

Karmaja Vyadhi with Special Reference to Shwitra: An Ayurvedic Perspective – A Review

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Abstract— Ayurveda, the traditional system of Indian medicine, provides a holistic understanding of health and disease that integrates physical, psychological, environmental and spiritual dimensions. One of the distinctive concepts described in Ayurvedic literature is Karmaja Vyadhi, referring to diseases that arise as a consequence of past deeds (Purvajanma Karma). These diseases are believed to manifest when the accumulated effects of actions performed in previous lives become dominant and are not easily explained solely by dietary or lifestyle factors. Among the disorders mentioned in this context, Shwitra, a type of skin disease explained under kushta chikitsa is frequently cited as having karmic involvement in its pathogenesis. Shwitra is characterized by the appearance of depigmented white patches on the skin due to impairment of pigmentation. Classical Ayurvedic texts attribute its causation to a combination of factors including Viruddha Ahara (incompatible diet), improper lifestyle practices, vitiation of Tridosha and the influence of Papakarma (immoral or unethical deeds). From a modern biomedical perspective, Shwitra closely resembles vitiligo, a chronic depigmentary disorder associated with autoimmune destruction of melanocytes, genetic predisposition, oxidative stress and neurogenic factors. The concept of Karmaja Vyadhi provides a unique philosophical and etiological framework that extends beyond purely physiological explanations of disease. Ayurveda proposes that certain conditions may arise even in the absence of obvious causative factors due to the influence of past karmic actions. This perspective emphasizes the interconnectedness of moral conduct, mental health and physical wellbeing. In addition to pharmacological and detoxification therapies, Ayurvedic management of such diseases often includes Daivavyapashraya Chikitsa, which incorporates spiritual practices, ethical behaviour, charity and rituals intended to neutralize the effects of past karma. This review aims to explore the concept of

Karmaja Vyadhi in classical Ayurvedic literature with special reference to Shwitra. The etiological factors, pathogenesis, classical descriptions and therapeutic approaches described in Ayurvedic texts are analysed and correlated with contemporary biomedical understanding of vitiligo. By integrating classical knowledge with modern perspectives, this review highlights the holistic approach of Ayurveda in understanding complex dermatological disorders and underscores the relevance of ethical and lifestyle factors in disease manifestation and management.

Index Terms— Karmaja Vyadhi, Shwitra, Vitiligo, Kushta, Ayurveda, Daivavyapashraya Chikitsa

I. INTRODUCTION

Ayurveda, the ancient medical system of India, presents a comprehensive framework for understanding health and disease through the principles of Dosha, Dhatu, Mala and Agni, along with the balance of mental and spiritual wellbeing. According to classical Ayurvedic philosophy, the human body functions as an integrated system where physiological, psychological, environmental and spiritual factors collectively influence health. Disease occurs when the equilibrium of these factors is disturbed due to improper diet, lifestyle, environmental influences or deeper metaphysical causes.¹

Among the various theories of disease causation described in Ayurvedic literature, the concept of Karmaja Vyadhi occupies a distinctive and profound place. The term "Karmaja" is derived from the Sanskrit word Karma, meaning action or deed. Karmaja Vyadhi

refers to diseases that arise as a result of past actions, particularly those performed in previous lives (Purvajanma Karma). Ayurvedic scholars have emphasized that while many diseases arise due to identifiable factors such as dietary indiscretions (Ahara), lifestyle disturbances (Vihara), or environmental exposures, some conditions manifest due to subtle karmic influences that transcend the present lifetime.²

Classical Ayurvedic texts such as Charaka Samhita, Sushruta Samhita, and Ashtanga Hridaya acknowledge the role of karma in the manifestation of certain diseases. These texts describe that diseases may occur even in individuals who follow appropriate diet and lifestyle practices, suggesting the influence of unseen or karmic factors. Such diseases are often categorized under Adhidaivika Vyadhi, which refers to disorders arising from supernatural or karmic causes. The concept highlights the philosophical foundation of Ayurveda, which views health as not merely a biological phenomenon but also a reflection of moral and spiritual conduct.³

