

Some Controversial Aspects about Astavarga

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Astavarga, a group of eight drugs consisting of Jivaka, Rishbhaka, Meda, Mahameda, Kakoli, Kseerkakoli, Riddhi and Vriddhi have been used in the indigenous system of medicine in the treatment of various disorders. These drugs have been described for the first time in some mediaeval texts of Ayurveda.¹⁻³ Although the term Astavarga did not appear in the ancient Ayurvedic texts⁴⁻⁹, yet some of the properties, actions and uses of some of the individual drugs of this group are defined. In the indigenous system of medicine different uses of these drugs have been described and are as follows :

Drugs as Recorded in Text ¹	Uses
<i>Jivaka-Rishbhaka</i>	In pyrexia and consumption of body tissues; as tonic, blood purifier and spermatogenic.
<i>Meda-Mahameda</i>	In fever; as restorative, galactagogue, blood purifier, and spermatogenic.
<i>Kakoli-Kseer Kakoli</i>	In fever, phthisis, burning sensation of the body, as restorative and spermatogenic.
<i>Riddhi-Vriddhi</i>	In unconsciousness, cough, consumption of body tissues, as aphrodisiac, promotes vitality and conception. In life promoting and as a spermatogenic.

In spite of the extensive use of this group of drugs, it has become increasingly difficult for

one to identify the actual species described in the text in view of the inadequate information about its description, natural habitat and other properties. For instance, it has only been mentioned that *Jivaka* and *Rishbhaka* are found in Himalayan Hills, their leaves are small and tubers appear like garlic having brush or bull's horns like appearance respectively and are devoid of any juice; *Meda* and *Mahameda* are found in South-east Himalayas, both having ginger like rhizomes but *Meda* is white in colour and secretes a creamy exudation when punctured, whereas *Mahameda* is creamish in colour; *Kakoli* and *Kseerkakoli* are reported from South-east Himalayas, both appear like *Satavari* (*Asparagus racemosus*), roots having pleasant odour and white exudation but tubers of *Kakoli* are more blackish; *Riddhi* and *Vriddhi* are found in *Kaushala* (a Himalayan range), their tubers show hairy perforated surface and appear like "cotton pod" but *Riddhi* climbs to its support in clockwise and *Vriddhi* in anticlockwise direction.

The aforesaid inadequate descriptions of the drugs coupled with inaccessibility of their areas of occurrence and excessive demand by the Ayurvedic drug manufacturers, tubers and rhizomes of a large number of plant species resembling in one way or the other started appearing in the drug market either as *Astavarga* or as substitutes for *Astavarga*. Further due to their uses, mostly in compound preparations in combination with large number of other drugs, it is difficult to pinpoint as to which of the market samples is closer to the therapeutic

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Drugs of Astavarga as recorded in texts	Astavarga drugs supplied in the market		Substitutes as recorded in the Ayurvedic texts		Substitutes supplied in the market	
	Vernacular name	Botanical name	Vernacular name	Botanical name	Vernacular name	Botanical name
<i>Jivaka</i>	Lahsunia	<i>Microstylis wallichi</i>	Vidari Kand	<i>Puraeria tuberosa</i>	Bahman Safed	<i>Centaurea bahen</i>
<i>Rishbhaka</i>	"	"	"	"	Bahman Lal	<i>Centaurea species</i>
<i>Meda</i>	Shakakul Misri	<i>Polygonatum verticillatum & P. cirrifolium</i>	Satavari	<i>Asparagus racemosus</i>	Salam Misri	<i>Eulophia compestris</i>
<i>Mahameda</i>	"	"	"	"	Shakakul misri	<i>P. verticil- latum</i>
<i>Kakoli</i>	—	<i>Rosocoea procera R. alpina and Lilium polyphy- llum</i>	Asvagandha	<i>Withania somnifera</i>	Krishna Musli	<i>Curculigo orchitoides</i>
<i>Kseer Ka:oli</i>	—	"	"	"	Sweta Musli	<i>Chlorophytum arundinaceum</i>
<i>Riddhi</i>	Lahsunia	Species of <i>Habenaria & E. Compestris</i>	Varahi Kanda	<i>Dioscorea bulbifera</i>	Chirakand	<i>Asparagus racemosus</i>
<i>Vridhhi</i>	"	"	"	"	Salampanja	<i>Orchis la- tifolia</i>

value of *Astavarga* drugs of Ayurvedic literature and so far no definite conclusion has been drawn.

A careful market survey of Himalayan hills of Kumaon, Garhwal and Dehradun (the biggest market, of *Astavarga* drugs in India) reveals that several plant species are popular and being supplied and used as *Astavarga* group of drugs. A list of plants supplied under *Astavarga*, their substitutes recommended in texts¹, and the substitutes available in the market are given in the table.

Thus from the foregoing observation it is evident that lack of adequate description of *Astavarga* group of drugs, in the Ayurvedic texts has been responsible for confusion regarding their identification. Thus, it is immensely important to carry out pharmacognostical study on these drugs to pinpoint their salient diagnostic characters which would enable one to distinguish them from one another and from their substitutes or adulterants and also to scientifically evaluate their therapeutic claims.

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