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A Critical Study of Unidentified and Controversial Drugs Mentioned in Charaka Samhita

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Abstract:

This study critically investigates the *unidentified* and *controversial* plant-based drugs (*Oudbhida Dravya*) described within the *Charaka Samhita*. The research aims to identify and list the drugs categorized as unidentified or controversial in classical and contemporary literature, particularly within the *Sutrasthana* and other relevant sections; analyze the reasons for their ambiguous status, such as regional variations in nomenclature, synonymous usage, and incomplete descriptions; explore attempts made in subsequent Ayurvedic texts and modern research to establish their botanical identities; and discuss the implications of these ambiguities for the accurate application of Ayurvedic principles and the standardization of traditional formulations. By examining these problematic *Dravya*, this study seeks to highlight the challenges in interpreting ancient Ayurvedic texts and the ongoing need for interdisciplinary approaches to clarify the identity and potential therapeutic value of these historically significant drugs.

Keywords: Charaka Samhita, Unidentified Drugs, Controversial Drugs, Ayurveda, Materia Medica, Botanical Identification

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INTRODUCTION:

The *Charaka Samhita*, revered as one of the foundational pillars of Ayurveda, meticulously details a vast array of medicinal substances, predominantly of plant origin (*Oudbhida Dravya*). This extensive materia medica forms the bedrock of Ayurvedic therapeutics. However, over the centuries, the precise botanical identity of certain drugs mentioned in the *Charaka Samhita* has become obscure or subject to debate. These "unidentified" and "controversial" drugs pose a significant challenge to the accurate interpretation and application of the classical Ayurvedic knowledge in contemporary practice and research.

The ambiguity surrounding these *Dravya* can stem from various factors, including regional variations in plant names, the use of common names that refer to multiple species, incomplete or generalized descriptions in the original texts, and the natural evolution of botanical taxonomy. Understanding and, where possible, resolving these ambiguities is crucial for the standardization of Ayurvedic formulations, the validation of traditional uses through modern scientific methods, and the preservation of the integrity of Ayurvedic knowledge.

This study aims to critically examine the unidentified and controversial drugs mentioned within the *Charaka Samhita*, with a particular focus on those appearing in the *Sutrasthana*, which lays down the fundamental principles of Ayurveda, including the basic understanding of *Dravya*. By analyzing the textual descriptions, reviewing classical and contemporary commentaries, and considering relevant ethnobotanical and modern scientific literature, this research seeks to shed light on the nature of these ambiguities and their implications.

Literature Review

The *Charaka Samhita* itself provides detailed descriptions of numerous medicinal plants, often including their morphological characteristics, *Rasa* (taste), *Guna* (qualities), *Virya* (potency), *Vipaka* (post-digestive effect), and *Karma* (actions). However, despite this detail, certain *Dravya* remain enigmatic. Classical commentaries on the *Charaka Samhita*, such as those by Chakrapani Datta (*Ayurveda Dipika*) and others, often attempt to clarify the identities of these plants based on their understanding and the prevailing knowledge of their time. These commentaries serve as invaluable resources in the quest for identification.[1]

Modern Ayurvedic scholars and ethnobotanists have also contributed significantly to this endeavor, employing comparative textual analysis, field surveys, and pharmacological investigations to correlate the ancient descriptions with known plant species. Despite these efforts, some drugs continue to be debated or remain unidentified.

The challenges in identification are multifaceted:

- **Synonymy**: Multiple plants might have been known by the same name in different regions or at different times.
- **Polysemy**: A single name might have been used to refer to different plants with similar properties or appearances.
- **Incomplete Descriptions**: The descriptions in the ancient texts might lack sufficient detail for precise botanical identification based on modern taxonomic standards.
- **Loss of Traditional Knowledge**: Over time, the traditional knowledge associated with certain local plant names might have been lost or altered.[2]

This review of existing literature highlights the ongoing need for a systematic and critical examination of the unidentified and

controversial drugs mentioned in the *Charaka Samhita*.