Within the wide spectrum of dermatological disorders described in Ayurveda, Shwitra holds particular significance. Shwitra is explained under Kushta Roga chikitsa, a group of skin diseases characterized by discoloration, textural changes, and alterations in skin integrity. The condition is primarily characterized by the appearance of white or depigmented patches on the skin, which may gradually spread and cause cosmetic as well as psychological distress. The classical descriptions of Shwitra include variations based on the involvement of different Doshas and Dhatus, particularly Rakta, Mamsa, and Meda.⁴

Ayurvedic texts attribute the development of Shwitra to multiple etiological factors. Dietary causes such as Viruddha Ahara (incompatible food combinations), excessive intake of heavy or unwholesome foods and improper digestion are considered important contributors. Lifestyle factors including irregular habits, suppression of natural urges and mental stress also play a significant role. In addition to these physiological causes, classical texts explicitly mention Papakarma or sinful acts as an important factor in the manifestation of Shwitra, thereby establishing its association with Karmaja Vyadhi.⁵

From a modern medical perspective, Shwitra is often correlated with vitiligo, a chronic depigmentary disorder characterized by the loss of melanocytes from

the epidermis. Vitiligo affects approximately 0.5–2% of the global population and is considered a multifactorial disease involving autoimmune mechanisms, genetic predisposition, oxidative stress, and neural factors. Although modern dermatology provides valuable insights into the biological mechanisms of vitiligo, it largely focuses on immunological and genetic aspects of the disease.⁶

Ayurveda, on the other hand, offers a broader and more holistic perspective that integrates biological, psychological and spiritual dimensions of disease. The inclusion of karmic factors in disease causation reflects the Ayurvedic understanding that human health is influenced not only by current behaviours but also by accumulated effects of past actions. This philosophical approach emphasizes ethical living, mental discipline and spiritual practices as integral components of disease prevention and management.⁷ Furthermore, Ayurvedic management of Shwitra involves a combination of Shodhana (purification therapies), Shamana (pacifying treatments), Rasayana (rejuvenative therapies) and Daivavyapashraya Chikitsa (spiritual therapies). These therapeutic approaches aim to correct Dosha imbalance, purify the body, restore skin pigmentation, and address the subtle karmic influences associated with the disease.⁸

Therefore, the present review aims to analyse the classical Ayurvedic concept of Karmaja Vyadhi with special reference to Shwitra. The study explores classical textual references, etiological factors, pathogenesis, and therapeutic approaches while attempting to correlate these concepts with contemporary biomedical understanding of vitiligo. Such an analysis may help bridge the gap between traditional knowledge and modern dermatological science, thereby enhancing the scope of integrative medical research.

II. AIM AND OBJECTIVES

Aim

To analyse the concept of Karmaja Vyadhi in Ayurveda with special reference to Shwitra.

Objectives

- To review classical references regarding Karmaja Vyadhi.
- To explore the etiopathogenesis of Shwitra described in Ayurvedic texts.

- To understand the role of karma in the manifestation of Shwitra.
- To discuss the integrative therapeutic approach for Shwitra.

III. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This review is based on a comprehensive analysis of classical Ayurvedic texts and contemporary scientific literature.

IV. DATA SOURCES

- Classical texts including Charaka Samhita, Sushruta Samhita and Ashtanga Hridaya
- Ayurvedic commentaries
- Research articles from indexed journals
- Electronic databases such as PubMed, Google Scholar and AYUSH Research Portal

Methodology

Relevant literature related to Karmaja Vyadhi and Shwitra was collected, reviewed and critically analysed. Conceptual correlations with modern medical perspectives were also explored.

Concept of Karmaja Vyadhi in Ayurveda⁹

Ayurveda recognizes different types of disease causation such as Dosha imbalance, environmental factors, trauma, infection and karmic influences. Karmaja Vyadhi refers to diseases that arise due to past deeds.

According to Charaka:

"Some diseases arise due to improper diet and lifestyle, while others occur due to the results of past actions."

Karmaja Vyadhi manifests when the effects of past actions become dominant and cannot be easily prevented by ordinary therapeutic measures.

