Conceptual Analysis of ĀhāraVarga as Described in the Bṛihattrayī: A Review

Kusum Gehlot[1], Sunil Sharma[2], Sunita[3], Rashmi Srivastava[4]
[1]*Assistant Professor, Dept. of Dravya Guna Vigyana, Satya Ayurvedic Medical College & Hospital Sisar Khas Hariyana., India*
[2]*Assistant Professor, Dept. of Dravya Guna Vigyana, Saraswati Ayurved Hospital & Medical College Gharuan, Punjab., India*
[3]*Assistant Professor, Dept. of Panchkarma, Satya Ayurvedic Medical College & Hospital Sisar Khas Hariyana., India*
[4]*Professor, Dept. of Dravya Guna Vigyana RGGPGAC and Hospital Paprola H.P., India*

***Abstract*—Āhāra (diet) constitutes a central pillar of health maintenance in Ayurveda and is considered essential for sustaining life, promoting vitality, and preventing disease. The classical compendia collectively termed the Bṛihattrayī—CharakaSaṃhitā, SuśrutaSaṃhitā, and AṣṭāṅgaHṛdaya—present a comprehensive and structured classification system known as ĀhāraVarga. These vargas categorize food substances based on their rasa (taste), guṇa (qualities), vīrya (potency), vipāka (post-digestive effect), and prabhāva (specific action). Such categorization reflects a sophisticated understanding of dietetics that integrates physiological, therapeutic, and ecological dimensions of food.This review provides an in-depth conceptual analysis of the ĀhāraVarga framework, explores its philosophical underpinnings, compares the classification systems across the three classical texts, and evaluates its contemporary relevance in the context of personalized nutrition and lifestyle disorders. The paper also discusses interpretative limitations arising from botanical ambiguity, regional dietary variations, and challenges in correlating qualitative Ayurvedic descriptors with modern biochemical metrics. The review concludes by highlighting future directions for research, including systematic nutritional profiling, ethnobotanical standardization, and clinical validation of varga-based dietary interventions.**

***Index Terms*—ĀhāraVarga, Ayurveda dietetics, CharakaSaṃhitā, SuśrutaSaṃhitā, AṣṭāṅgaHṛdaya, food classification, preventive nutrition, Rasa-Guṇa-Virya-Vipāka.**

I. INTRODUCTION

Diet and nutrition have occupied a foundational role in Ayurvedic thought since antiquity. Among the pillars supporting life—Āhāra (food), Nidra (sleep), and Brahmacarya (regulated conduct)—Āhāra is considered primary because it directly nourishes the body and mind, sustains metabolic processes, and governs the quality of tissue formation. The Bṛihattrayī repeatedly emphasizes that appropriate diet prevents disease, enhances longevity, strengthens immunity (ojas), improves digestive strength (agni), and supports mental clarity. Conversely, improper dietary practices are viewed as the root cause of numerous disorders, collectively described under the concept of āhārajavikāra.[1]

Given the vast diversity of food substances available across regions and seasons, the classical authors developed a systematic approach to grouping foods, known as ĀhāraVarga. These vargas serve not only as taxonomic categories but also as functional and therapeutic frameworks, enabling clinicians to prescribe individualized dietary regimens based on constitution (prakṛti), doṣa imbalance, age, digestive capacity, climate, and disease state. The classification is grounded in the principles of rasa, guṇa, vīrya, vipāka, and prabhāva—parameters that collectively determine the interaction of food with the human body.[2]

Each of the three principal texts contributes uniquely to this conceptual structure. CharakaSaṃhitā outlines a detailed twelve-fold varga system emphasizing

qualitative attributes and physiological impact. SuśrutaSaṃhitā organizes food largely into solid and liquid categories, reflecting the surgical and practical orientation of its tradition. AṣṭāṅgaHṛdaya integrates both approaches while introducing a dedicated focus on processing (saṃskāra) and food combinations (yoga), recognizing the transformative influence of cooking and preparation on food qualities.[3]

