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Review on *Upavishas* of clinical significance

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ABSTRACT

'Visha' (poisonous substance) is that which causes *'Visannatva'* (distress) and/ or *visada* (sadness) in the body. The classification of *Visha* is based on certain basic criteria like origin, base, properties, potency etc. Some of the *Ayurvedic* classics and texts in medieval period have classified all the poisons into two categories as *Mahavisha* and *Upavisha* based on their toxicity and potency. *Upavisha* (semi-poisonous drugs) are the group of drugs which were less toxic in nature but produce certain toxic symptoms on consumption or administration. The symptoms produced in the body by *Upavishas* are less toxic, less severe, usually not life threatening and their toxicity can be controlled by therapeutic measures. The paper deals with different types of *upavisha* mentioned by different acharyas with special emphasis to Rasa Tarangini. *Snuhi Ksheeram (Euphorbia nerifolia), Arkaksheeram (Calotropis procera), Dattura beeja (Datura metel), Karaveera (Nerium indicum), Langali (Gloriosa superba), Vijaya (Cannabis sativum), Vishatintuka beeja (Strychnos nuxvomica), Rechakam (Croton tigilium), Bhallatakam (Semicarpus anacardium), Ahiphenam (Papaver somniferum), Gunja (Abrus precatorius)* are the *upavishas* mentioned in *Rasa Tarangini.* The therapeutic importance of these drugs along with *sodhana* (purification), dosage, important formulations etc. are dealt in detail.

Key words: *Upavisha, Sodhana, Visha.*

INTRODUCTION

'Visha' (poisonous substance) is that which causes 'Visannatva'[1] (distress) and/or *visada* (sadness) in the body. Thus *Visha* has been defined as substance which prove destructive to life and which possess *Vyavayi* (absorbed quickly), *Vikasi, Ushna* (hot potency), *Tikshna* (penetrating), *Ruksha* (dryness), *Sukshma* (can pass through sukshma srotas), *Asukari* (acts quickly), *Anirdesya rasa* (indistinct taste) and *Apaki* (not properly digested) properties. The drugs which possess these properties are called *Visas* and those which are considered less toxic in comparison with the *Mahavishas*[2] are called *Upavishas.*

According to mythology *Visha* (poisonous substances) and *Amrutha* (ambrosia) arose during the *Ksheera Sagara Madhana* (churning of milky ocean) suggesting the paradoxical nature of *Visha* and *Amrutha.* The concept of poison is broad and etiologically varied. Charaka identified the necessity of complete knowledge of herbs and their utility in therapeutics. Charaka opined that "Even an acute poison can become an excellent drugif it is properly administered".[3] On the other hand, even a drug if not properly administered become an acute poison. A few factors which decided *Visha* as medicine

- Dosage
- Time of administration
- Duration of treatment
- Type of formulation
- Skill of individual physician

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Classification

The classification of *Visha* is based on certain basic criteria like origin, base, properties, potency etc. Some of the *Ayurvedic* classics and texts in medieval period have classified all the poisons in to two categories as *Mahavisha* and *Upavisha* based on their toxicity and potency.

Upavisha are the group of drugs which were less toxic in nature but produce certain toxic symptoms on consumption or administration. The symptoms produced in the body by *Upavishas* are less toxic, less severe, usually not life threatening and their toxicity can be controlled by therapeutic measures.

Broadly *Vishas* are classified as

- *Sthavara* and *Jangama*[4] according to Charaka, Susrutha and Rasatharangini
- *Krithrima* and *Akrithrima*[5] in Ashtanga Hridaya

Akrithrima again classified in to *Sthavara* and *Jangama* types.

Of these *Sthavara Vishas* are those which belong to minerals or to poisonous herbs group while *Jangama Vishas* are obtained from animals. The *Krithrima Vishas* are formed as a result of undesired compounding of drugs.

Classification as per ancient literature

'Rasarnava' appears to be the first text to mention '*Visha - Upavisha'* classification. After *Rasarnava, Rasa Ratnakara, Rasendra Choodamani*, and *Rasaratna Samuchayam* have mentioned about five *Vishas* while other texts like *Rasendra Chintamani, Sarngadhara Samhita, Bhava Prakasa* and *Ayurveda Prakasa* have enumerated nine dravyas as *Vishas*.

