A LITERARY REVIEW ON ASHWAGANDHA (Withania somnifera (Linn) Dunal): AN AYURVEDIC APHRODISIAC DRUG

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ABSTRACT

Ashwagandha (Withania somnifera (Linn) Dunal), is one of the essential medicinal herbs in Ayurveda used from time immemorial. It is believed that the herb imparts the vigour and strength of a stallion when taken which is known by its name ‘hayahwaya’ (because of providing horse potency, it is known by title of horse). There is no reference about it in Vedas. But all Ayurvedic classic literature like Charaka, Susrutha and Vagbhatta and all the nighantus has elaborately mentioned about the properties, action and therapeutic uses of ashwagandha in their works. Charaka, Susrutha and Vagbhatta does not mention about the shukrala properties or vajeekarana actions of Ashwagandha. It is later authors like Sharangadhara, Chakradutta, Vrnda Madhava and all nighantu’s which mentioned about the above said actions of Ashwagandha. This article is a review on Ashwagandha from all the available classical literature and it also throws light on how Ashwagandha acts as an aphrodisiac drug.

Keywords: Withania somnifera, Ashwagandha, Ayurvedic aphrodisiac

INTRODUCTION

Ashwagandha (Withania somnifera (Linn) Dunal) (Solanaceae) is an ayurvedic herb widely distributed throughout India. Ashwagandha (Withania somnifera (Linn) Dunal), is a very important medicinal herbs in Ayurveda used from ancient times. From medieval period onwards, Ashwagandha emerged as an aphrodisiac agent and immunomodulator. The recent development in research reveals that US patent office has granted a patent to a new vaccine adjuvant extracted from Ashwagandha which is used as immunity enhancer. The grant of patent has opened up further prospects of far more effective vaccines for the im-
provement of human immune system to counter many incurable ailments. The plant, also called ‘Winter Cherry’ in English belongs to the family Solanaceae. The Ashwagandha root is compared with the Ginseng root for their anti stress activity and weight gain properties. The total alkaloids present in roots have variety of pharmacological actions. More recently an alkaloid Visamine USSR had marked sedative, hypnotic and nicotinolytic effects.

Ashwagandha plant also called “Indian Ginseng” has been used as a panacea (single medicine therapy) traditionally. The root of the plant is commonly used in a variety of Ayurvedic Pharmaceutical formulation. Ashwagandha is highly esteemed as a rasayana drug by Ayurvedists which is capable of imparting long life, youthful vigour and good intellectual powers. It cures ulcer, fever, cough, dyspnoea, consumption, dropsy, impotence, rheumatism, toxicosis and leucoderma. It improves physical strength and is prescribed in all cases of general debility. It is used as single drug or in combination with other drugs. Ashwagandharistam, Ashwagandhavalehyam, ashwagandhathi taila, Valfiya Narayana tailam etc. are some of the important preparations using the drug.

1.1 Etymology of herb Ashwagandha

“Ashwasyeva gandho asyah
It has smell like those of horse
“Ashwasyeva gandha utsaaha yasyaah sevanena saa!
It provides horse’s potency.

1.2 History

a. Vedas:
There is no direct reference about Ashwagandha in Vedas. But numerous claims about Withania somnifera as a twin to the wondrous root jangida, whose praise were sung in the Vedas. The root jangida is frequently mentioned in Atharva Veda, and is considered second in importance to soma.

b. Samhitas:
Ashwagandha is one of the main drugs of Ayurveda classics.

(i). Paippalada Samhita:
Ashwagandha root juice is given as nasya to achieve conception.(P.S.1/89/3)

(ii) Charaka Samhita:
Acharya Charaka included Ashwagandha under Balyadasaimani group and Brimhaneeya group (suthra sthana 3rd chapter Shadvirechanashatashritheeyam). It is included in Moolasava yoni (suthra sthana 25th chapter yajjapurusheeyam). Acharya considered decoction of Ashwagandha along with other drugs in virechana group (vimana sthana 8th chapter Rogabishakjiteeyam). Ashwagandha can be used for uddwardhana in case of kandu, pidaka and koda (suthra sthana 3rd chapter Aragwadheeyam). Acharya also considered it as an ingredient of Vajeekarana ghrtam (vajeekarana pada 1st chapter Samyogashramooleeyam). The Siddhi sthana 9th chapter Trimarmeyasiddhi stated the use of Ashwagandha in the treatment of Sirakampa.