Methodology

This study employed a multi-pronged approach to identify and analyze the unidentified and controversial drugs mentioned in the *Charaka Samhita*.[3]

1. **Textual Analysis**: A thorough review of the *Charaka Samhita*, primarily focusing on the *Sutrasthana* and cross-referencing with other relevant sections like the *Kalpasthana* and *Siddhisthana*, was conducted to identify *Dravya* whose botanical identity is either explicitly questioned in commentaries or appears inconsistently across different interpretations.
2. **Review of Classical Commentaries**: Key classical commentaries, including *Ayurveda Dipika* of Chakrapani, were examined to understand the traditional interpretations and any noted ambiguities regarding specific plant names.
3. **Analysis of Modern Literature**: Contemporary books, research papers, and databases focusing on Ayurvedic pharmacognosy, ethnobotany, and the history of Indian medicine were consulted to identify drugs that are consistently listed as unidentified or controversial. This included works discussing the botanical equivalents proposed by various scholars.
4. **Categorization**: The identified drugs were categorized based on the nature of the ambiguity (e.g., completely unidentified, multiple potential identities, regional variations).

The primary outcome of this methodology was the compilation of a list of *Oudbhida Dravya* from the *Charaka Samhita* that are considered unidentified or controversial, along with the reasons for their ambiguous status and any proposed botanical equivalents.

Table 1: Unidentified Drugs of Charak Samhita[4,5]

No.	Drug Name	Chakrapani Commentary (Ck)	Yogindranath Sen (Ys)	Gangadhar Roy (Gr)	Probable Botanical Source(s)
1	Bharadwaji	Vanakarpasi	Vanakarpasi	Vanakarpasi	*Thespesia lampas* Dalz & Gibs, *Hibiscus cancellatus* Roxb
2	Jivaka	-	-	-	*Microstylis musifera* Ridley
3	Kakoli	-	-	-	*Roscoea procera* Wall.
4	Kleetaka (Anupa)	-	-	-	*Glycyrrhiza glabra* Linn (Aquatic variety?)
5	Kleetaka (Sthalaja)	Yashtimadhu	-	-	*Glycyrrhiza glabra* Linn (Terrestrial variety)

6	Kshirakakoli	-	Payasvini	-	*Roscoea procera* Wall.
7	Ksheerini	Dugdhika, Ksheeralata	Dugdhika, Ksheeralata	Swarnakshiri	*Polygonatum cirrhifolium* (Wall.) Royle (Lactiferous)
8	Mahameda	-	-	-	*Polygonatum multiflorum*
9	Meda	-	-	-	*Microstylis wallichii*
10	Rishabhaka	-	-	-	*Argyreia speciosa*
11	Rishyagandha	Rishyajangalaka	Rishyajangalaka	Vridhhadaraka	*Argyreia speciosa* (syn. *Vidhara*) or *Sida cordifolia* (Bala)
12	Jatila	Uchhata	Uchhata/Jatamansi	Jatamansi	*Nardostachys jatamansi*
13	Kulinga	Uchhatabheda	Uchhatabheda/ Kultrashringi	Suryavarta	*Eleusine aegyptiaca*
14	Vashira	Suryavarta	Suryavarta	-	*Eleusine aegyptiaca*
15	Vasuka	Vasukahatta	Vasukahatta	-	*Premna barbata* Wall. (Basota), *Trianthema* spp., or *Calotropis* spp.
16	Vrishaparni	Phanjipattrika	Mushikaparni bheda	Phanjipattrika	Variant of *Mushikaparni* (e.g., *Ipomoea reniformis*)

Table 2: Controversial Drugs of Aushadhachatushka

No.	Drug Name	Chakrapani Commentary (Ck)	Yogindranath Sen (Ys)	Gangadhar Roy (Gr)	Proposed Botanical Source(s)
1	Amiavetasa	-	-	Thaikala	*Garcinia pedunculata* Roxb., *Rheum emodi*
2	Eilavaluka	-	-	-	*Prunus cerasus* Linn

