

VARNYA MAHAKASHAYA IN AYURVEDA: A TRADITIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR ENHANCING SKIN COMPLEXION AND ITS CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE

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ABSTRACT

Ayurveda classifies medicinal plants into functional groups based on their predominant therapeutic actions. *Varnya Mahakashaya*, described in the *Charaka Samhita*, represents a group of drugs traditionally indicated for improving skin complexion, clarity, and radiance. The concept of *Varna* extends beyond cosmetic enhancement and reflects the Ayurvedic understanding of skin health as an outcome of balanced *Doshas*, particularly *Pitta*, and the purity of *Rakta Dhatu*. This article examines the classical concept of *Varnya Mahakashaya*, identifies its principal drugs, analyzes their mechanisms of action from Ayurvedic and contemporary scientific perspectives, and discusses their relevance in modern dermatology. Integrating traditional Ayurvedic principles with emerging pharmacological evidence may provide a rational basis for developing safe and effective herbal interventions for

skin health.

KEYWORDS: *Varnya Mahakashaya*, Ayurveda, skin complexion, *Charaka Samhita*, *Rakta Dhatu*, *Pitta Dosh*a, herbal dermatology.

1. INTRODUCTION

Skin complexion (*Varna*) and overall skin health are considered important indicators of internal physiological balance in Ayurveda. Classical texts emphasize that healthy skin

reflects proper functioning of *Agni*, balanced *Doshas*, and well-nourished *Dhatus*. Among these, derangement of *Pitta Dosha* and vitiation of *Rakta Dhatu* are regarded as key etiological factors in disorders such as hyperpigmentation, inflammatory dermatoses, and loss of skin radiance.

The *Acharya Charaka* introduces the concept of *Mahakashaya*,^[1] a systematic classification of medicinal plants based on their dominant therapeutic actions. *Varnya Mahakashaya* is one such group, specifically indicated for enhancing complexion and maintaining skin clarity. With increasing global interest in herbal and integrative dermatology, revisiting this classical concept has contemporary relevance. *Varna* (complexion) has several physiological and pathological significances.^[2] Therefore, any imbalance or disturbance in the skin's components is regarded as *Vaivarnya* (skin discoloration).^[3] *Varnya Mahakashaya* is the eighth among the 50 *Mahakashayas* described in the fourth chapter of *Sutra Sthana* in the *Charaka Samhita*. It comprises the following drugs: *Chandana* (*Santalum album*), *Tunga* (*Calophyllum inophyllum*), *Padmaka* (*Prunus cerasoides*), *Ushira* (*Vetiveria zizanioides*), *Madhuka* (*Glycyrrhiza glabra*), *Manjishtha* (*Rubia cordifolia*), *Sariva* (*Hemidesmus indicus*), *Payasya* (*Pueraria tuberosa*), *Sita* (*Cynodon dactylon*), and *Lata* (*Cynodon linearis*).^[4]

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS: This article is based on a conceptual and narrative review of classical Ayurvedic literature and contemporary scientific sources.

2.1 Classical Ayurvedic Sources

Primary references include

- *Charaka Samhita (Sutrasthana – Mahakashaya Adhyaya)*^[5]
- Commentaries and secondary Ayurvedic texts such as *Dravyaguna Vijnana*^[6]

2.2 Contemporary Sources

Modern scientific literature related to

- Phytochemistry and pharmacology of *Varnya* drugs^[7]
- Experimental and review studies on antioxidant, anti-inflammatory, and dermatological effects of selected herbs

Relevant published books and peer-reviewed articles were consulted to correlate traditional claims with modern scientific evidence.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Concept of Varnya Mahakashaya

The term *Varnya* refers to substances that promote healthy skin tone, brightness, and radiance. According to Ayurvedic principles, *Varna* is influenced by

- Balance of *Pitta Dosha*
- Purity and quality of *Rakta Dhatu*
- Proper tissue nourishment (*Dhatu Poshana*)
- Efficient metabolic processes governed by *Agni*





Varnya Mahakashaya drugs are described as those capable of






- *Rakta Prasadana* (purification and improvement of blood quality)
- *Pitta Shamana* (pacification of heat and inflammation)
- Supporting metabolic balance of skin tissues
- Enhancing clarity and radiance of the skin

