

Eye Diseases and their Treatment in Ancient India

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Abstract: Ancient Indian ophthalmology has a significant contribution with respect to the Ayurvedic medical knowledge, especially under the branch Shalakya tantra which covers the diseases of the eye and its related organs. Sushruta Samhita gives an elaborate description of the diseases affecting the eyes and their causes, symptoms, prognosis and treatment particularly in its Uttara Tantra. It recognizes 76 categories of eye-related ailments and categorizes them based on Vata, Pitta, Kapha, blood and the combination of Vata, Pitta and Kapha as well as the external causes. The conditions that are called "cataract" (such as Kacha and Lingānāśa), as well as surgical procedures related to Sushruta, are given special emphasis. Ancient remedies were also Anjana (collyrium), irrigation, fomentation, medicinal application, diet and preventive measures. The present paper reviews the ancient Indian concept of eye diseases and its management with a critical analysis and evaluates the contribution of ancient Indian knowledge in the advancement of ophthalmology.

Keywords: Ancient India, Ayurveda, Eye Diseases, Ophthalmology, Shalakya Tantra, Sushruta Samhita, Cataract, Eye Surgery, Anjana, Ayurvedic Medicine

I. INTRODUCTION

Historically, the sense of vision has been considered one of the most important sensory abilities as it allows people to make sense of what they see, to engage in activities of daily living and to interact appropriately in their social environment. As a result, diseases of the eyes were given much attention in the olden days' medicine. The study and treatment of disorders of the eye in India became an important part of Ayurveda especially of the special branch in which it is studied and treated, Shalakya Tantra, which deals with diseases of eye, ear, nose and throat and related structures.

In classical Ayurvedic literature, there is a description of the details of ocular disorders, their causes, symptoms, anatomical location, prognosis and treatment. The Sushruta Samhita is an important book in this tradition, and particularly the Uttara Tantra, has many references to eye diseases and their cure. The ancient Indian physicians used to regard the disorders of the eyes with the concepts like dosha, dhatu, srotas and agni, which are not present in biomedical concept.

However, the texts show a systematic clinical observation and classification of eye diseases. Special focus was paid to inflammatory diseases, eyelid diseases, visual disturbances, trauma and cataract like diseases. Sushruta's cataract surgery is particularly notable in the history of eye surgery. The exact nature of this procedure is still controversial, but it is thought to be a first attempt to surgical correction of impaired vision. Therefore, the ancient Indian ophthalmology offers a piece of insight into the development of observation, therapeutic practice and surgical knowledge.

II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The principal objectives of the present research are:

1. To explore the evolution of the knowledge of eye diseases in ancient India.
2. To understand the concept of Shalakya Tantra and its significance with eye care.
3. To know the important types of Eye diseases mentioned in classical Ayurvedic literature.



4. To study about the old Indian explanations about causes of eye diseases.
5. To analyse the medicinal and non-surgical methods used for treating eye disorders.
6. To analyse historical evidence about Sushruta's cataract surgery.
7. To evaluate the significance of preventive and behavioural approach in eye care in ancient period in India.
8. To critically analyse the knowledge of the ancient Indians on eye diseases from historical and contemporary standpoint.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

The study "Evaluation of Ayurvedic Measures for the Maintenance of Ocular Health & Prevention of Ocular Disorders" by **Jangra, Ashu and Kumar (2024)**¹ discusses the Ayurvedic strategies for eye health maintenance and prevention of eye-related disorders. Their study revealed about the preventive practices that were discussed with regard to Dincharya, Ritucharya, Sadvritta, Swasthavritta and Chakshushya Rasayana. They also studied various procedures such as Anjana, Netraprakshalana, Padabhyanga, yoga, Pranayama, Neti and Trataka. This study shows that in Ayurvedic Ophthalmology apart from treatment, prevention and preservation of healthy vision was also highlighted.

