EVOLUTION OF KUŞTA

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Amongst the number of drugs mentioned in the ancient Āyurvedic classics, the drug Kuşta (Saussurea lappa Clarke) a rare Himalayan herb is used in various human pathologies. It is used as an aphrodisiac tonic and as a valuable remedy in asthma and chest complaints. Often an adulterated or an altogether different spurious and much cheaper stuff is sold in the market as Kuşta. The present study was undertaken with a view to give detailed account of evolution of the drug and its adulterants.

Kuşta has been mentioned as an important drug in Atharvaveda. According to certain references of Atharvaveda it is thought to be growing in Amśta Sarovara in the Himalaya along with Somā (Dravyaguna Viśṇuṇa by P. V. Shrima, Part IV, p. 51). Like Somā it is said to have grown in the third heaven under the famous Āśvastha tree where gods assembled and thence it was brought in a golden ship. As a remedy, it held the highest place among the herbs bearing auspicious names, Naghā, Naghamarā and styled as the offsprings of Jīvalā, the living one. Regarding its property it is said that it cures diseases of bodily affection especially fever (hence called fever destroyer), and consumption (Yakṣmā). From its general property, it was also named all healing (Viśvanheṇa). Its aromatic qualities were apparently known as it is classed with salve (Anjana) and nard (Nalad) (Kau. Sūt. 35, 27 and 38.9). This drug is widely referred in many diseases as a single drug or in compound form by the classics of Bṛhatraī. Some important points are discussed here.

In Caraka Saṃhitā (1000 B. C.) the drug kuṣṭa has been mentioned under sūtra, vimāna, cikitsā, and siddhi sthān mostly for the treatment of vāta and kapha predominant diseases. Here the drug was prescribed as vāthar pradeha (sūt. 3.20), lakhanīya-mahākāśya (sūt. 3.23), vātnābak pradeha (sūt. 25.40) and also in hydroga (Ch. 26.101).

In Sukrtra Saṃhitā (1000 B. C.) kuṣṭa is described under elādīgana (sūt. 38.24), mustādīgana (sūt. 38.54), and vālasāmana (sūt. 39.65).

Dalhana (12th century A.D.), commentator of Suṅruta Saṃhitā and botanist of Āyurveda, suggested that kuṣṭa and puṣkarmūla are the same plant, the difference in name being due to the part used. The root of the plant is used as puṣkarmūla and the whole plant or its branches are used as kuṣṭa.

Śivās-Sena (15th century, A.D.) commentator of Cakradatta of Cakrapāṇi, mentioned kuṣṭa as a substitute for puṣkarmūla. He also stated that if puṣkarmūla is not available, kuṣṭa should be used.

In Cikitsā grantha i.e. Cakradatta (11th century A.D.) Śāraṅgadhāra Saṃhitā (13th century A.D.), Bhāvaprakāśa (16th century A.D.) and Yogaratnakara (17th century A.D.), the drug kuṣṭa is prescribed for the treatment of many diseases, viz., āṁavāta (Cak. datt., 59.36), hṛdṛoga (Cak. Datt., 7.160), kāś svās (Śār. Saṃ., 2.134), pārśva śūla (Bhāvaprak., 26.116), and prameha (Bhāvaprak., 38.47) in a single or in a compound form.

A study of Nīghanṭus of both the medieval and modern periods reveals that kuṣṭa was known by various synonyms i.e. aqad, jivala, kāśmirajā, etc. Aṣṭāṅga Nīghanṭu, Paryāyaratnamālā, Rājaballabha Nīghanṭu dealt with synonyms only, while Dhanvantariya, Śoḍhāl, Madanapāla and Kaidera Nīghanṭus dealt with the synonyms as well as properties of kuṣṭa i.e. kuṣṭhaghaṇa, krmīghna and pramehaghaṇa. Bhāvaprakāśa Nīghanṭu mentioned kuṣṭhā bhedā for puṣkarmūla and kāśmirajā for kuṣṭha.

An important Sanskrit lexicon (Amara Koṣa,) has mention of Kuṣṭa. Its commentators like Kṛṣirasvāmi (11th century A.D.) and Bhānuji Dikṣita, while giving the etymology seem to have accepted that these words have been derived from the habitats*, general characters**, and properties*** of the drug. Similarly Śiva Koṣa (17th century A.D.) a Sanskrit lexicon describes synonymous terms of kuṣṭa as mentioned earlier.

Kuṣṭa (Saussurea lappa Clarke, family Compositae) has been described in almost all the text of modern materia medica viz. Flora of British India by Hooker, Indian Medicinal Plants by Kirtikar and Basu, Glossary of Indian Medicinal Plants by Chopra et al. and also in Wealth of India, a C.S.I.R., New Delhi publication. Its description is mainly based on botanical characteristics, pharmacological

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*Vāpya (vāpli vyāpta) means it grows in the vicinity of Vapie.