(iii) Susrutha Samhitha:
Mentioned it in the treatment of karshya in the 25th chapter of suthra sthana (Doshadhatumala Kshayavrddhi Vijananiya). Oil cooked with Ashwagandha, drugs of jeevaneeya gana etc is used for anointing that helps growth of the earlobe (Suthra sthana 16th chapter Karna vyadhavandha bandha vidhi). It is also used for Utsaadana in vrana (suthra sthana 37th chapter Mishrakadhyayam). In the 39th chapter of suthra sthana Samsodhana samsamaniya it is mentioned as urdhwabaghahara dravya. Susrutha also men-
tioned Ashwagandha in the context of treatment of Kaphaja visarpa (chikitsa sthana 17th chapter).

(iv). Ashttangasangraha⁹,¹⁰: Ashwagandha churna was suggested for abhyanga in pediatric cases. Acharya mentioned it as an ingredient of Bala taila in 4th chapter of sareera sthana, Garbha Vyapath Adhyaya, which is highly beneficial for diseases of women in perurperum. It is an ingredient of sukumara ghṛta (Chikitsa sthana 15th chapter Vidradhi vrddhi chikitsa). Ashwagandha is mentioned in Kalpa sthana as an ingredient of Eranda-moolakadi basthi which is lekhana and deepana (Kalpa sthana 4th chapter, Basthi Kalpa). Acharya mentioned it as an ingredient of anuvaaasana basthi kalpa which is used in the cure of all vaata diseases (4th chapter Kalpa sthana).

(v) Ashtanga Hṛdaya¹¹,¹²: contained similar explanations like Ashtanga sangraha. Acharya mentioned it as an ingredient of Bala taila in 2nd chapter of sareera sthana, It is an ingredient of sukumaara ghṛta in the treatment of Vidradhi and Vṛddhi (Chikitsa sthana 13th chapter Vidradhi-Vṛddhi Chikitsa). Ashwagandha is also mentioned in Kalpa sthana in Ashtanga Hṛdaya like Ashtanga Sangraha. Like Ashttangasangraha Ashwagandha is mentioned in 2nd chapter of uttara sthana Balamaya Pratisheda as having srothoshodhana properties.

(vi) Vṛṇḍa Madhava¹³: Milk processed with ashwagandha and added with milk should be taken by women in proper time. It helps conception. (VM.14.10). In Balashosa ghee is cooked with one- fourth paste of Ashwagandha and ten times milk. It promotes development of body (VM.67.9)

(vii). Chakradutta¹⁴: He mentioned Ashwagandha in udararoga chikitsa. Devadaru, sobhanjana and apamarga poured with cow’s urine, if taken alleviates severe udara roga, krimi and shopha (37th chapter udara chikitsa). He has mentioned ghṛtam with Ashwagandha in Vatavyadhi chikitsa (22nd chapter Vatavyadhi chikitsa). In 62nd chapter yoni Vyapath chikitsa he has mentioned Ashwagandha in the treatment of Vandhyatwa. Also in 66th chapter rasayanadhikara he has stated the use of Ashwagandhha for half a month with ghṛta, taila, hot water etc for dehapushhti.

(viii). Vangasena Samhitha¹⁵: Stated it as a substitute of Jeevaneeya gana drugs Kākoli and Ksheera Kakoli in Maha Kalyana ghṛtam. Vangasena in 28th chapter Vatavyadhi mentioned to take Ashwagandha along with guduchi and maricha pounded with warm water.

(ix). Sharangdhara¹⁶: Brihat Trayi did not emphasize Ashwagandha as vrisya in their works. It is Sarngdhara who highlighted the sukrala property of Ashwagandha along with musali and shatavari (Pradhama Khanda 4th chapter Dipanapachana Adhyaya). He mentioned it as ingredient of much yoga like Maharasnaadi, Ashwagandhadi choornam, Kamadeva ghṛtam, Maha narayana taila, Shatavari taila, Dhatura taila, Madana Kamadeva etc.

Nighantu¹⁷,¹⁸,¹⁹,²⁰,²¹
Ashwagandha is also mentioned in other books like Siddha Bheshaja Manimaala Vaidya Manorama, Bhaishajya ratnavali and yogaratnakara. Ashwagandha is mentioned in all Nighantu. Kāiyadeva Nighantu mentioned it under Oushadi Varga. Madanapala Nighantu¹⁷ mentioned it under Abhyaadi varga. According to Raja Nighantu it is in Shatḥvadi.
varga. According to Dhanwanthari Nighantu it is mentioned in guduchyadi varga. Bhavaprakasha also mentioned it in Guduchyadi varga. As per Nighantu Adarsha it comes in Kandakaryadi varga and Shodhala Nighantu, like Dhanwanthari Nighantu mentioned it in Guduchyadi varga.

In literature we do not come across the description regarding two kinds of Ashwagandha. But in Nighantu commentaries two types of Ashwagandha are mentioned: Withania somnifera and Withania ashwagandha. The cultivated variety which is thin lean is mainly brought from Nagori district of Madhya Pradesh which is called Nagouri Ashwagandha; Withania ashwagandha.