V. TYPES OF DISEASES BASED ON ETIOLOGY

Ayurveda classifies diseases into three major types:

1. Adhyatmika Vyadhi – diseases originating within the body
2. Adhibhautika Vyadhi – diseases caused by external factors
3. Adhidaivika Vyadhi – diseases resulting from unseen or karmic factors

Karmaja diseases fall primarily under the category of Adhidaivika Vyadhi.

Shwitra in Ayurveda¹⁰

Shwitra is described as a type of skin disease. It is characterized by white patches due to discoloration of the skin.

Definition¹¹

Shwitra is a skin disorder characterized by depigmented patches resulting from the vitiation of Tridosha and impairment of Rakta, Mamsa and Meda Dhatu.

Synonyms

- Kilasa
- Shwitra
- Shweta kushta

VI. ETIOLOGICAL FACTORS

Ayurvedic texts describe several causes for Shwitra including:

- Consumption of Viruddha Ahara
- Excessive intake of fish with milk
- Heavy, oily and incompatible foods
- Suppression of natural urges
- Improper lifestyle
- Papakarma (sinful acts)

The inclusion of papakarma indicates the karmic dimension of the disease.

Pathogenesis (Samprapti)¹²

The pathogenesis of Shwitra involves the vitiation of Tridosha, especially Pitta and Kapha, along with involvement of Rakta Dhatu.

Samprapti Sequence

1. Intake of etiological factors (Nidana)
2. Vitiation of Doshas
3. Impairment of Agni
4. Vitiation of Rakta, Mamsa and Meda
5. Localization in Twak (skin)
6. Development of depigmented patches

From a karmic perspective, the disease may manifest even without obvious etiological factors due to the influence of past deeds.

Karmaja aspect of Shwitra

The concept of Karmaja Vyadhi occupies a significant place in Ayurvedic philosophy and disease etiology. According to Ayurvedic principles, the health and

disease status of an individual are influenced not only by present lifestyle and environmental factors but also by the accumulated effects of past actions, known as karma. These karmic influences may originate from actions performed in the present life (Iha Janma Karma) or from deeds performed in previous lives (Purvaja Nma Karma). When the effects of such actions become predominant, they may manifest as diseases that are difficult to explain solely through physiological causes.¹³

In classical Ayurvedic literature, certain chronic and obstinate diseases are considered to have a karmic origin, particularly when they appear in individuals who otherwise follow appropriate dietary and lifestyle practices. Such diseases are categorized under Karmaja Vyadhi and are often described as having deeper metaphysical causes that extend beyond observable biological factors.

Among dermatological disorders described in Ayurveda, Shwitra is one condition frequently associated with karmic influences. Shwitra is explained under Kushta chikitsa, which includes a group of skin diseases characterized by discoloration and pathological changes in the skin. Classical texts describe Shwitra as a disorder involving the vitiation of Tridosha, especially Pitta and Kapha, along with the impairment of Rakta, Mamsa and Medo Dhatu. These pathological changes ultimately lead to loss of normal skin pigmentation and the development of characteristic white patches.¹⁴

While dietary incompatibilities (Viruddha Ahara), improper lifestyle practices and Dosha imbalance are recognized as primary etiological factors, Ayurvedic texts also mention Papakarma (sinful or unethical actions) as a contributing cause of Shwitra. Such references indicate that certain diseases may arise as consequences of moral or ethical transgressions performed in previous lives. These actions may include disrespect towards teachers or elders, causing harm to innocent beings, engaging in dishonest behaviour or violating social and spiritual norms.¹⁵

The inclusion of karmic factors in the etiology of Shwitra highlights the holistic worldview of Ayurveda, where physical health is closely linked with ethical conduct and spiritual wellbeing. According to Ayurvedic philosophy, actions performed with negative intentions may create subtle imbalances that accumulate over time and eventually manifest as physical diseases. In this context, Shwitra is

considered not merely a dermatological condition but also a reflection of deeper karmic influences affecting the individual.¹⁶

Another important aspect of Karmaja Vyadhi is the observation that such diseases may persist despite appropriate treatment. Ayurvedic scholars explain that when karmic influences are strong, conventional therapeutic measures alone may not provide complete relief. Therefore, in addition to pharmacological and detoxification therapies, Ayurveda recommends Daivavyapashraya Chikitsa, which includes spiritual and ritualistic practices aimed at mitigating the effects of past karma.