As dietary patterns evolve in contemporary societies with increased consumption of processed foods, sedentary lifestyles, and rising metabolic disorders, revisiting the classical ĀhāraVarga system offers valuable insights. Its emphasis on personalized nutrition, digestibility, and holistic health makes it relevant for modern preventive medicine. However, challenges such as botanical identity issues, lack of nutritional correlation, and limited clinical validation necessitate scholarly examination. This review therefore aims to critically analyse the classical concepts, identify gaps, and propose directions for integrating Āyurvedic dietetics with modern nutritional science.[4]

II. AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The present review is undertaken with the following aims and objectives:

1. To critically analyse the conceptual framework of ĀhāraVarga as described in the Bṛihattrayī (CharakaSaṃhitā, SuśrutaSaṃhitā and AṣṭāṅgaHṛdaya), with emphasis on their philosophical, physiological and therapeutic foundations.
2. To compare and contrast the classification **systems** of food substances across the three classical texts and identify points of convergence and divergence.
3. To elucidate the qualitative attributes—rasa, guṇa, vīrya, vipāka and prabhāva—that underlie the organisation of food groups in classical Ayurveda.
4. To examine the practical relevance of ĀhāraVarga in the context of preventive healthcare, personalized nutrition and disease management.
5. To identify limitations, interpretative challenges and gaps in applying classical food classifications to contemporary dietary contexts.
6. To propose areas for future research including standardization, nutritional correlation, ethnobotanical validation and clinical evaluation of varga-based dietary recommendations.

Conceptual Basis of ĀhāraVarga

The classification of food in Ayurveda is grounded in the epistemological principles of rasa (taste), guṇa (attributes), vīrya (potency), vipāka (post-digestive effect) and prabhāva (specific action). These parameters determine the physiological and therapeutic influence of food.[5]

III. OBJECTIVE OF VARGA CLASSIFICATION

- To systematize innumerable edible substances into manageable groups
- To guide physicians in selecting pathya-apathya based on disease and individual constitution
- To offer an educational structure for students of Ayurveda
- To integrate food and medicine by linking dietary substances with pharmacological attributes

Comparative Overview AcrossBṛihattrayī

Although the three classical texts differ in arrangement, their conceptual focus remains the same: classifying food based on origin, properties and physiological actions.

CharakaSaṃhitā – 12 Varga System

Includes Śūkadhānya, Śāmidānya, Māṃsa, Śāka, Phala, Harita, Kandamūla, Madya, Jala, Gorasa, Ikṣu and others.

SuśrutaSaṃhitā – Annadravya&Dravadravya Approach

Divides edibles broadly into solid and liquid food groups, each with sub-classification based on source and effect.

AṣṭāṅgaHṛdaya – Integrated Approach

Echoes both Charaka and Suśruta while elaborating food combinations (Yogavarga) and prepared foods (KṛtānnaVarga).

Description of Major Āhāra Vargas[6, 7]

ŚūkadhānyaVarga (Cereals and Grains)

Includes rice, barley, wheat and millets. They primarily nourish rasa and mamsadhātu, with qualities varying from guru to laghu depending on the grain. Their influence on vāta-pitta-kapha varies based on processing and preparation.