Rasa Tarangini (20th C AD) described only *Vatsanabha* in *Visha* group considering its medical importance, common availability and frequent use in therapeutics. The other drugs of poisonous nature have been included in *Upavisha* group by this text. There is a difference of opinion amongst the authors regarding the drugs of '*Upavisha*' group. *Rasarnavakara* mentioned five *dravyas* in '*Upavisha*'group while *Rasa Ratna Samuchaya* and *Rasendra Chintamani* enumerated seven drugs. In later texts like *Ayurveda Prakasha* and *Yogaratnakara* it is raised upto nine, while in Rasatarangini it has gone up to eleven.

*Sthavara Visha adishtana*as per *Rasatharangini*[6]

There are 10 *Sthavara Visha Adishtana* namely *Kanda* (tubers), *Sara* (heart wood), *Niryasa* (exudate/resin), *Pushpa* (flower), *Moola*(root), *Dala* (leaf), *Twak* (bark), *Ksheera* (milky exudate).

Table 1: Showing *Upavishas* as per different *Acharyas.*

Rasarnava - 5	Rasendra sara samgraha - 7	Rasa ratna samuchayam - 7	Rasatharangini - 11	Yoga ratnakaram - 7
Snuhi (Euphorbia nerifolia)	*Snuhi* (Euphorbia nerifolia)	*Neelaka*	*Snuhiksheeram* (*Euphorbia nerifolia*)	*Arkaksheeram* (*Calotropis procera*)
Arka (*Calotropis procera*)	*Arka* (*Calotropis procera*)	*Arka* (*Calotropis procera*)	*Arkaksheeram* (*Calotropis procera*)	*Snuhi ksheeram* (*Euphorbia nerifolia*)
Unmatha (*Datura metel*)	*Dattura (Datura metel)*	*Kanaka (Datura metel)*	*Dattura beeja (Datura metel)*	*Langali (Gloriosa superba)*
Karaveera (Nerium indicum)	*Karaveera (Nerium indicum)*	*Karaveera (Nerium indicum)*	*Karaveera (Nerium indicum)*	*Karaveerakam* (*Nerium indicum*)
Langali (Gloriosa superba)	*Langali (Gloriosa superba)*	*Langali (Gloriosa superba)*	*Langali (Gloriosa superba)*	*Gunja (Abrus precatorius)*
	Gunja (Abrus precatorius)	*Jaya (Cannabis sativum)*	*Vijaya (Cannabis sativum)*	*Ahiphenam (Papaver somniferum)*
	Ahiphena (Papaver	*Vishamushti*	*Vishatintuka Beeja*	*Dattura (Datura*

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	Somniferum)	*(Strychnos Nuxvomica)*	*(Strychnos Nuxvomica)*	*Metel)*
			Rechakam (*Croton tiglium*)	
			Bhallatakam (*Semicarpus anacardium*)	
			Ahiphenam (*Papaver somniferum*)	
			Gunja (*Abrus precatorius)*	

Pharmacological properties of *Visha*

'*Charaka*' in the 23rd chapter of *Chikitsa Sthana* has mentioned following 10 properties of *Vishas*. '*Susrutha*' in *Kalpasthana* also mentions 10 properties of *Visha*. *Susrutha* mentions *Avipaki* in place of *Anirdeshya Rasa*.

Acharya Sharngadhara has mentioned 8 properties of *Visha.*

Table 2: Showing the properties of *Visha Dravyas* mentioned by various Acharyas.

Charaka[7]	**Susrutha**[8]	**Sharngadhara**[9]
Laghu (light in nature)	*Ruksha* (dryness)	*Vyavayi* (absorbed quickly)
Ruksha (dryness)	*Ushna* (hot in potency)	*Vikashi*
Asu (acts quickly)	*Tikshana* (penetrating)	Sukshma (passes easily through srotas)
Visada (clear)	Sukshma (passes easily through srotas)	Chedi (has chedana property)
Vikashi (absorbed quickly)	Asu (acts quickly)	Madavaha (intoxicating)
Tikshna (penetrating)	Vyavayi (quick acting)	Agneya (having predominance of agni mahabhuta)
Sukshma (passes easily through srotas)	Vikashi (absorbed quickly)	Prananasaka (causes mortality)
Vikashi	Visada (clear)	Yogavahi (acts quickly)
Ushna (hot in potency)	Laghu (light in nature)	
Anirdeshya rasa (not specified taste)	Avipaki (not digested)	

Importance of *Visha dravya* in *Rasasashtra*

Rasasamskara Upayogat - *Visha drayas* are used in various *samskaras* of *parada.*

The *Visha dravyas* are extremely useful in various mercurial processes and *parada bandhana* (binding of mercury).It may prove to be fatal if used improperly.