Sharma et al. (2024)² studied about the Ayurvedic concept of Patala with its association to Netra Sharir and Eye disorders. In their review they pointed to the difficulties encountered in the correlation of the traditional description of the eye with the modern anatomical structures. The authors stressed that the terms like Patala need to be understood in the context of the text and history of the term. Upon their findings they suggest a prudent comparative strategy, when the ancient Ayurvedic concepts on ophthalmology are compared with the modern anatomical knowledge.

Mehar et al. (2023)³ studied the Ayurvedic concept of Drishti and its association with its ocular anatomy and pathology. The authors studied the references to Drishti, Netra Sharir, Patala and conditions like Timira. Their analysis showed that not all the ayurvedic terms could be matched with the corresponding modern ophthalmological structure and/or diagnosis. The study thus highlights the need for 'contextual interpretation' of classical descriptions and adds to the understanding of the ancient Indian concepts of visual function/eye disease.

Kumar, Singh and Manjusha (2023)⁴ conducted a randomized controlled clinical study on the possible role of an Ayurvedic treatment protocol as an adjunct to conventional treatment of diabetic retinopathy. Their work is valuable insight into the linkage of ancient ayurvedic o/a treatment to modern clinical research. Diabetic retinopathy is not an ancient disease category but is one of the modern clinical diseases, however, the study shows that there are ongoing attempts to study Ayurvedic interventions through systematic research methodology and a modern attitude towards the development of Shalakya Tantra.

Vardhan et al (2022)⁵, in their review article, focussed on the ophthalmological knowledge recorded in classical literature of India, highlighting one of the specialized branches of Ayurveda, Shalakya Tantra. They have studied the descriptions of diseases of the eyes, its diagnosis, the medicinal treatments, surgical procedures in classical texts, especially in the Sushruta Samhita. The authors also gave details of Kriya Kalpa procedures like Tarpana, Putapaka,

¹ Jangra, M., Ashu, & Kumar, M. (2024). Maintenance of ocular health by Ayurveda. *Journal of Ayurveda and Integrated Medical Sciences*, 9(3), 173–177. <https://doi.org/10.21760/jaims.9.3.26>

² Sharma, H., Mehar, K., Tripathi, A., Bavalatti, N., Kundal, P., & Sharma, S. (2024). Patala, the layers of eye—Basis of all eye disorders in Ayurveda: A critical review. *International Research Journal of Ayurveda and Yoga*. <https://doi.org/10.48165/IRJAY.2024.70412>

³ Mehar, K., Tripathi, A., Bavalatti, N., & Rajagopala, M. (2023). Ayurvedic concept of *Drishti* and its relevance to ocular anatomy and pathology. *International Research Journal of Ayurveda and Yoga*.

⁴ Kumar, V. K., Singh, B. V. D., & Manjusha, R. (2023). Add-on effect of Ayurvedic treatment protocol for diabetic retinopathy: A randomized controlled clinical study. *AYU*, 42(3), 118–129. https://doi.org/10.4103/ayu.AYU_208_19

⁵ Vardhan, P., Sharma, S., & Fiaz, S. (2022). A brief review of ophthalmology in Indian classical literature. *International Research Journal of Ayurveda and Yoga*, 5(6), 154–162. <https://doi.org/10.47223/IRJAY.2022.5624>



Seka, Aschyotana and Anjana. Their review helps in the understanding of the evolution of specialised ophthalmological knowledge in ancient India.

IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research Design

It is qualitative, historical and descriptive study that aims to study about the eye diseases and its treatment in ancient India. It explores the evolution of ophthalmological knowledge by studying classical Ayurvedic textbooks, including descriptions of the disease, treatment and surgery, and adds the interpretations of the time, as derived from modern scholarship⁶.

4.2 Primary Sources

The primary sources that are available and are mainly used are the Sushruta Samhita especially the Uttara Tantra. The study covers its description of the ocular diseases, classification, cause, symptoms, prognosis, medicinal treatment and surgical procedures for prevention. These descriptions are explained based on the ancient ayurvedic medical knowledge and theory.