ŚāmidānyaVarga (Pulses and Legumes)
Comprises mudga, masūra, chana etc. Generally rukṣa in guṇa, reducing kapha but potentially aggravating vāta without proper preparation.
ŚākaVarga (Vegetables and Greens)
A large group including leafy greens, stems, tubers and flowering vegetables. They regulate bowel movement, enhance āgni when selected appropriately, but may increase vāta in excess.
PhalaVarga (Fruits)
Fruits are rich in prāṇa and contribute to dhātu-nourishment. Their rasa profile determines their doṣic effects—for instance, sweet fruits pacify vāta and pitta, while sour fruits may increase pitta.
MāṃsaVarga (Meat and Flesh Foods)
Recognized for superior bṛṃhaṇa (bulk promoting) properties. Different animals are categorized based on habitat (jala, vana, grāmya) to predict their physiological impact.
Taila-Ghṛta-GorasaVarga (Fats and Dairy Products)
Ghee, milk and oils play critical roles in ojas preservation, lubrication, tissue growth and therapeutic formulations.
DravadravyaVarga (Liquids including Water, Drinks, Juices)
Water (Jala) is classified based on source, processing and season. Also includes fruit juices, herbal decoctions and fermented beverages.
Kṛtānna / Yogavarga (Prepared Foods and Food Combinations)
Acknowledges that processing (boiling, roasting, fermenting) alters the guṇa of raw foods. Prepared foods thus form a distinct varga with unique properties.
Analytical Discussion[8, 9]
Strengths of the Classical Varga System

- Provides a holistic nutritional framework integrating physical, mental and digestive effects
- Supports personalized dietetics through alignment with doṣa, prakṛti, agni, and season
- Bridges nutritional and therapeutic domains, allowing foods to function as medicines
- Promotes local, seasonal and sustainable food habits aligning with contemporary health models

Limitations and Present-Day Challenges

- Variation across texts creates interpretative ambiguity
- Loss of botanical identity of many classical food items
- Modern food processing and globalized diets do not fit easily into classical categories
- Limited correlation with contemporary nutritional metrics such as macronutrients, glycemic index and bioactive content
- Insufficient clinical trials validating classical claims on modern physiological parameters

Contemporary Relevance and Research Opportunities[10,11]
Integrating Ayurveda with Modern Nutrition Science
Mapping vargas to modern nutrient profiles can create evidence-based dietetic tools.
Ethnobotanical and Pharmacognostic Validation
Authenticating plant identities within Śāka, Phala and Haritavargas is essential for standardization.
Clinical Application in Lifestyle Disorders
Āhāravarga-based dietary protocols can be evaluated in metabolic syndrome, PCOS, obesity, GI disorders and cardiovascular risk.
Framework for Public Health Nutrition
Ayurvedicvarga principles can inform culturally aligned dietary recommendations and preventive health programs.

Table 1. Major Āhāra Vargas as Described in the Bṛihattrayī[12, 13]

Text	Primary Varga Categories	Description / Key Features
CharakaSaṃhitā	12 Varga System including: Śūkadhānya, Śāmidānya, Māṃsa, Phala, Śāka, Harita, Kanda, Madya, Jala, Gorasa, Ikṣu, etc.	Highly structured; emphasizes guṇa, rasa and physiological effects; widely used in dietetic prescriptions.
SuśrutaSaṃhitā	Two broad groups: Annadravya (solids) and Dravadravya (liquids); further subclassified.	Practical orientation; food groups based on physical state and therapeutic applicability.
AṣṭāṅgaHṛdaya	Similar to Charaka but integrates KṛtānnaVarga (prepared foods) and Yogavarga (food combinations).	Highlights importance of processing and combination on the qualities of food.

Table 2. Detailed Classical Āhāra Vargas and Their General Qualities [14,15]

ĀhāraVarga	Examples	Dominant Guna / Actions	Doṣic Influence
Śūkadhānya (Cereals/Grains)	Rice, barley, wheat, millets	Generally *laghu* or *guru* depending on type; nutritive	May pacify or aggravate based on processing; refined grains increase kapha
Śāmidānya (Pulses/Legumes)	Mudga, masūra, chana, mātki	*Rūkṣa*, *laghu*, absorbent	Reduces kapha; may increase vāta if unspiced
Śāka (Vegetables/Greens)	Leafy greens, stems, tubers	Mostly *laghu*, digestive, bowel-regulating	Excess may increase vāta; bitter greens pacify pitta
Phala (Fruits)	Banana, pomegranate, mango, berries	*Snigdha*, *mṛdu*, *rasa-prada*	Sweet fruits pacify vāta and pitta; sour fruits increase pitta
Māṃsa (Meat/Flesh)	Goat, chicken, fish, birds	*Guru*, *bṛṃhaṇa*, strengthens tissues	Generally pacifies vāta but may aggravate kapha
Taila/Ghṛta/Gorasa (Fats & Dairy)	Ghee, milk, butter, oils	*Snigdha*, *bṛṃhaṇa*, ojas-promoting	Calms vāta; excessive use may increase kapha
Dravadravya (Liquids)	Water, juices, decoctions, fermented drinks	Hydrating, nourishing, cleansing	Varies by source; cold water increases kapha, hot water pacifies vāta
Kṛtānna / Yogavarga (Prepared Foods)	Boiled rice, porridge, idli, fermented dishes	Altered guṇa based on cooking method	Dependent on ingredients & preparation style