Importance of *Sodhana* of *Visha-upavisha dravyas*

The poisonous plants reported in ancient scriptures of Ayurveda are being still practised widely in a number of disease after proper *Sodhana*(purifactory procedures). The concept of *Sodhana* was mentioned for the first time in *Charaka Samhita* in the context of '*Danti dravanti kalpadhyaya*'. To reduce the *'Vikashi* (quick absorption) property of *Danti* root, *Charakacharya* mentioned it as ' *Samskara'.*

Acharya Vagbhata also mentioned *Sodhana* of plant drugs in detail in the context of *Bhallataka rasayana*. The concept of *Sodhana* in Ayurveda is not only a process of purification/detoxication but also a purificatory procedure to enhance the potency and efficacy of the drug. It is reported that Aconite (*Vatsanabha*) purified by cow's urine is converted to cardiac stimulant, whereas Aconite is cardiac depressant.

It is clearly mentioned in '*Bhavaprakasha*' that the bad / toxic effects attributed to '*Asodhita Vishas'* (not

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purified) are minimised when these are used after being subjected to *Sodhana* process. Hence *Visha* should be subjected for *Sodhana* before being used in therapeutics. Various *Sodhana* are mentioned for *Upavishas.*

1. *Gomutra Nimajjana* (soaking in cow's urine) for a prescribed period
2. *Swedana* (boiling) in various medium such as cow's milk, goat's milk, cow's urine, vegetable extractives, kanjika etc.
3. *Bharjana* (frying) with ghee or without ghee.
4. *Nisheshana* (reducing the oily content)
5. *Kshalana* (washing) with hot water.

Among the above procedures the treatment with cow's urine and boiling in cow's milk are the most common procedures applied for almost all the '*Visopavisha*' drugs.

Ayurveda Prakasha - a classical Ayurvedic text book mentions *Samanya Sodhana* of *Visha Dravyas*

Method 1

The small pieces of drug is tied in a clean cloth and made in to a *pottali*. *Dola yantra swedana* is done with cow's milk as the medium for 5 *ghatika* (15 hrs). After *Swedana* for the prescribed time period, drug is taken out, washed with warm water and dried in sun. It is then stored in air tight containers.[10]

Samskarana of *Visha Dravya*

The *Visa Dravya* should be carefully covered with a cloth soaked in *Rakta Sarshapa Thailam*. This procedure will enable the drug to retain its potency.[11]

Eradication of *Visatwam*

To the purified *Visha Dravya*, equal quantity of purified *Tankan* (Borax) is added and triturated thoroughly in a *Khalwa Yantra*. This procedure eradicates *Visatwa* of *Visha dravya*.[12]

Visha Dravya - contraindicated

The persons who are short tempered (of *Pitta prakriti*), who are suffering from *Pithaja Rogas*, who are impotent, suffering from *Rajayakshma*, hungry, thirsty, tried after prolonged work, pregnant women, children, old age people, *Sukumaras* are considered unfit for administration of *Visha Dravya* as per *Ayurveda Prakasha*.[13]

Visha Dravya Sevana Pathyas

Aharaja Pathyas - The *Visha Dravyas* should be taken along with Ghee, milk or other *Hitaharas* (compatible food). *Viharaja Pathyas* - *Brahmacharya* should be followed while administering *Visha* dravyas.[14]

Table 3: Short description of *Upavishas* by *Rasatharangini*

Name with synonyms	Scientific name and family	English name	Morphology	Poisonous part	Chemical constituents
Kuchala, Vishatintukam, Kuchelakam, Kuchliam, Tindukam, Karaskaram, Remyaphala, Kupaaka, Vishamushti, Kalakuta	*Strychnos nux vomica* Family Logananiaceae	Poison nut, Quaker buttons.	Thorny tree native to Indian sub-continent.	Seed	Srychnine, Loganine, Brucin.