4.3 Secondary Sources

Secondary Sources are scholarly books, research articles, historical research and academic publications dealing with Ayurveda, Sushruta, ancient Indian medicine and ophthalmology. The ancient writings and treatment are critically evaluated by using the modern historical and biomedical literature, which offers context and helps interpret the ancient descriptions and therapeutic options..

4.4 Data Collection

Data are gathered by studying the classic Ayurvedic books and scientific articles. Special emphasis is placed on the text on eye diseases, what they entail, what causes them, how they are classified and treated, and how to prevent them and how they are surgically managed. There is also a reference of the relevant historical facts on the ophthalmological practice of the ancient Indians.

4.5 Data Analysis

The information that is collected is analysed descriptively and interpretatively. The classification of eye diseases is in terms of aetiology, signs symptoms, anatomical site and treatment. The treatment method are discussed thematically to reveal patterns in ancient Indian knowledge about the eye and the significance of the same in the field of medicine⁷.

4.6 Comparative Analysis

Cautiously, the selected ancient descriptions are compared with the modern concepts of ophthalmology. These comparisons emphasize general similarities in clinical aspects instead of exact comparisons. The ancient categorisation of diseases in Ayurveda is understood in its historical context, rather than assuming that these categories are equivalent to current biomedical diagnostic categories.

4.7 Historical Interpretation

The study examines the historical significance of the knowledge of ancient Indian eyesight, especially that of Sushruta. It takes into account the evolution of clinical observation, diseases classification, drug and surgical treatment. The analysis is also mindful of the inability to apply solely modern scientific terminology to explain old times and methods of medicine.

⁶ Gunjal, S., & Gaikwad, S. C. (2022). Ayurveda review on eye diseases, their diagnosis and management. *International Journal of AYUSH*, 11(5), 39–45.

⁷ Premcy, C. R. (2022). Management of *Shushkakshipaka* w.s.r. to dry eye syndrome: A single case study. *Journal of Ayurveda and Integrated Medical Sciences*, 7(5).



4.8 Scope and Limitations

The primary focus of the study is mainly on the textual and historical evidence relating to the eye diseases and its treatment in ancient India. Does not assess traditional therapies in an experimental way. Thus, conclusions are only about knowledge and practices in the past and not about current efficacy, safety or validity of Ayurvedic eye care practices⁸.

Result:

Table 1: Proposed Bar-Graph Data for Research Methodology

S. No.	Research Methodology Component	Proposed Weight (%)
1	Research Design	10
2	Primary Sources	20
3	Secondary Sources	15
4	Data Collection	15
5	Data Analysis	15
6	Comparative Analysis	10
7	Historical Interpretation	10
8	Scope and Limitations	5
Total	Overall Methodology	100

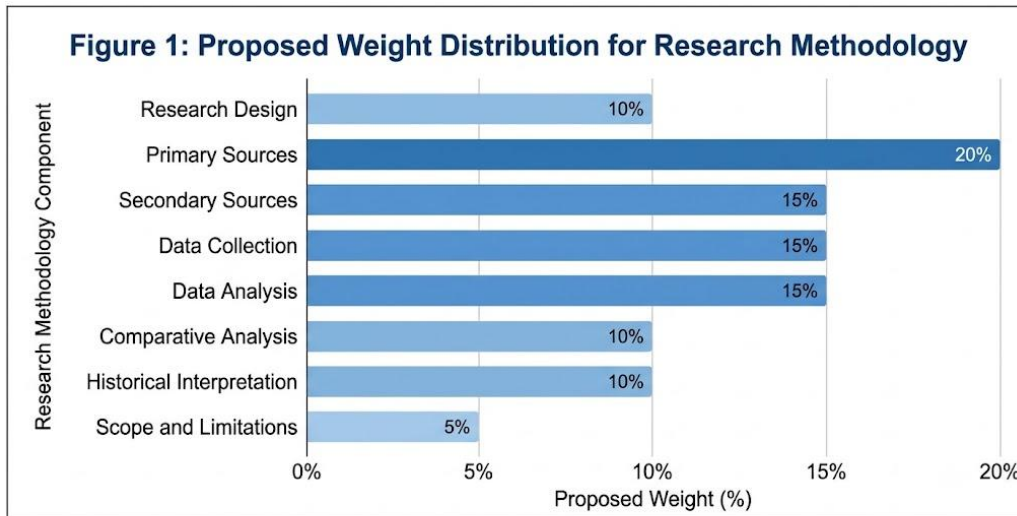
Interpretation :