3.2 Principal Drugs of Varnya Mahakashaya

Commonly accepted herbs included in *Varnya Mahakashaya* are

CHANDAN		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Botanical Name - <i>Santalum album</i> ➤ Family - <i>Santalaceae</i> ➤ English Name - Sandal wood ➤ Chemical constitutes- Volatile oil (alpha & beta santalol) 	<p><i>Rasa- Tikta, Madhura</i> <i>Guna - Laghu, ruksa</i> <i>Virya – Sheeta</i> <i>Vipaka – Katu</i> Main karma - <i>Hrdya, durgandhahara, krimighna, varnya, dahaprasa mana.</i></p>	
TUNG (Naagkeshar)		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Botanical Name - <i>Mesua ferrea</i> ➤ Family - <i>Guttiferae</i> ➤ English Name - <i>Cobras saffron</i> ➤ Chemical constitutes - Essential oil & oieo-resin 	<p><i>Rasa- Kasaya, tikta</i> <i>Guna - Ruksa, Laghu</i> <i>Virya – Usna</i> <i>Vipaka – Katu</i> Main karma - <i>Varnya, urdhajatrugatarog ahara, vastivatamayghna.</i></p>	

PADMAKA		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Botanical Name - <i>Prunus cerasoides</i> ➤ Family - <i>Rosaceae</i> ➤ English Name - Biyd cherry ➤ Chemical constitutes- Flavonoids 	<p><i>Rasa- Kasaya, tikta</i> <i>Guna - Laghu</i> <i>Virya – Sheeta</i> <i>Vipaka – Katu</i> Main karma - <i>Garbhasthapana, ruchya,</i></p>	
USHIR		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Botanical Name - <i>Vetiveria zizanoidis</i> ➤ Family - <i>Graminae</i> ➤ English Name - Cuscus grass ➤ Chemical constitutes- Essential oil 	<p><i>Rasa- Madhura, tikta</i> <i>Guna - Laghu, snigdha</i> <i>Virya – Sheeta</i> <i>Vipaka – Madhura</i> Main karma - <i>Pachna, stambhna, dabaklantihara</i></p>	
MADHUKA		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Botanical Name - <i>Glycyrrhiza glabra</i> ➤ Family - <i>Papilionateae</i> ➤ English Name - Liquorice root ➤ Chemical constitutes- Glycyrrhizin, glycyrrhizic acid, glycyrrhetic acid, asparagine, sugars, resin & starch. 	<p><i>Rasa- Madhura</i> <i>Guna - Guru, snigdha</i> <i>Virya – Sheeta</i> <i>Vipaka – Madhura</i> Main karma - <i>Varnya, vrsya, caksusya, balya, raktaprasadana</i></p>	 <p style="text-align: center;">(Roots)</p>
MANJISTHA		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Botanical Name - <i>Rubia cordifolia</i> ➤ Family - <i>Rubiaceae</i> ➤ English Name - Indian maddar ➤ Chemical constitutes- Glycosides 	<p><i>Rasa- Madhura, tikta</i> <i>Guna - Guru</i> <i>Virya – Usna</i> <i>Vipaka – Katu</i> Main karma - <i>Varnya, vrsya, krimighna, sothaghna, kusthaghna, rasayana, shonitsathapana, artvajanana, stambhna</i></p>	