3	Gandira	Shamathashaka	Samashthila	Shamathashaka	*Albizia julibrissin* Durazz, *Dalbergia sericea*
4	Hastidanti	Brihatphala	Brihatphala	Hastidanti/ Nagadanti	*Trichosanthes bracteata* (Lam.)
5	Hastiparnini	Morata (fruiting)	Sharat kalabhava	Morata	*Cucumis sativus* Linn. (bitter variety) or *Trapusha* (wild cucumber)
6	Jivanti	Suvarna varnabha	Jivavardhana	Swarnabala	*Leptadenia reticulata*, *Dendrobium ovatum*, *Dregea volubilis*
7	Kandekshu	-	-	Lataa	*Saccharum spontaneum*
8	Kapitänna	-	-	Gandhabhanda	*Albizia procera*, *Menkeleria tenacissima*
9	Moorva	-	-	-	*Sansevieria roxburghiana*, *Clematis triloba*
10	Parpata	-	-	-	*Polycarpaea corymbosa*, *Rungia parviflora*
11	Pashanabheda	-	-	-	*Kalanchoe pinnata*, *Bergenia ligulata*, *Coleus forskohlii*
12	Vishvaksenakanta	Priyangu	Priyangu	Priyangu	*Callicarpa macrophylla*, *Aglaia roxburghiana*
13	Mukta/Suvaha	Rasna	Rasna	Rasna	*Pluchea lanceolata*, *Alpinia*

					galangal, *Vanda roxburghii*

DISCUSSION:

The study of unidentified and controversial drugs in *Charak Samhita* highlights significant challenges in the botanical identification of certain medicinal plants referenced in classical Ayurvedic texts. While many herbs have well-established identities, others remain ambiguous due to linguistic variations, regional synonyms, and evolving taxonomic classifications. This research systematically analyzes these discrepancies, focusing on two key categories:

1. **Unidentified Drugs**

Ambiguity in the Ashtavarga Group[5]

The **Ashtavarga** drugs (*Jivaka, Rishabhaka, Kakoli, Kshirakakoli, Meda, Mahameda, Riddhi, Vriddhi*) are particularly problematic because:

- **Substitutes are widely used**: Classical texts like *Bhaishajya Ratnavali* suggest replacements (e.g., *Shatavari* for *Kakoli*, *Ashwagandha* for *Jivaka*), indicating these plants were rare even in ancient times.
- **Taxonomic confusion**:

a) *Jivaka* is tentatively linked to *Microstylis musifera* (an orchid), but no conclusive evidence exists.

b) *Kakoli* and *Kshirakakoli* are both attributed to *Roscoea procera*, yet some scholars argue for *Lilium polyphyllum* or *Fritillaria roylei*.

c) *Meda* and *Mahameda* are often conflated with *Polygonatum* species, but their descriptions in *Nighantus* do not match modern classifications.

Implication: The therapeutic equivalence of substitutes (e.g., *Shatavari* for *Kakoli*) must be pharmacologically validated to ensure clinical efficacy.

2. **Kleetaka: A Drug of Dual Identity**

Kleetaka is described in two forms:

- **Anupa (Aquatic)**: Possibly *Glycyrrhiza glabra* (Yashtimadhu), but its fruits/seeds lack purgative properties mentioned in texts.
- **Sthalaja (Terrestrial)**: Likely an imported material (e.g., from the Nile Valley), as no native Indian plant fits the description.

Challenge: The name *Kleetaka* may refer to a **lost trade commodity** rather than a specific plant, highlighting the need for historical trade route studies.

3. Ksheerini: Lactiferous or Not?

- **Chakrapani's dual interpretation**:
  - As *Dugdhika* (non-lactiferous, e.g., *Euphorbia hirta*).
  - As *Kshirakakoli* (lactiferous, e.g., *Roscoea procera*).
- **Pharmacological conflict**: *Dugdhika* is bitter and used for bleeding disorders, while *Ksheerini* in *Brihmaniya Mahakashaya* implies sweet, nourishing properties.
- **Resolution**: *Kshiravidari* (*Ipomoea digitata*) is a stronger candidate due to its sweet, lactiferous nature.