Daivavyapashraya therapies may involve mantra recitation, religious rituals, charity (Dana), fasting (Upavasa), prayer, and acts of compassion. These practices are believed to purify the mind, promote spiritual growth, and neutralize negative karmic influences. In addition, Ayurveda emphasizes the importance of Sadvritta (ethical conduct) and Achara Rasayana (behavioural conducts) as preventive measures that support both physical and mental health.¹⁷

From a modern scientific perspective, the karmic explanation of disease may appear metaphysical; however, it can also be interpreted symbolically in terms of long-term behavioural and psychosocial influences on health. Contemporary research in fields such as psychoneuroimmunology suggests that chronic stress, emotional disturbances and negative behavioural patterns can significantly influence immune function and disease progression. Therefore, the Ayurvedic emphasis on ethical living, mental discipline and spiritual practices may have indirect physiological benefits that support overall health and wellbeing.¹⁸

Thus, the concept of the Karmaja aspect of Shwitra represents a unique integrative perspective within Ayurvedic medicine. It underscores the interconnected relationship between moral conduct, psychological balance, and physical health. By addressing both the physiological and spiritual dimensions of disease, Ayurveda provides a comprehensive approach to understanding and managing complex chronic disorders such as Shwitra.¹⁹

Modern Correlation: Vitiligo²⁰

Vitiligo is a chronic autoimmune disorder characterized by loss of melanocytes leading to depigmented skin patches.

VII. PROPOSED MECHANISMS

- Autoimmune destruction of melanocytes
- Genetic predisposition
- Oxidative stress
- Neural mechanisms

Although modern medicine focuses on biological mechanisms, Ayurveda integrates psychological, behavioural, and karmic dimensions.

VIII. THERAPEUTIC PERSPECTIVE IN AYURVEDA ^{21,22}

Management of Shwitra includes Shodhana, Shamana and Rasayana therapy.

Shodhana Therapy

- Vamana
- Virechana
- Raktamokshana

Shamana Therapy

Commonly used medicines include:

- Bakuchi
- Khadira
- Aragwadh
- Manjistha

Rasayana Therapy

Rasayana therapy helps in improving immunity and preventing recurrence.

Daivavyapashraya Chikitsa

Since Shwitra is associated with karmic factors, Ayurveda recommends spiritual therapies such as:

- Mantra chanting
- Charity (Dana)
- Fasting (Upavasa)
- Worship and ethical conduct

Table 1: Types of Disease Causation in Ayurveda

Type	Cause	Cure
Doshaja	Improper diet and lifestyle causing dosha imbalances	Vipaksha sheelana (diet and regimen opposite to the causative factors and contrary to doshas vitiated)
Karmaja	Misdeeds from past life	Only when there is karma kshaya (reduction in karmic debts by noble deeds)
Sankara / doshakarmaja	Mix of both the above	Both dosha and karma kshaya

Table 2: Etiological Factors of Shwitra in Ayurveda

Category	Etiological Factors	Pathological Effect
Dietary factors (Ahara)	Viruddha Ahara (incompatible foods), excessive intake of sour, salty and heavy foods	Agni Mandya, Ama formation, Dosha aggravation
Lifestyle factors (Vihara)	Suppression of natural urges, irregular habits, excessive stress	Disturbance of Dosha balance
Psychological factors	Mental stress, emotional disturbances	Aggravation of Pitta and Vata
Karmic factors	Papakarma, unethical behavior in previous lives	Manifestation of Karmaja Vyadhi

Table 3: Dosha and Dhatu Involvement in Shwitra

Dosha/Dhatu	Role in Pathogenesis	Clinical Manifestation
Vata	Disturbs normal skin metabolism and circulation	Dryness and irregular spread of patches
Pitta	Responsible for pigmentation and skin coloration	Loss of pigmentation, pinkish colour lesions, burning sensation
Kapha	Causes stagnation and structural changes	Thickened skin patches, itching
Rakta Dhatu	Affects skin complexion	Depigmented lesions
Mamsa Dhatu	Structural support of skin	Changes in skin texture
Meda Dhatu	Involved in skin lubrication	Pale or glossy patches