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Ahiphena , Aphena, Nishphena, Ahiphenaka, Aphookam, Phaniphenam, Nagaphenam.	*Papaver somniferum*. Family - Papaveraceae	Opium-poppy, Bread seed poppy.	It is the species of plant from which opium and poppy seeds are derived. Valuable ornamental plant grown in gardens.	Seed	Naturally occurring alkaloids known as opiates- morphine, codeine, thebine, papaverine , noscapine and oripavine.
Jayapala, Rechaka, Saraka, Vibhedana, Maladravi.	*Croton tigilum*. Family- Euphorbiaceae.	Purging croton	An erect evergreen shrub or small tree, 5-7 m height , found through out tropical India.	Seed	30 - 45% of a fixed oil named croton oil and about 20% protein. The oil comprises the fatty acids oleic acid 37%, linoleic acid 19%, myristic acid 7.5%, arachidic acid 1.5%, palmitic acid 1%, formic acid 1%, acetic acid 0.5%, stearic acid 0.5% and smaller amounts of butyric acid, lauric acid, tiglic acid and valeric acid. The oil also contains a group of proteins called 'crotin', about 3.5% croton resin ('crotonol'), a glucoside called crotonoside (isoguanosine), and a non-volatile unsaturated fatty acid responsible for the purgative properties.[21]
Dathura, Kithava, Unmatha, Dhurtha, Kanaka, Sata, Kantakaphala, Shivasekhara.	*Datura metel* Family - Solanaceae.	Thorn apple, Devil's trumpet.	It is a shrub-like annual or perennial herb. It grows in the wild in all the warmer parts of the world, such as India and is cultivated worldwide for its chemical and ornamental properties	Seeds	Contains higher levels of tropane alkaloids which are highly poisonous and may be fatal if ingested.
Bhanga, Bhangi, Matulani, Madini, Mathika, Mathuli, Vijaya, Tantrakarini, Bahuvadini.	*Cannabis sativa* Family- Cannabacea.	Indian hemp.	Is an annual herbaceous plant.	Inflorescence as ganja & Tender leaves and fruits as bhanga.	The flowers and fruits (and to a lesser extent the leaves, stems, and seeds) contain psychoactive chemical compounds known as cannabinoids that are consumed for recreational, medicinal, and spiritual purposes. When so used, preparations of flowers and

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					fruits (called marijuana) and leaves and preparations derived from resinous extract (e.g., hashish) are consumed by smoking, vaporising, and oral ingestion.
Gunja, Rakta, Rattika, tamrika, Krishnachudika, Uchada, Sitapaki, Bhillabhushanika, Aruna, Chudamani, Shikhandi, Krishnala, Kakananthi, Kambhoja	*Abrus precatorius* Family- Leguminoseae	Jequirty, Indian licorice, Rosary pea.	It is a herbaceous flowering plant. It is a slender, perennial climber with long, pinnate-leafleted leaves that twines around trees, shrubs, and hedges.	Leaves, roots and seeds.	Seeds contain a toxic substance called abrin.
Bhallataka, Bhallata, Tapana, Arushkara, Agnika, Krimigna, Vatari	*Semicarpus anacardium* Family- Anacardiaceae	Marking nut	It is a deciduous tree. The nut is about25mm long, ovoid and smooth lustrous black.	Seeds	Black fruit is toxic and produces a severe allergic reaction if it is consumed or its resin comes in contact with the skin.
Karaveera,Hayari, Hayamara, Aswamaraka, Aswantaka, Aswaghna, Chandataka.	*Nerium indicum* Family - Apocyanaceae.	Oleander, rose berry.	Evergreen shrub or small tree which is toxic in its all parts.	Roots, bark, seeds and leaves	A water extraction of crushed leaves of *Nerium oleander* yielded 2.3% of a crude polysaccharide. The seed oil in *Nerium oleander* contains about 12% isoricinoleic acid.[33]
Langali, Halini, Seeri, Visalya, Kaliharika, Agnijihwa, Swarnapushpa, Dipta, Naktendupushpika, Vidhyudjwala, Vahnisikha, Langali, Garbhapatini,Hali, Langalini.	*Gloriosa superba* Family- Liliaceae.	Glory lilly, wolf's bane.	It is a climber with leaf tendril and large , solitary and corymbose, showy flowers.	Dried tuberous root	Every part of the plant is poisonous, especially the rhizomes. The plant contains high levels of colchicine, a toxic alkaloid. It also contains the alkaloid gloriocine.
Arka kshira, Raviksheera,Soorya ksheera, Arkadugda,	*Calotropis procera* Family- Apocyanacea	Sodom apple, Mudar	It is a species of flowering plants in the dogbane family.	Root bark, milky exudate, flowers and	Calotropis procera contained many biological active chemical groups including, cardenolides,