The data represented in the proposed bar-graph are the relative emphasis given to the various methodological components in the present study. The highest weightage (20%) is given to Primary Sources as the Sushruta Samhita, especially the Uttara Tantra, is the key source for understanding the ophthalmological knowledge of ancient India. Each Secondary Sources, Data Collection, and Data Analysis receives 15% of the marks, showing that there is a significant role for each of these in supporting, organizing and interpreting the historical evidence. The supporting elements of Research Design, Comparative Analysis, and Historical Interpretation, all receive a 10% each, showing that they are all of equal importance in setting up the research framework and in providing a context for the ancient medical practice. The role of Scope and Limitations is similar to that of the other aspects of the study, albeit in a limited manner, it is important and that is the reason for its 5% allocation. The distribution is generally focused on providing ample evidence from the text, and includes a balance of historically interpreting, comparing and evaluating, and systematically analyzing⁹.

⁸ Meena, R., Vardhan, P., & Pamnani, G. C. (2024). *Netra Putpaka Kriya Kalpa*: An Ayurvedic perspective on ocular treatment. *International Research Journal of Ayurveda and Yoga*.

⁹ Timmapur, G. M., & Fiaz, S. (2021). Efficacy of Triphala Ghrita and Goghrita Manda Tarpana in the management of *Shushkakshipaka* w.s.r. to dry eye syndrome: An open-labelled randomized comparative clinical trial. *AYU*, 41(1), 52–57. https://doi.org/10.4103/ayu.AYU_108_18





Source: Data from Table 1, Proposed Bar-Graph Data for Research Methodology.

Note: Total Weight = 100%

V. OPHTHALMOLOGY IN ANCIENT INDIAN MEDICAL TRADITION

5.1 The Concept of Shalakya Tantra

Traditionally, Shalakya Tantra is considered as one of the specialties of Ayurveda. It is mainly concerned with diseases affecting the head and the sense organs, especially the eyes, ears, nose and throat. The name is linked with the word "shalaka" which means a probe, or slender apparatus, and is applicable where special instruments are needed in procedures to deal with delicate anatomical structures¹⁰.

Many diseases of the eye receive attention in the classical literature. A modern compendious resumé of Indian classical medical literature records, that Shalakya Tantra gives detailed systematic descriptions of eye diseases and treatments. This is a specialism that has developed, showing that eye diseases were not just regarded as symptoms of the general condition. But rather they were approached in terms of diagnostic categories and specialized therapeutic procedures.

5.2 The Sushruta Samhita and Uttara Tantra

The Sushruta Samhita has been an important book on Indian medicine and surgery. It has a wealth of information on diseases of the eye or other organs of the head in its Uttara Tantra. The text elaborates on ocular diseases based on the etiological factors, anatomical sites, clinical symptoms, prognosis and therapeutic management of the disease¹¹.

But the ophthalmological material of the Uttara Tantra has special importance, as it is a comparatively well attempt to systematically arrange diseases based on their clinical features. There are seventy-six different types of eye disease that are identified in the text. These are classified based on the presumed etiology and location in the body.

This classification shows the significance of disease of the eyes in the Ayurvedic medical system.