Table 4: Correlation between Shwitra (Ayurveda) and Vitiligo (Modern Medicine)

Aspect	Shwitra (Ayurvedic Concept)	Vitiligo (Modern Concept)
Definition	A type of skin disease characterized by white patches on skin	Chronic depigmentary disorder
Pathogenesis	Tridosha imbalance with Rakta, Mamsa and Meda involvement	Autoimmune destruction of melanocytes

Etiological factors	Viruddha Ahara, lifestyle errors, karmic factors	Genetic predisposition, autoimmune mechanisms
Nature of disease	Chronic and sometimes difficult to cure	Chronic with variable progression
Treatment approach	Shodhana, Shamana, Rasayana, Daivavyapashraya	Immunomodulators, phototherapy, corticosteroids

Table 5: Ayurvedic Management of Shwitra

Treatment Approach	Examples	Therapeutic Role
Shodhana Chikitsa	Vamana, Virechana, Raktamokshana	Elimination of vitiated Doshas
Shamana Chikitsa	Bakuchi, Khadira, Manjistha	Pacification of Doshas and improvement of pigmentation
Rasayana Therapy	Guduchi, Amalaki	Immunomodulation and rejuvenation
Daivavyapashraya Chikitsa	Mantra chanting, charity, fasting	Reduction of karmic influence and mental purification

Table 6: Daivavyapashraya Chikitsa in Karmaja Vyadhi

Practice	Description	Possible Benefit
Mantra Japa	Recitation of sacred mantras	Mental calmness and spiritual purification
Dana (Charity)	Acts of charity and compassion	Ethical purification and karmic balance
Upavasa (Fasting)	Controlled fasting practices	Detoxification and discipline
Puja and prayer	Spiritual rituals and devotion	Psychological stability and faith

IX. DISCUSSION

The concept of Karmaja Vyadhi reflects one of the most profound philosophical aspects of Ayurveda, emphasizing that disease manifestation is not solely determined by immediate physical causes but may also be influenced by the cumulative effects of past actions (Karma). Ayurveda recognizes that human life operates within a complex interaction of biological, psychological, environmental and spiritual dimensions. Therefore, disease etiology is understood through a multidimensional framework that includes Ahara (diet), Vihara (lifestyle), Manasika factors (mental states) and Daivika influences (karmic factors).²³

Acharya Vagbhata classifies diseases into 3 types - Doshaja, Karmaja and Dosha karmaja. Diseases originating from vitiation of Dosha are Doshaja vyadhi. Those resulting because of one's previous deeds are termed Karmaja and those originating from the combination of both previous deeds and vitiation of doshas are referred to as dosha Karmaja. Doshaja Vyadhi occurs due to specific Nidana and subsides by Doshahara Chikitsa. In Karmaja Vyadhi, specific cause cannot be elicited, and it subsides only by Karma kshaya. In Sankara or Dosha Karmaja Vyadhi, there will be severe flare up by minor involvement in Doshakara Nidana. Dosha Karmaja Vyadhi subsides by Dosha and Karma Kshaya. Karmaja diseases,

however, are believed to arise from the consequences of past deeds. According to Ayurvedic philosophy, the results of actions performed in previous lives may manifest as certain diseases in the present life, especially when other causative factors are minimal or absent. Such diseases are often difficult to treat and may persist despite appropriate therapeutic measures.²⁴

Within the context of dermatological disorders, Shwitra is frequently associated with karmic factors in classical texts. The classical descriptions highlight the vitiation of Tridosha, particularly Pitta and Kapha, along with the involvement of Rakta, Mamsa, and Meda Dhatu. The impairment of these tissues leads to disturbances in skin pigmentation and results in the characteristic white patches observed in Shwitra.²⁵

Ayurvedic texts also emphasize the role of Viruddha Ahara (incompatible dietary combinations) in the development of Shwitra. Consumption of incompatible food combinations such as milk with fish, excessive intake of sour and heavy foods and irregular dietary habits are considered major contributing factors. These dietary practices lead to Agni Mandya (digestive impairment) and the accumulation of Ama, which subsequently vitiates the Doshas and affects the skin tissues.²⁶