4. Controversial Identifications

- **Rishyagandha**: Equated with *Argyreia speciosa* (Vidhara) or *Sida cordifolia* (Bala), but neither fully matches the textual descriptions of aphrodisiac properties.
- **Vasuka**: Tentatively identified as *Premna barbata* (Basota), but *Trianthema* spp. (Visakhapara) also fit the *Vasuvanshamana* (alleviating Vata) criteria.
- **Vrishaparni**: Likely a variant of *Mushikaparni* (*Ipomoea reniformis*), but no consensus exists

3. **Controversial Drugs**

- **Amiavetasa**: Proposed as *Garcinia pedunculata* or *Rheum emodi*, reflecting regional usage differences.

- **Jivanti**: Multiple candidates (*Leptadenia reticulata*, *Dendrobium ovatum*) complicate its identification, underscoring the need for phytochemical validation.
- **Pashanabheda**: Attributed to *Bergenia ligulata* or *Coleus forskohlii*, highlighting the impact of regional traditions on nomenclature.

4. **Controversial Drugs of charaka and Proposed Resolutions**[7]

Drug Name	Major Controversy	Proposed Resolutions
Amiavetasa	Disputed between *Garcinia pedunculata* (fruit) and *Rheum emodi* (rhubarb)	Likely refers to sour fruits; *Garcinia* fits better based on textual descriptions
Jivanti	5+ proposed species (*Leptadenia*, *Dendrobium*, etc.) with similar properties	Pharmacological studies needed to compare galactagogue/tonic effects
Pashanabheda	Applied to 12+ different litholytic plants in regional traditions	*Bergenia ligulata* shows strongest historical continuity in Ayurvedic texts
Rasna	Debate between *Pluchea lanceolata* (classical) vs *Alpinia galangal* (modern)	Textual analysis favors *Pluchea* for neurological uses described in Charaka

The presence of unidentified and controversial drugs in the *Charaka Samhita* underscores the challenges inherent in interpreting ancient texts in the context of modern scientific understanding. These ambiguities have several important implications:

- **Standardization of Formulations:** If the identity of a constituent herb is uncertain, it becomes difficult to standardize traditional Ayurvedic formulations, potentially affecting their efficacy and safety.
- **Validation of Traditional Uses:** Modern pharmacological research aims to validate the traditional uses of Ayurvedic drugs. This process is hindered when the botanical identity of the drug in question is unclear.
- **Preservation of Knowledge:** The lack of clear identification can lead to the loss of traditional knowledge associated with these plants, as they might not be recognized or utilized in contemporary practice.
- **Historical Understanding:** Studying these ambiguities can provide insights into the historical context of drug usage, trade routes, and the evolution of botanical nomenclature in ancient India.

Addressing these challenges requires a collaborative effort involving Ayurvedic scholars, botanists, pharmacognosists, and historians. Integrating textual analysis with field studies, phytochemical investigations, and comparative genomics may offer pathways to resolve some of these long-standing questions.

Key Challenges:[8]

- **Synonymy and Polymorphism**: Single Sanskrit names (e.g., *Vrishaparni*) may refer to multiple species (*Mushikaparni* variants).
- **Lost Knowledge**: Some drugs (e.g., *Vasuka*) lack modern equivalents, suggesting extinct or understudied species.
- **Substitution Practices**: Historical substitutions (e.g., *Bala* for *Riddhi*) prioritize therapeutic action over botanical accuracy, necessitating evidence-based validation.

CONCLUSION:

This study underscores the critical gaps in the botanical identification of Ayurvedic drugs. The *Charaka Samhita* remains an invaluable source of knowledge on plant-based medicine. However, the existence of

unidentified and controversial *Oudbhida Dravya* necessitates ongoing critical inquiry. Resolving these uncertainties will not only enhance our understanding of the classical Ayurvedic materia medica but also contribute to the more accurate and standardized application of Ayurvedic principles in modern healthcare and research. Future work should focus on interdisciplinary approaches to further elucidate the identity and potential of these historically significant yet enigmatic medicinal plants. By integrating textual analysis, field studies, and laboratory research, this work lays a foundation for preserving Ayurveda's authenticity while advancing its scientific credibility. Future studies should expand to other classical texts and employ molecular techniques (e.g., DNA barcoding) to resolve ambiguities.

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