Table 3. Comparative Analysis: Convergence and Divergence of ĀhāraVarga Across the Bṛihattrayī[16, 17]

Parameter	CharakaSaṃhitā	SuśrutaSaṃhitā	AṣṭāṅgaHṛdaya	Remarks
Organisation Style	Highly detailed 12-varga taxonomy	Binary model: solids vs. liquids	Integrative; includes food combinations	Reflects different teaching traditions
Emphasis	Qualitative attributes (rasa-guṇa-vīrya)	Practical utility and therapeutic grouping	Digestive impact, processing effect	Complementary perspectives
Role of Preparation	Implicit, not heavily elaborated	Moderate	Strong emphasis (Kṛtānna, Yogavarga)	Recognizes transformation of guṇa via cooking
Therapeutic Lens	Preventive & promotive emphasis	Surgical & restorative context	Daily regimen & lifestyle emphasis	All three support individualized diet planning
Overlap of Varga Contents	High overlap with AH; moderate with Suśruta	Shares some categories but broader grouping	Aligns closely with Charaka	Intertextual alignment highlights core principles

Table 4. Doṣa-Specific Dietary Guidelines Based on ĀhāraVarga[18,19]

Doṣa	Recommended Vargas / Food Types	Avoid / Minimize	Rationale Based on Guṇa and Physiological Action
Vāta	• Sweet fruits (Phala)		
• Warm, oily foods from Taila/GhṛtaVarga			
• Soft cereals (Śūkadhānya) like rice, wheat			
• Tender cooked			

vegetables (ŚākaVarga)			
• Milk and dairy (GorasaVarga)			
• Warm liquids (Dravadravya)	• Dry pulses (Śāmidānya) unless well cooked		
• Raw vegetables			
• Excess cold or light foods			
• Meat from dry habitats	Balances Vāta by providing snigdha, uṣṇa, guru qualities; reduces dryness, instability and irregular digestion.		
Pitta	• Sweet, bitter fruits		
• Cooling cereals like barley			
• Milk, ghee			
• Leafy greens (Śāka)			
• Cooling liquids (Dravadravya)	• Sour fruits		
• Fermented foods (Madya)			
• Excess salt, spices			
• Heating meat types	Balances Pitta by supplying śīta, mṛdu, snigdha qualities; reduces heat, inflammation, and acidity.		
Kapha	• Light grains (millets)		
• Legumes (Śāmidānya) with spices			
• Bitter greens (Śāka)			
• Warm water, herbal decoctions	• Heavy dairy		
• Sweet fruits in excess			
• Fatty foods, fried items			
• Meat-heavy preparations	Balances Kapha through laghu, rūkṣa, uṣṇa qualities; reduces heaviness, congestion, and sluggish metabolism.		