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Ravidugda, Sooryadugda.				leaves.	steroids, tannins, glycosides, phenols, terpenoids, sugars, flavonoids, alkaloids and saponins.
Snuhi kshira, Sudhakshira, Sehundaksheera, Snuhidugdha, Sudhadugdha, Snugdugdha.	*Euphorbia nerifoila* Family- Euphoriabiaceae.	Common milk hage.	It is a small tree or big shrub growing to a height of 10-20 feet in dry regions of India.	Milky exudate.	Triterpenoids, euphol, 24-methylene cycloartenol, euphorbol etc

Table 4: Methods of purification, dosage, properties and important formulations of *Upavishas*.

Name of the drug	Method of Sodhana (purification)	Dosage	Properties	Important formulations
Kuchlala	1. Seeds are soaked in *Kanji* for 3 days. On the 4th day , the external cover is removed and dried under sun [15] 2. *Dolayantra swedana* with *godugdha* as medium [16]	¼ gunja to 1 gunja [17] (31mgs–125mg) Anupana- milk, ghee or butter.	*Rasa – Katu* (Pungent) *Guna – Agni deepana, tikshna*, aphrodisiac, *pachana, kaphahara, mutrala, medohara* etc. *Veerya – Ushna* (Hot potency) *Vipaka-* Action – *Grahani, unmadam, admanahara, swasa* etc.	*Agnitundi Rasa, Lakshmivilasa Rasa, Soollanirmoola Rasa, Suptivatari Rasa* etc
Ahiphena	After *Nirmalikarana* procedure, *ahiphena* is taken in a *khalwa yantra* and subjected to *bhavana* with *ardraka swarasa* for 7 times[18]	*¼ gunja to 1 gunja* [19] (31mgs–125mg) Anupana- milk, ghee, butter.	*Rasa- Tiktha* *Guna- grahi, Nidrajanakam*(200nducing sleep) Action- useful in *sannipata jwara,chardi*, acute and chronic *atisara ,vishoochika* etc.[20]	Vedananthaka rasa, Nidrodaya rasa, Sindhoorabhupana rasa, Harshodaya vati, Ahiphenasava, Mangalodaya vati etc.
Jayapala	The seeds of well grown fruits are selected and the external covering of the seeds are removed . The testa (greenish structure inside the seed) is removed and cotyledons are tied in a pottali . Dolayantra swedana is done for 3 hours with cow's milk as the	1/8 – ¼ ratti (15.65 to 31mg) [23] Anupana- Cold water	*Rasa- Tiktha* *Guna-Virechanakara, vanthikrit, Vata-kapha samana.* Useful in *Jalodara, Navajwara, krimi, kushta* [24]	Ichabhedi rasa, Jalodarari rasa, Jwarari rasa, Anjana bhairava rasa, Vrishchika vishahara pralepa.