In addition to dietary and lifestyle factors, classical texts mention Papakarma, or immoral actions, as an etiological factor in the development of Shwitra. Such

references indicate that Ayurveda recognizes a deeper metaphysical dimension in disease causation. The inclusion of karmic factors reflects the belief that ethical conduct and moral behaviour influence overall health. This perspective highlights the close relationship between ethical living, mental wellbeing and physical health.²⁷

From a modern biomedical perspective, Shwitra closely resembles vitiligo, a chronic depigmentary disorder characterized by the loss of melanocytes in the skin. Vitiligo is considered a multifactorial disease involving autoimmune mechanisms, genetic susceptibility, oxidative stress and neural factors. The autoimmune hypothesis suggests that melanocytes are destroyed by autoreactive immune cells, leading to depigmented patches on the skin.²⁸

Another important aspect highlighted in Ayurveda is the psychological impact of skin disorders. Conditions such as Shwitra often lead to social stigma, emotional distress, and reduced self-esteem. Ayurveda recognizes the role of mental factors in disease progression and emphasizes the importance of maintaining mental balance. Practices such as Sadvritta, Achara Rasayana and stress management are recommended to promote overall wellbeing.²⁹

The management of Shwitra in Ayurveda is comprehensive and includes Shodhana (purificatory therapies), Shamana (palliative treatments) and Rasayana (rejuvenative therapies). Shodhana procedures such as Vamana and Virechana are recommended to eliminate vitiated Doshas from the body. These detoxification therapies help restore Dosha balance and improve metabolic functions.³⁰

Shamana therapy involves the use of herbal formulations that possess Kushtaghna (anti-dermatotic), Rakta Shodhaka (blood purifying) and pigmentation-enhancing properties. Medicinal plants such as Bakuchi, Khadira, Manjistha, and Aragwadha are commonly used in the management of Shwitra. These herbs are believed to stimulate pigmentation, improve skin metabolism, and correct underlying Dosha imbalance.³¹

Recent integrative medical approaches increasingly recognize the importance of mind-body interactions in disease development and recovery. Concepts such as psychoneuroimmunology demonstrate that psychological stress and emotional disturbances can significantly influence immune responses and disease progression. In this context, the Ayurvedic emphasis

on mental discipline, ethical behaviour, and spiritual practices appears relevant even from a modern scientific standpoint.³²

Thus, the concept of Karmaja Vyadhi in relation to Shwitra represents a unique integrative perspective that bridges metaphysical philosophy with clinical medicine. It highlights the importance of addressing not only physical symptoms but also psychological and spiritual dimensions in disease management.

X. CONCLUSION

Shwitra is an important dermatological disorder described in Ayurveda as a type of skin disease characterized by depigmented patches on the skin. The classical Ayurvedic texts describe a multifactorial etiology involving Dosha imbalance, improper dietary habits, lifestyle disturbances and karmic influences. Among these factors, the concept of Karmaja Vyadhi provides a unique philosophical framework that emphasizes the role of past actions in disease manifestation. The Ayurvedic understanding of Shwitra integrates physiological, psychological, and spiritual dimensions of health. While modern medicine primarily explains vitiligo through autoimmune and genetic mechanisms, Ayurveda offers a broader perspective by incorporating lifestyle factors, mental health and ethical conduct into the understanding of disease causation. Management of Shwitra in Ayurveda involves a holistic therapeutic approach that includes Shodhana therapies for detoxification, Shamana therapies using herbal formulations, Rasayana therapies for rejuvenation and Daivavyapashraya Chikitsa to address karmic influences. This comprehensive strategy aims to restore Dosha balance, improve tissue metabolism, enhance immune function and promote overall wellbeing. The concept of Karmaja Vyadhi highlights the importance of ethical behaviour, mental discipline and spiritual practices in maintaining health. By emphasizing the interconnectedness of physical, mental, and spiritual aspects of life, Ayurveda provides a holistic model for disease prevention and management. Further interdisciplinary research integrating Ayurvedic principles with modern biomedical science may provide deeper insights into the pathogenesis and management of complex disorders such as vitiligo. Such integrative approaches have the potential to enhance therapeutic outcomes

and promote a more comprehensive understanding of human health.

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