VI. CLASSIFICATION OF EYE DISEASES

The Sushruta Samhita states that there were 76 different types of eye disease. They are categorized based on the predominance of the three doshas, blood, combination of the three doshas and external causes.

¹⁰ Niras, A. (2022). A critical review on glaucoma and its management in Ayurveda. *International Journal of Indian Medicine*, 3(3), 14–20. <https://doi.org/10.55552/IJIM.2022.3402>

¹¹ Meena, R., Vardhan, P., & Pamnani, G. C. (2024). *Netra Putpaka Kriya Kalpa*: An Ayurvedic perspective on ocular treatment. *International Research Journal of Ayurveda and Yoga*. <https://doi.org/10.48165/IRJAY.2024.70208>



Basis of Classification	Number of Diseases
Vata-related	10
Pitta-related	10
Kapha-related	13
Blood-related	16
Tridoshic/combined	25
External/traumatic	2
Total	76

It was also classified the disorders of the eye by their location. These were the Sandhi or junctional areas, Vartma or eyelids, Vartma-shukla or Vartma-krishna, the whole eyeball and the area of Drishti.

In this way two major features of the ancient Indian ophthalmology are demonstrated. A theoretical explanation of disease was correlated with the classification of disease using an etiological theory of the doshas, for the first time. Second, disorders were categorized geographically: The old ideas about anatomy do not exactly match up to the present ideas about ophthalmic anatomy, but the idea of localization of disease has historical importance¹².

VII. CAUSES OF EYE DISEASES

According to Sushruta Samhita there are many factors which are considered to contribute to the occurrence of the ocular diseases. These include over exposure to sunlight, heat and then water exposure rapidly, looking at things for too long in the day, daytime sleep, night-time wakefulness, crying too much, tiredness, emotional upset, trauma, smoke, dust and over concentration on visual things and some dietary items.

Also, the text relates eye problems to dysfunction of the body's normal functions and to wrongful living habits. This type of description shows an important aspect of ancient Indian ophthalmology, as a preventive medicine¹³.

Taking a modern view of these observations, some of them can be viewed as being early examples of the understanding of a link between environmental and behavioural factors and eye health, albeit in a different explanatory context. For example, smoke and dust are now known to be environmental irritants as well as extended exposure to high intensity sunlight is relevant to the health of the eyes. Yet, it is important to note that medical interpretation of any ancient causal statement does not presume that it is scientifically proven.

VIII. MAJOR EYE DISEASES DESCRIBED IN ANCIENT INDIA

8.1 Abhishyanda

According to Ayurvedic texts, one of the eye diseases is called as Abhishyanda. It is marked by the signs and symptoms of oculitis and lacrimation. Various symptoms were described of different doshas.

The condition has been described more generally in terms of inflammatory or conjunctival diseases but no direct attempt is made to equate with a modern diagnosis as the diagnostic approach is quite different.

Therapy was targeted at the presumed root cause dosha and local and systemic therapy were used.

8.2 Adhimantha

In classical literature, another condition of the eyes is mentioned, namely Adhimantha. Descriptions focus on pain and inflammatory aspects. Some contemporary historical views have equated some of the types of Adhimantha with pressure or inflammatory diseases of the eyes.

¹² Lin, H. T., Yang, Y. C., Hsu, C. C., & Chen, C. W. (2020). The history of cataract surgery: From couching to phacoemulsification. *Annals of Translational Medicine*, 8(22), 1546. <https://doi.org/10.21037/atm-2019-rs-04>

¹³ Gunjal, S., & Gaikwad, S. C. (2022). Ayurveda review on eye diseases: Their diagnosis and management. *International Journal of AYUSH*, 11(5), 39–45.



In the ancient text, it was differentiated based on various dosha categories and prognosis and therapeutic management of the condition was discussed.

8.3 Kacha and Linganasha

Cataract is one of the most important diseases of the past of ancient Indian ophthalmology. The words Kacha and Linganasha are found in Ayurvedic references to lens and/or visual axis disorders of sight¹⁴.