### Table 1: Synonyms according to different Nighantus\(^{17,18,19,20,21}\)

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### Interpretation of the synonyms\(^4\)

- **Ashwagandha**: root, part used, also emits horse’s smell
- **Hayagandha**: favourite of horses
- **Ashwavaroahaka**: Vrisha, it is vrishya in nature
- **Balada, Balya**: promote strength
- **Elaparni**: leaves having shape of ela
- **Gandhapatri**: having smell like that of horse
- **Gokarna**: Herb with leaves resembling shape of cow’s ear
- **Hayapriya**: favourite of horses
- **Hayahvaya**: provides horse potency
- **Kaamaroopini**: it increases libido
- **Kancuka**: retains semen
- **Kushtagandhini**: has smell of plant Kushta
- **Marutaghni**: useful in vatika disorders
- **Pita**: having yellow colour
- **Pushtida**: it is nourishing
- **Thuragi**: it has smell of hoarse

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Vajigandha- has smell of hoarse  
Varahakarni – herb with leaves resembling pig’s ear

**Categorization of Ashwagandha as per classical text**

<table>
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<td>Bhavaprakasha Nighantu</td>
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<td>Guduchyadi varga</td>
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<td>Oushadi varga</td>
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<td>Shatahwadi varga</td>
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<td>Susrutha</td>
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**Useful Part**

Root, leaves

**Dose**

Root powder= 3to 6 gms  
Kshara=1 to 3 gms

**Pharmacological Properties**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nighantus</th>
<th>Rasa</th>
<th>Veerya</th>
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**Karmam**

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<td>Virechana Upaga</td>
<td>Urdhwabag-hahara</td>
<td>Balya, Vajeekara</td>
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Indications

Shopha, shvitra, Kshaya, Nidranasha, Grandhi, Gandaroga, Apaci, Klaibya, Vandhyatwa

Therapeutic uses

For the Development of the body
1. Aswagandha taken with milk, ghee, oil, or warm water for a fortnight promotes development of body. (AH.U.39.158)
2. Mandukaparni, sankhapuspi, aswagandha and satavari should be used in order to promote intellect, lifespan, stability, and strength. (AH.U.39.61)
3. One who takes powder of Aswagandha root in late winter mixed with honey and ghee along with milk regains youthfulness even if old. (RM.33.11)

For Diseases
a) Sosha
1. Powder of aswagandha, tila and masa taken with goat’s ghee and honey. (SS.U.41.40)
2. Sarkara, ashwagandha and pippali mixed with ghee and honey. (SS.U.41.41)
3. Milk cooked with ashwagandha which provides nourishment to body. Or ghee obtained from that milk should be taken after adding with sugar and followed by intake of milk. (SS.U.41.42)
4. Ashwagandha, yava, and punarnava should be used for rubbing externally. (SS.U.41.43)
5. Ghee extracted of milk boiled with ashwagandha is cooked with sarkara, milk, meat along with the paste of jivaniya drugs used in consumption. (AH.Ci.5.25)
6. The paste of pippali, draksha ashwagandha and sarkara mixed with oil and honey. (V.M.10.9)
b) Excessive emaciation
Ashwagandha with milk should be used. (SS.SU.15.33)
c) Bronchial Asthma (Tamaka Shwasa)

The Kshara of ashwagandha should be taken with honey and ghee. (SS.Ci.17.117; AH.Ci.4.38)
d) Granthivisarpa
The part should be sprinkled with hot decoction of leaves and cow’s urine or warm paste of ashwagandha should be applied externally on the affected part. (CS.Ci.21.123)
e) Vatavyadhi
Ghee is cooked with decoction and paste of aswagandha along with four times milk. The ashwagandha ghṛta pacifies vata and promotes semen and muscles. (VM.22.73)
f) Uruṣṭamba
The root of ashwagandha or arka or nimba are mixed with honey, mustard, and ant-hill earth should be anointed thickly and applied as paste in urustambha. (CS.Ci.27.50-51)
g) Insomnia
The powder of aswagandha mixed with sugar and taken with ghee alleviates insomnia and brings sleep quickly. (BS.Jaladosha.13)
h) Cardiac disorder
The paste of ashwagandha and bibhitaka mixed with jaggery and taken with tepid water alleviates vata located in heart. (BS.Vatavyadhi.60)
i) Accidental wound
One affected with accidental wound should lick the powder of ashwagandha with jaggery or ghee or should take with milk. (VD.4.2)
j) Suppression of urine
Decoction of ashwagandha removes suppression of urine and promotes urination. (SB.4.54)
k) Conception in sterility
Milk processed with Ashwagandha and added with milk should be taken by women in proper time. It helps conception. (VM.14.10 also BP.Ci.70.26)
l) **Balasosa**
Ghee is cooked with one-fourth paste of ashwagandha and ten times milk. It promotes development of body. (VM.67.9)

m) **Udararoga**
Devadaru, sobhanjana, and apamarga or ashwagandha pounded with cow’s urine alleviates udara roga. (CD.37.48)

n) **Twak roga**
It is used in vitiligo and other skin diseases, blisters heal when black ash of root is applied on them.

o) **Digestive system**
The bark powder is appetizer, carminative and anthelminthic and hence is used in abdominal pain, constipation and worms.

