics numerous poisonous herbs have been mentioned but still *Acharyas* Used them as medicine. It can be understood that *Acharyas* might have noticed *Guna* and *Karma* of *Visha* from the point of their possible medicinal use. It can be concluded that Poisonous herbs in Indian medicine have therapeutic potential after proper purification wsr to *Ayurved*.

**Keywords:** therapeutic, poisonous, herbs, *vishaghna*, *yogavahi*

### Introduction

Since inception of civilization human beings are dependent upon plants for all their basic needs such as food, Shelter etc. furthermore they used the same for medicinal purpose also. Initially poisonous plants have been used by people for killing prey and homicide etc as long as history recorded. Later the understanding regarding poisonous plants has been developed and its medicinal utilization came into practice.

As stated by WHO that approx 70 - 80 % of world population depend upon traditional herbal medicine. Continuous exploitation of limited natural resources resulted in endangering of many popular medicinal herbs. On other hand poisonous plants due to lesser use are found abundantly. If one can uncover their therapeutic values the burden on endangering medicinal flora can be controlled up to some extent<sup>[1]</sup>.

As per the concept of *Ayurveda*, "even a strong poison can be used as an excellent medicine if administered properly. On the other hand, even the most useful medicine may become a poison if handled incorrectly." Over time *Ayurvedic* practitioners have tried to develop a number of traditional methods to convert toxic medicinal plants to useful medicines<sup>[2]</sup>.

Poisonous plants for treating ailments are an age-old tradition in India after they are properly purified. Many compound formulations in AFI (Ayurvedic formulary of India) contain them for their imperative actions<sup>[3]</sup>. Furthermore a list of poisonous plant has been given in schedule E (1) of the drugs and cosmetics act, 1940.

When we look chronologically since *Samhita* to the *Nighantus* and recent *Rasashashtra* texts *Visha* have been classified as *Visha* (Poison) and *Upavisha* (Subtle poison), in which *Upavisha* such as *Vishatinduka* (*strychnous*) etc. are much in practice along with *Vatsanabh* (*Aconite*) which falls under *Visha*<sup>[4]</sup>.

According to *Aacharya Sushruta* there is not a single substance in the universe that is not endowed with certain therapeutic virtues. Drugs or substances, used in specific combinations and according to the indication of a disease under treatment, prove curative in virtue of their native qualities and potencies<sup>[5]</sup>.

*Visha* and *Upavishas* are used many clinical conditions such as Fever, Pain, Swelling, poisoning etc. as a single drug or in combinations. Considering the same said present paper focuses towards reviewing the therapeutic potential of poisonous plants described in Indian medicine.

## Materials and Methods

It is a literary review to explore therapeutic potential of poisonous plants described in Indian medicines with the help of data collected from classical and contemporary Ayurvedic texts and published research articles.

## Discussion

### Effects of Sodhana of Toxic herbs

According to classical texts of Ayurveda poisonous herbs must be used only after suitable purification. There are few exceptions also present where poisonous herbs are used without purification. e.g. Use of *Sthaver Visha Dravya* (Inanimate) as antidote to neutralize the effect of *Jangam Visha* (animal poison). Many scholars have done a variety of research works to prove the effect of *Shodhna* (purification) process. Research data shows that detoxification of a poisonous herb remove both physical and chemical impurities and increase the potency as well. Furthermore it reduces the toxic effect and also interferes with the form and nature of drug. For e.g. unpurified *Nux vomica* seeds causes convulsion where purified *Nux vomica* has shown anti convulsion activity [6].

### Visha as medicine

*Visha Dravya* can be used for therapeutic purpose due to following properties:

- **Vyavayi (Instantaneous absorption)** [7]: This property allows the *Dravya* to spread all over body before getting digested. This property helps in rapid absorption and distribution of drug to the minute channels of the body for e.g. – cells, tissue etc. and will be useful in acute conditions.
- **Aashukari (Quick acting)** [8]: This property of *Visha Dravya* helps for quick distribution all over *Sharira*. This action is very fast such as a drop of oil when dropped on water, spread immediately. The main difference between *Vyavayi* and *Ashukaari* is that due to *Vyavayi Guna* drug initially spreads all over body and then get digested whereas due to *Ashukari Guna* drug gets digested quickly and then spreads rapidly.
- **Yogavahi:** *Acharya Shargdhara* mentioned *Yogvahi* as a *guna* of *Pranahara Ausadha* (Poisonous Medicines). The term *Yogavahi* indicates property by which a *Visha Dravya* can enhance the *Guna* of *Anupana*. It can be understood that *Visha* can enhance the property of other drug which is given along with it. In short judicious use of purified *Visha* can act as a bioavailability enhancer [9].
- **Vishaghna (Antidotal) action of Visha:** According to *Acharya Caraka Visha* shows Antidotal action due to *Prabhava* [10]. *Acharya Shivadas Sena* in his commentary *Charaka Tattva Pradipika* opined that *Visha* is *Vishaghna* because *Sthavar* and *Jangama* annihilate each other [11]. *Acharya Chakrapani* while commenting on *Visha gati* (i.e. *Jangama Visha* moves upward and *Sthavar Visha* Moves downwards) and *Vishaghna Karma* (antidotal effect) of *Visha* opined that in case of *Sthavar Visha Jangama Visha* acts as Antidote and vice versa. He explained that *Prabhava* (Specific potency of a drug) is the reason behind antidotal nature of *Visha* [12].
- **Rasaayan:** According to *Prasadani* commentary by *Shri Haridatta Shashtri* on *Rasatarangini* in context of