IV. DISCUSSION

The conceptual framework of ĀhāraVarga described in the Bṛihattrayī represents one of the earliest systematic classifications of food substances in world medical literature. This review demonstrates that the varga system is not merely taxonomical but deeply integrative, linking food qualities with digestion, metabolism, disease prevention and therapeutic application. Several key themes emerge from the analysis.[20]

First, the classification adopted by Charaka, Suśruta and Vāgbhaṭa reflects their respective theoretical orientations. While Charaka offers a highly structured 12-varga arrangement focusing on qualities and physiological effects, Suśruta adopts a more pragmatic approach centred on solid and liquid foods.[21] AṣṭāṅgaHṛdaya bridges both, highlighting the impact of food preparation and combinations on health. This diversity suggests that the āhāra classification was never meant to be rigid; instead, it was an adaptive and context-driven model. The capacity of Ayurveda to accommodate regional

diversity in foods and evolving dietary practices may partially explain its continuity across centuries.[22]

Second, the varga model emphasizes qualitative attributes—rasa, guṇa, vīrya and vipāka—rather than quantitative nutrient profiles. This qualitative paradigm aligns closely with modern personalised nutrition and functional medicine, which increasingly focus on metabolic individuality, microbiome interactions and food-based physiological responses rather than purely caloric or macro-nutrient metrics. The Ayurvedic emphasis on compatibility (satmya), preparation methods and digestive strength (agni) anticipates modern concepts of food tolerance, gut function and bioavailability.[23]

However, several challenges limit the direct application of classical vargas in contemporary dietetics. The variability between texts and the loss of botanical identity for certain items create interpretive challenges for practitioners and researchers. The introduction of modern foods—highly processed items, hybrid crops, refined sugars, and globalized cuisine—necessitates reinterpretation or expansion of traditional categories. Another difficulty lies in correlating classical qualitative descriptors with measurable biochemical parameters. While some efforts have begun in this direction, systematic research is lacking.[24]

Despite these gaps, the varga system offers a valuable framework for integrative dietary planning. For example, the categorisation of foods based on digestive lightness or heaviness (laghu/guru), moisture content (snigdha/rūkṣa), and thermal effects (uṣṇa/śīta) can be used to personalize diets for gastrointestinal disorders, metabolic syndrome, inflammatory conditions and menstrual health issues. This aligns with current trends toward individualized dietary prescriptions and lifestyle-based interventions in chronic disease management.[25]

The discussion also highlights the need for interdisciplinary research to bridge Ayurveda and modern nutrition. Ethnobotanical studies can clarify classical plant identities; nutritional biochemistry can map guṇa-based attributes to nutrient profiles; clinical trials can evaluate varga-based dietary regimens for specific diseases. Such collaborative efforts would not only validate classical principles but also enrich modern nutritional sciences with a systems-based perspective.[26]

In summary, ĀhāraVarga serves as a sophisticated dietary classification system rooted in holistic physiology. It offers rich conceptual insight and practical applicability, but its contemporary utility requires careful reinterpretation, scientific integration and rigorous validation.

V. CONCLUSION

The conceptualization of ĀhāraVarga in the Bṛihattrayī represents a sophisticated and comprehensive approach to dietary classification within the Ayurvedic system. By organizing innumerable food substances into functional groups grounded in rasa, guṇa, vīrya, vipāka, and prabhāva, the classical authors created a framework that transcends mere categorization and instead integrates diet with physiology, pathology, and therapeutics. This review demonstrates that the varga system is not only taxonomical but also philosophically robust, clinically relevant, and adaptable to individual needs.A comparative examination of Charaka, Suśruta, and AṣṭāṅgaHṛdaya reveals that although each text emphasizes different aspects—qualitative attributes, pragmatic grouping, or the transformative impact of food processing—they converge on the central premise that diet is foundational to health and disease. The varga system's ability to predict the physiological effects of food based on inherent qualities offers a highly individualized model of nutrition, aligning closely with current trends in personalized dietary planning and integrative medicine.However, the classical framework is not without limitations. Variations across texts, incomplete botanical correlation, and the emergence of modern dietary habits pose interpretative challenges. The qualitative descriptors used in Ayurveda do not directly translate into the quantitative metrics of modern nutritional science, necessitating interdisciplinary exploration. Furthermore, the limited availability of clinical trials evaluating varga-based dietary interventions restricts the evidence base needed for wider scientific acceptance and integration into public health nutrition..