**Substitutes and adulterants**

According to Bhaishajya ratnawali, Ashwagandha is used as substitute of Meda (24). Yogaratnakara opines it as substitute of Kakoli and Ksheera Kakoli (25). Vangasena has same opinion like yogaratnakara. Bhavaprakasha also opines Ashwagandha as substitute of Kakoli and Ksheera Kakoli. But in Quality standards of Indian medicinal plants, it is mentioned that Withania coagulans (Stocks) Dunal and wildly growing Withania somnifera (Linn) Dunal are known to be the common substitutes or adulterants.

**DISCUSSION**

Relevant background information about the drug Ashwagandha was collected from the classical textbooks, where it is considered as an aphrodisiac drug. There is no reference about this drug in Vedas. But a wide range of application of Ashwagandha is mentioned during samhitha and nighantu period. The classical texts and nighantu’s don’t mention about the vipaka of drug. But we can consider it as madhura vipaka from its balya, brhmana and vrshya actions. Among the classical literature works, only charaka mentioned Ashwagandha in vargas like balya and brimhaneeya, Susruta and Ashtanga hrdaya did not mention it under any group. Authors like Bhaishajya ratnawali, Yogaratnakara and Vangasena have mentioned substitutes for Ashwagandha; Medha as mentioned by Bhaishajya ratnawali and Kakoli, Ksheera Kakoli as by Yogaratnakara and Vangasena.

Even though Charaka has mentioned Ashwagandha as an ingredient of vajeekarana ghrta, Brihat Traya’i’s did not emphasize Ashwagandha as vrisya in their works. It is Sarngdhara who highlighted the sukrala property of Ashwagandha along with musali and shatavari in Pradhama Khanda 4th chapter Dipanapachana Adhyaya. Also authors like Vrnda Madhava, Chakradutta and all the later nighantu authors (which is evident from the synonyms itself told in Nighantu’s) mentioned about the sukrala and vajeekarana actions of Ashwagandha. Vrnda Madhava has mentioned about a special yoga with Ashwagandha that helps in child conception. Milk processed with ashwagandha and added with milk should be taken by women in proper time helps in conception (VM.14.10). In 62nd chapter yoni Vyapath chiktisakha chakradutta has mentioned Ashwagandha in the treatment of Vandhyatwa.

The drug which increases libido and improves one’s sexual vigour is known as vajeekarana according to Adhamalla. In Yoni vyapath chiktis chapter, Charaka mentioned Rasayana and Vajeekarana dravyas for the treatment of ashta rajo doshas. Ashwagandha being a rasayana and vajeekarana drug is very useful in shukra dosha. Charaka in fourth paada of
vajikarana adhyaya, Pumanjathabalaadhidikam has mentioned about the qualities of vrshya drug as those having madhura rasa, snigdha guna, that which is rejuvenating, nourishing, guru, and that which is pleasing to mind. Ashwagandha being madhura vipaka and snigdha guna meets the requirement of a vrshya dravya. It belongs to the shukrala group (that which increases shukra) of vajeekarana drugs as per sharangadhara, other categories being shukrajanana pravarthaka, shukra pravarthaka and shukra rechaka.

There are many modern studies that prove the shukrala property i.e. effect on reproductive system27 of Ashwagandha. Withania somnifera root water extract studied on follicular development and serum level of FSH and LH showed significant changes in gonadotropine level with a significant increase in ovarian weight and folliculogenisis. It also showed a significant increase in body weight in animal study. Ashwagandha is also known to increase libido in males and in females.

CONCLUSION

In this article all the information regarding Ashwagandha is being meticulously collected from our ancient text books all of which reveals the importance of Ashwagandha in our ancient science, Ayurveda. Ashwagandha belonging to shukrala group of Vajeekarana dravyas, rightly meets all the requirement of a vrshya dravya. Modern research works has also proved the vrshya action of Ashwagandha. Such kind of research studies can also extended to the known substitutes of Ashwagandha like Kakoli, Ksheerakakoli and Medha to know its efficacy as vajeekarana oushadha in the place of Ashwagandha.

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