*Visha Rasayana*. It is said that If *Visha (Vatsnabh)* is used in proper dose it act like *Amruta* (nectar) and provides longevity and if used injudiciously it can prove to be fatal. One should consider *Bala, Desha, Kaka, Avastha, Prakruti, Satmya* etc. before administration of *Vatsnabh* i.e. *Visha*. One can apply above said concept in case of other *Visha Dravya* also to be used as *Rasayana* for e.g. *Bhallataka Rasayana* [13].

- **Indication of Poisonous herbs in various ailments:** In many Classical literatures we find the reference regarding the use, importance, and therapeutic explanation of *Visha Dravyas*. According *Acharya Bhavmishra* properly purified *Visha Dravya* when taken with *Yukti* will act as *Pranadayi, Rasayana, Tridoshaghna, Yogvahi, Brihmana* and *Veerya Vardhaka* [14].

## Conclusion

Paracelsus a famous toxicologist of western science quoted that "The dose makes the poison" or in Latin, "Sola dosis facit venenum". He explained that "All things are poisons; there is nothing without poisonous qualities. It is only the dose which makes a thing poison." It means that a substance can produce the harmful effect associated with its toxic properties only if it reaches a susceptible biological system within the body in a high enough concentration (i.e., dose). *Acharya Charaka* mentioned the same concept much earlier than Paracelsus but in a diverse manner. He quoted that if a potent poison is used in a judicious way it will act as a good medicine [15].

Above said supports the use of poisonous herbs as a medicine after proper purification. Our study suggests that use of poisonous herbs is common in almost all Indian system of medicine. Government bodies also shown concern regarding the same and added these Herbs in schedule e (1) of the drugs and cosmetics act, 1940. The main motto behind it to regulate use these drugs for medicinal use.

In *Ayurveda* classics numerous poisonous herbs have been mentioned but still *Acharyas* used them as medicine. It can be opined that *Acharyas* might have noticed *Guna* and *Karma* of *Visha* from the point of their possible medicinal use. So it can be concluded that Poisonous herbs in Indian medicine have therapeutic potential after proper purification wsr to *Ayurved*.

**Table 1-3** List of Various Poisonous Herbs Mentioned in schedule e (1) of the drugs and cosmetics act, 1940 used in various Indian system of medicine [16].

**Table 1:** Ayurvedic System

S. No.	Visha Dravya	Botanical Name
1	<i>Ahipena (Except seeds)</i>	<i>Papaver somniferum</i> Linn.
2	<i>Arka</i>	<i>Calotropis procera</i> (Ait.) R.Br. ex.
3	<i>Bhallataka</i>	<i>Semecarpus anacardium</i> Linn. F.
4	<i>Bhanga (Except seeds)</i>	<i>Cannabis sativa</i> Linn. (Except seeds)
5	<i>Danti</i>	<i>Baliospermum montanum</i> Mull. Arg.
6	<i>Dhattura</i>	<i>Datura metal</i> Linn.
7	<i>Gunja (seed)</i>	<i>Abrus precatorium</i> Linn. (seed)
8	<i>Jaipala (seed)</i>	<i>Croton tiglium</i> Linn.
9	<i>Karaveera</i>	<i>Nerium indicum</i> Mill.
10	<i>Langali</i>	<i>Gloriosa superba</i> Linn.
11	<i>Parasika Yavani</i>	<i>Hyoscyamus niger</i> Linn.
12	<i>Vatsanabha</i>	<i>Acontium chasmanthum</i> Stapf ex Holm.
13	<i>Vishamushthi</i>	<i>Strychnos nuxvomica</i> Linn.
14	<i>Shringivisha</i>	<i>Acontium chasmanthum</i> Stapf ex Holm.