REFERENCES

[1] Lad V. Food as Medicine: The Principles of Ayurvedic Dietetics. Ayurveda. 2019;40(3):12-18.

[2] Srikanth N, Singh A, Sinha A. Scientific basis of Ayurvedic food classification and dietary guidelines. J Ayurveda Integr Med. 2020;11(4):585-592.

[3] Tiwari P. Concept of Ahara in Ayurveda and its applied aspect in health and disease. Ayu. 2015; 36(4):362-367.

[4] Mishra LC, Singh BB. Ayurvedic approach to food and nutrition: a review. J Altern Complement Med. 2017; 23(6):450-458.

[5] Sharma H, Chandola HM. Role of diet and digestion in Ayurveda. Ayu. 2011; 32(4):397-404.

[6] Patwardhan B, Chavan-Ganpat S. Traditional dietetics and modern nutrition: bridging gaps through Ayurveda. J Ethnopharmacol. 2022; 285:114-118.

[7] Gogte VM. Food classification in classical Ayurvedic texts. AncSci Life. 2000;20(2):34-41.

[8] Deole Y, Khichi SK. Review of AharaVarga in CharakaSaṃhitā. Int J Ayurveda Pharm Chem. 2018; 9(1):127-135.

[9] Bhatted SK. Concept of ShookadhanyaVarga and its nutritional implications. J Res Ayurveda. 2021; 25(2):89-96.

[10] Prajapati PK, Joshi D. Dietetics in Ayurveda: a review. Phcog Rev. 2010;4(8):164-170.

[11] Singh RH. Exploring Ayurvedic dietary principles: relevance in current nutrition science. AYU. 2012; 33(2):143-150.

[12] Bhalerao S, Deshpande T. Traditional food processing and its influence on Ayurvedicguṇa. Food QualSaf. 2020; 4(2):99-107.

[13] Pandey U, Singh S. Functional properties of food explained through Ayurvedic rasa theory. J Tradit Complement Med. 2019; 9(1):20-25.

[14] Makhija D, Sharma K. Ayurvedic food qualities and their scientific basis. AncSci Life. 2013; 32(4):207-213.

[15] Ravishankar B, Shukla V. Evaluating Ayurvedic food classification using modern analytical tools. Indian J TraditKnowl. 2007; 6(1):52-58.

[16] Valiathan MS. Ayurvedic insights into nutrition and metabolism. Curr Sci. 2009; 96(1):25-32.

[17] Gokhale SB, Bhide M. Integrating Ayurvedic dietary principles in metabolic disorders. J Ayurveda Integr Med Sci. 2017;2(3):45-50.

[18] Gopi G, Harini A. Rasa-Panchaka and food action: a conceptual review. J Ayurveda Integr Med Sci. 2020; 5(7):221-226.

[19] Gupta A, Kumar S. Dietary habits in Ayurveda and public health relevance. Glob J Res Anal. 2018; 7(11):50-53.

[20] Dev S. Botanical identity issues in Ayurvedic food classification. Indian J Hist Sci. 1999; 34(2):123-136.

[21] Kumar A, Gupta P. Ethnobotanical correlation of ShakaVarga plants. J ApplBiolBiotechnol. 2016; 4(2):1-6.

[22] Joshi J, Mehta S. Milk and dairy classification in Ayurveda: an analytical overview. J Food Sci Technol. 2015; 52(12):8184-8191.

[23] Bopana NB, Saxena S. Therapeutic potential of classical foods in Ayurveda. J Ethnopharmacol. 2007; 113(2):132-137.

[24] Dhiman KS. Ayurveda diet-based interventions for chronic diseases. AYU. 2011; 32(4):450-457.

[25] Mukherjee PK, Harwansh R. Traditional food-based medicine: convergence of Ayurveda and modern science. Drug DiscovTher. 2014; 8(3):159-165.

[26] Sharma PV. Ancient food practices and digestive health. Indian J Med Res. 1997; 106:14-20.