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	medium[22]			
Dhattura	*Dolayantra swedana* of the seeds done with cow's milk as the medium for 3 hours [25]	*Sudha dhattura bija churna* – ¼ to ½ ratti.(31-62.5mg) *Sudha dattura patra churna*- starting from ½ ratti to 1.5 ratti (62.5- 1.5mg)[26] Anupana- Cow's milk	*Rasa – Katu* *Veerya – Ushna* *Action – Swasasamana* and *kapha samshoshana*(useful in respiratory disorders) Useful in *bahya and abbhyantara sopha, krimi, kushta, jwara*. Cures skin diseases.	Unmadagajankusha rasa, Pralapantaka rasa, Kanakasava.
Vijaya	The dry leaves of *bhanga* is taken along with enough quanity of *'Babbula kwatha'* and it is subjected to *swedana* for half *ghati* (24minutes)[27]	2-4 gunja (250-500mg) [28]	It increases digestion, induces sleep, aphrodisiac, reduced abdominal pain etc	Madanodaya modhaka, Trailokya vijaya vati, Trailkya sammohana rasa.
Gunja	*Dolayanra swedana* of crushed seeds are done with *kanjika* for 1 yama (3 hours) [29]	½ to 1 ½ ratti (62,5-187,5mg)[30]	It is aphrodisiac, effective in *urusthambha, sopha, amavata* etc *Rasa – Madhura, katu*	Gunjadya thailam, Gunja jeevanarasa, Gunjabhadra rasa.
Bhallataka	The seeds along with brick powder are tied in a *pottali* and rubbed thoroughly from outside until the brick powder is soaked with oil from *bhallataka* seeds.[31]	1- 3 gunja (125-375)[32]	*Rasa –Katu, tikta* *Veerya- ushna* *It is rasayana, krimihara, ballakara, subsides gulma, arshas, grahani, kushta etc.*	Bhallataka rasayanam.
Karaveera	----	-----	-----	Karaveeradyam thailam.
Langali	----	------	*Rasa –Katu,* *Veerya- ushna* *Properties – Kaphavata hara, Aparapatini, Sadyaprasava karika,* *Useful in Sopha, Kushta, krimi, parikarthika etc.*	Langalyadi lauha.
Arka ksheera	---	---	*Rasa- Tikta,* *Veerya- Ushna*	----

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			Properties- *Snigdham* Useful in *kushta, gulma, udara, arshas, krimi and dantaroga.* It produces emesis and purgation. Also used in Ksharakarma.	
Snuhi ksheeram	96ml of *Snuhiksheera* is taken 24ml of filtered '*Chinchapatra swarasa'*(Tamarind juice) in a wide mouthed container and placed in sun and dried.			

Table 5: Important formulations in which *Visha* and *Upavisha* as one of the ingredient which are used extensively in Ayurvedic practise.

Bhallataka	***Kupilu***	***Snuhi***	***Dhattura***	***Arka***	***Jayapala***
Sanjeevani Vati	*Agni Tundi Vati*	*Arshakutara Rasa*	*Piyusha Valli Rasa*	*Pravala Panchamruta Rasa*	*Asvakanchuki Rasa*
Narasimha Choornam	*Mahavisha Garbha Thailam*	*Jalodarari Rasa*	*Jayamangala Rasa*	*Soothikabharana Rasa*	*Icchabhedi Rasa*
Amruta Bhallataka Ghritam	*Vishamushti Vati*	*Kaseesadi Thailam*	*Sootasekhara Rasa*	*Maha Vatavidhwamsini Rasa*	*Sukhavirechana Vati*
Prasarini Thailam	*Soolaharana Yogam*	*Abhaya Lavana*	*Tribhuvanakeerthi Rasa*	*Bruhut Marichadia Thailam*	
Panchatikta Guggulu Ghritam	*Krimi Mudgara Rasa*		*Lakshmi Vilasa Rasa*		
Kutajavaleham			*Pushpa Dhanwa Rasa*		
			Kanakasava		

Therapeutic significance: Screening of formulations which commonly practised by Ayurvedic practitioners reveal the extensive use of *Visha* and *Upavishas* drugs. Nearly 160 formulations are mentioned in the Ayurveda formulary of India and about 430 formulatons in Bhaishajya Ratnavali.

General antidotes of *Visha Dravyas*[34]

- *Tankanam* (Borax)
- *Haridra* (Turmeric)
- *Goghrita* (Ghee)
- *Nimba swarasa* (Lemon juice)
- *Go dugdha* (Cow's milk)
- *Ajadugdha* (Goat's milk)

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- *Meghanada rasa*
- *Sarpakshi*
- *Arjuna twak*
- *Putranjivaka*
- *Vandhya karkoti*
- *Gojihwa*
- *Trisulika*
- *Sarpakshi*

Figures of *Upavisha*

Figure 1: *Srychnos nux vomica*

Figure 2: Papaver somniferum

Figure 3: Croton tigilum

Figure 4: Datura metel

Figure 5: Cannabis sativa

Figure 6: Abrus precatorius

Figure 7: Semicarpus anacardium

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Figure 8: Nerium indicum

Figure 9: Gloriosa superba

Figure 10: Calotropis procera

Figure 11: Euphorbia nerifoila

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