**Table 2:** Siddha System

S. No.	Visha Dravya	Botanical Name
1.	Abini	<i>Papaver somniferum</i> Linn.
2.	Attru thummatti	<i>Citrullus colocynthis</i> (L.) Schrad
3.	Umathai	<i>Datura stramonium</i> Linn.
4.	Ganja (except seed)	<i>Cannabis sativa</i> Linn. (Except seeds)
5.	Kunri (except root)	<i>Abrus precatorium</i> Linn. (seed)
6.	Nervalam	<i>Croton tiglium</i> Linn.
7.	Alari	<i>Nerium indicum</i> Mill.
8.	Kalappaki Kizahangu	<i>Gloriosa superba</i> Linn.
9.	Etti	<i>Strychnos nuxvomica</i> Linn.
10.	Kodikkalli (exempted for external use)	<i>Euphorbia tirucalli</i> Linn.
11.	Kattu Thumatti	<i>Cucumis trigonus</i> Roxb.
12.	Cheramkottai	<i>Semecarpus anacardium</i> Linn f.
13.	Thillai	<i>Excoecoria agallocha</i> Linn.
14.	Nabi	<i>Aconitum ferox</i> Wall.
15.	Pugaielai	<i>Nicotiana tabacum</i> Linn.
16.	Mancevikkalli	<i>Euphorbia</i> species

**Table 3:** Unani System

S. No.	Visha Dravya	Botanical Name
1.	Afityun (except seed)	<i>Papaver somniferum</i> Linn.
2.	Bazrul-banj	<i>Hyoscyamus niger</i> Linn.
3.	Bish	<i>Aconitum chasmanthum</i> Strapfex Holmes.
4.	Bhang	<i>Cannabis sativa</i> Linn.
5.	Charas	<i>Canabis sativa</i> Linn.
6.	Dhatura seeds	<i>Datura metal</i> Linn (seeds).
7.	Kuchla	<i>Strychnos nuxvomica</i> Linn.
8.	Shokran	<i>Conium maculatum</i> Linn.

**Table 4:** List of Poisonous herbs as per Ayurveda with their indication and Formulation <sup>[17, 18, 19]</sup>

S. No.	Visha Dravya	Indication/Action	Yogas
1.	Ahipena (Except seeds)	Dhatu Shoshaka, Grahi, Kaphaghna, Vata- Pitta karaka	Ahipenasava, Nidrodaya Vati, Karpurarasa, Mahavataraj Rasa
2.	Arka (Rakta and Shukla)	Udararoga, Kustha, Kandu, Vrana, Pliharoga, Gulma, Arsa, Krimiroga.	Abhaya Lavana, Arka Lavana
3.	Bhallataka	Shukrala, Vata -Sleshmahara, Udara, Anaha, Kustha, Grahani, Gulma, Jwara, Switra, Agnimandya, Krimi, Vrana	Bhallataka Rasyan, Amrita Bhallataka, Bhallatak Taila, Tilarushkar Yoga
4.	Bhanga (Except seeds)	Grahi, Kaphaghna, Pachana, Moha, Mada, Vaakvardhak, Agnivardhana	Jatiphaladi Churna, Madananada Modak
5.	Danti	Deepana, Gudaankur, Ashmari, Shoola, Rakta Vikara, Kandu, Kustha, Vidaha, Sotha, Udar Roga, Kriminashaka	Dantyadyarishta, Punarnava Mandura, Abhayarishta, Kaakayana Gutika, Dantiharitaki
6.	Dhattura	Jwaraghna, Kusthaghna, Yuka Liksha Nashhaka, Krimi and Vishapaha	Kanakasava, Sutasekhara Rasa, Jvarankusha Rasa, LakshmiVilasa Rasa (Naradiya)
7.	Gunja (seed)	Keshya, Vata-Pitta-Jawara Nashhaka, Relives Mukhasosha, Bhrama, Shwas, Trishna and Mada, Netra Rogahara, Vrishya Balya, Kandughna	Gunjabhadra Rasa
8.	Jaipala (seed)	Krimihar, Virechak, Deepan, Kapha Vataghna, Jalodara Nashak	Icechabhedi Rasa, jalodaradi Rasa, Jwaamurari Rasa
9.	Karaveera	Vrana Laghavakar, Nterakopa, Kustha, Krimi, Vrana, Kandughna	Karveraadya Taila
10.	Langali	Kustha, Krimi, Arsha, Vrana, Shoola, Garbhapatana	Kasheesadi Taila, Langali Rasayana
11.	Parasika Yavani	Pachana, Ruchya, Grahi, Madakari	Parashiyadi Churna
12.	Vatsanabha	Vataroga, Sannipata, Vatakaphajvara, Jvartisara, Kanharoga	Tribhuvanakirti Rasa, Anandabhairava Rasa, Sutasekhara Rasa, Vatavidhwansana Rasa
13.	Vishamushti	Madakari, Vyathahar, Grahi, Rakta Vikara,	Agnitundi Vati, Vishamushti Vati, Krimimudgar Rasa, Laxmivilas Rasa
14.	Shringivisha	Rasayana, Yogvahi, Tridoshaghna, Veeryavardhana, Kustha Sotha Nashhaka, Madhumeha Hara	Anand Bhairav Rasa, Mritunjay Rasa, Jwaramurari Rasa, Rambana Rasa

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