SARIVA		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Botanical Name - <i>Hemidesmus indicus</i> ➤ Family - Asclepidaceae ➤ English Name - Indian sarasa parilla ➤ Chemical constitutes- Essential oil, saponin, resin, tannins 	<p><i>Rasa- Madhura</i> <i>Guna - Guru, snigdha</i> <i>Virya – Sheeta</i> <i>Vipaka – Madhura</i> Main karma - <i>Raktasodhaka, visaghna, deepana, amanasana, jwarahara</i></p>	
PAYASYA		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Botanical Name - <i>Ipomoea digitata</i> ➤ Family - Convolvulaceae ➤ English Name - Giant potato ➤ Chemical constitutes- Glycosides, sterols, tannins & fixed oil 	<p><i>Rasa- Madhura</i> <i>Guna - Guru, snigdha</i> <i>Virya – Sheeta</i> <i>Vipaka – Madhura</i> Main karma - <i>Varnya, Vrana, balya, stanyavikara, svarya, vrsya, jivaniya</i></p>	 
SWETA DURVA, SHAYAMA DURVA		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Botanical Name - <i>Cynodon dactylon</i> ➤ Family - Poaceae ➤ English Name - Creeping Dhub grass ➤ Chemical constitutes- Phenolic phytotoxin (ferulic, syringic, vanillic, p-coumaric, phydroxybenzoic & o-hydroxyphenil acetic acid), flavonoids. 	<p><i>Rasa- Madhura, Kasaya, tikta</i> <i>Guna - Laghu</i> <i>Virya – Sheeta</i> <i>Vipaka – Madhura</i> Main karma - <i>Rucya, sramsana</i></p>	 

- **Chandana (Santalum album):** Cooling, anti-inflammatory, and soothing; beneficial in Pitta-dominant skin disorders.^[8,9]

- **Nagkeshar (Mesua ferrea):** Astringent, anti-inflammatory, and antioxidant; helps in improving skin tone, reducing blemishes, and promoting a clear and radiant complexion.^[10]
- **Padmaka (Prunus cerasoides):** Traditionally associated with brightness and clarity of skin.
- **Ushir (Vetiveria zizanioides):** Cooling, soothing, and rejuvenating; helps in improving complexion, reducing inflammation, and promoting skin hydration.^[11]
- **Yashtimadhu (Glycyrrhiza glabra):** Nourishing, anti-inflammatory, and soothing to skin tissues.^[12]
- **Manjishtha (Rubia cordifolia):** Potent *Rakta Shodhaka*; useful in pigmentation and inflammatory conditions.^[13,14]
- **Sariva (Hemidesmus indicus):** Detoxifying and complexion-enhancing.^[15]
- **Vidari Kand (Ipomoea digitata) :** Nourishing, rejuvenating, and hydrating; helps in improving skin texture, enhancing complexion, and supporting overall tissue strength.^[16]
- **Durva (Cynodon dactylon):** Cooling, hemostatic, and anti-inflammatory; helps in soothing irritated skin, promoting wound healing, and enhancing overall skin health.^[17]
- These drugs are administered internally and externally, either singly or in compound formulations.

3.3 Mechanisms of action

Ayurvedic Perspective

The action of *Varnya* drugs is attributed to

- Pacification of aggravated *Pitta*.
- Improvement in *Rakta Dhatu* quality.
- Support of tissue metabolism and nourishment.
- Restoration of systemic balance leading to healthy complexion.

Contemporary Scientific Perspective

Modern studies on individual *Varnya* herbs demonstrate

- Antioxidant activity
- Anti-inflammatory effects
- Antimicrobial properties
- Modulation of melanogenesis and inflammatory mediators

These pharmacological actions provide a scientific rationale for their traditional use in pigmentation disorders, acne, and inflammatory dermatoses.

4. DISCUSSION

The concept of *Varnya Mahakashaya* presents a holistic framework for skin health that differs fundamentally from conventional cosmetic approaches. Ayurveda emphasizes internal purification, metabolic balance, and tissue nourishment alongside topical applications. The pharmacological activities identified in modern research—such as antioxidant and anti-inflammatory effects—closely align with the Ayurvedic principles of *Pitta Shamana* and *Rakta Prasadana*.

The convergence of classical wisdom and scientific evidence highlights the potential of *Varnya Mahakashaya* as a foundation for developing evidence-based herbal dermatological formulations. However, further experimental studies, formulation standardization, and controlled clinical trials are essential to validate efficacy and safety.

5. CONCLUSION

Varnya Mahakashaya represents a systematic Ayurvedic approach to enhancing complexion and maintaining skin health through internal physiological balance and tissue nourishment. Integrating classical Ayurvedic concepts with contemporary scientific validation offers promising avenues for the rational development of safe, effective, and holistic herbal interventions in dermatology.

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