It is especially important to realize the significance of cataract surgery as described in the surgical context with Sushruta. Analysis of historical texts, the Sushruta Samhita, suggests that cataract was considered to be a disorder of the visual apparatus, and that there was an understanding that surgery could be attempted when suitable.

8.4 Pakshma-kopa

Pakshma-kopa is related to eye-lashes that are abnormal or oriented towards the eye. In the past it has been said to be similar to trichiasis.

Eyelash related ocular injury is evidence that disorders of the surface of the eye are given due consideration, along with the eyelids and their associated conditions.

8.5 Pothaki and Other Eyelid Disorders

There are a number of diseases involving the eyelids described in ancient Indian texts, some of which are characterized by inflammation, and some also by abnormal growth. Medicinal and, if necessary, surgical treatment was used for these.

These descriptions provide a good example of the awareness of the connection between eyelid disease and function among ancient physicians¹⁵.

IX. DISCUSSION

The findings of this research work suggest that eye diseases were an important field of specialization in ancient Indian medicine. The book Sushruta Samhita is of special significance because its Uttara Tantra gives a detailed classification of the eye diseases, talks about their etiologies, clinical features, and there are many treatments described.

The classification of seventy-six eye diseases is of historical importance as a result of an attempt to establish a structured nosology. Its etiological and anatomical classification was a part of its theoretical basis, but this differed from the theoretical basis of modern ophthalmology.

The ancient Indian way also exemplifies the preventive, medical and surgical practices. This meant that the doctor did not have to just do the surgery. Instead the physician was supposed to evaluate the patient's condition, determine the nature of the disorder, and then make a prognosis and choose the proper intervention.

Insurgery for the cataract is a surgery which is the most well known of Sushruta's oculist work worldwide. But the historical facts tell a more complex story. The procedure was a precursor of operative treatment of cataract, although the nature of it is not clear.

The wider significance of this tradition is that of the growing clinical expertise and the practice of surgery. It's one of multiple historical routes, which have been taken by human societies in an attempt to understand and treat visual disorders.

¹⁴ Bagade, J. N. (2022). Evaluation of action of *Netra Anjana* in maintaining *Netra Swasthya*. *Journal of Ayurveda and Integrated Medical Sciences*, 7(11).

¹⁵ Bansode, A., & Dhakate, V. G. (2023). An Ayurvedic management on *Shushkakshipaka* (dry eye syndrome): A case report. *Journal of Ayurveda and Integrated Medical Sciences*, 8(12), 261–264. <https://doi.org/10.21760/jaims.8.12.39>



X. CONCLUSION

In India, eye diseases and their treatment was studied and treated in an ancient way, which shows a great amount of knowledge and specialization in this field. The physicians of ancient India, in the process of defining Shalaky Tantra and the Sushruta Samhita, made detailed descriptions of eye diseases, the supposed causes of them, their anatomical location, symptoms, prognosis and treatment.

The classification of seventy-six eye diseases is only one example of the systematics of ancient Indian ophthalmological thinking. Therapy involved local application of medicines, Anjana, irrigation, external treatments, dietary regimen, behaviour and surgery. Of these, the surgical treatment of cataract is the most historically important.

Nevertheless, the history of ancient Indian ophthalmology needs to be understood in the context of the intellectual and medical background of that period. The explanations for its dosha-based explanations cannot be directly compared with modern pathology and the treatments of the traditional medicines should not automatically be considered as scientifically proven contemporary medicines.

The ancient Indian medicine, however, was well versed in the observation and treatment of eye disease and conditions, as evidenced in the historical records. The classical texts give significant clues as to the history of medicine, surgery and scientific ideas in India in the ophthalmological sections. Their study makes a valuable contribution to the growing knowledge of how early medical practitioners understood disease, classified it and tried therapeutic and surgical treatments.

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