**Utpala (utpala-puṣpa sa-patrām) means its flowers are like utpala (locus).

***Kuṣṭam (kuśanārogaṃ) means it kills many diseases and pākal (pākam-lāti) means it produces pāka, which indicates its úṣṇa vírya.
action and therapeutic uses. It is a tall, stout herb with annual stem and thick perennial roots. Leaves are small and petioles of the leaf almost clasp the stem. Fruits are achene and the hairs on the fruits are pappus (Fig. 1). The fresh root is stout, has the shape of a carrot and grows up to 0.6 m in length and 0.3 m in girth (Figs. 2 & 3). It possesses a characteristic penetrating odour and is somewhat
bitter in taste. It is found in Kashmir and surrounding areas and grows freely on moist slopes of 8,000 to 13,000 ft. (Fig. 4). The roots contain an alkaloid Saussurine.

Fig. 3. Root of *S. lappa* Clarke.

Fig. 4. *Saussurea lappa* Clarke in ecological state.
0.5%, essential oil 5%, bitter resin, Kuṣṭhin 6.0%, inulin 1.8%, and volatile oil 1%. The drug is used as antiseptic, antispasmodic and in cardiac problems. Its rasāyana and vājikarana properties are also reported.

There are many drugs very similar to kuṣṭa in their structural and functional aspects, and used as substitutes or adulterants.

**Discussion**

When we turn over the pages right from Vedic era (600 B.C.), we find that kuṣṭa has been mentioned as a reputed drug for its excellent response in various human pathologies.

While going through the literature of Bṛhatāra, it is found that kuṣṭa is mentioned for various therapeutic purposes. There was no mention of identity or synonyms of kuṣṭa. But the commentators of Sūkrūta and Caraka Samhitās created confusion by giving different names for substitutes and adulterants.

Sufficient information for post-Samhitā period is available in the literature of Kogaś and Nighaṇṭus. These mention synonyms, derivation and in some cases property. A critical study of kuṣṭa in Nighaṇṭus reveals that Dhanvantariya Nighaṇṭu (10th century A.D.) had a very clear view on kuṣṭa and that there was no problem of identity. But in the 16th century A.D. Bhāvaprakāśa put more controversy in nomenclature and identity of kuṣṭa and puṣkarmūla.

Not only in Nighaṇṭus but also in the text of modern materia medica the drug kuṣṭa has occupied an important place. It attracted attention of famous authors like Ainslie who described kuṣṭa as a root of Costus speciosus (Asiatic Researches, Vol. II, p. 349). Dioscorides said that best qualities of kuṣṭa should be light coloured, compact, devoid of acrid smell and should have a firm texture. Falconer proved beyond doubt that kuṣṭa of upper India was the root of Aucklandia costus (Syn. Saussurea lappa).

Sarkar, however, tried to prove at great length by quoting Patanjali and Ayurvedic pharmacopoea (Indian J. Pharm., Vol. I, p. 52-67) that Saussurea lappa is not kuṣṭa but puṣkarmūla. According to him Costus speciosus, which has been designated by Kirtikar and Basu, is really kuṣṭa and the Ayurvedic pharmacopoea of later period permitted the use of kuṣṭa in place of puṣkarmūla.

Costus speciosus (Fig. 5) is sometimes confused with Saussurea lappa (Fig. 2 and 3) and both the plants are known as kuṣṭa in Sanskrit. While kuṣṭa is the trade name of samples of Saussurea lappa, the ancient vernacular name “Keo’ should be given to Costus speciosus. The resemblance of the roots of toonis or Iris germanica (Fig. 6) is also reported.
Fig. 5. *Costus speciosus*.

Fig. 6. *Iris germanica*. 

The natives of Kashmir say that this drug is adulterated with other kinds of roots viz of *Inula racemosa*, *Costus speciosus*, *Iris germanica*, *Aconitum heterophyllum*, etc. Another communication made to the Horticulture Society of India, Amritsar states that “Kut” is adulterated not only with “Tut” but the principal substitute seems to be a species of *Ligularia*. The roots are collected in enormous quantities in the mountains of Kashmir and find their way all over India and are also exported to China and Red Sea countries.

**Conclusion**

On summarising, it may be concluded that the drug *kuṣṭa* (*Saussurea lappa*) seems to have been in use since the Vedic era. In *Saṃhitā* period, the drug became more prominent and its widespread use shows its importance and popularity.

The commentator’s views created controversy and produced substitutes. *Nighantu* like Dhanvantariya, Rāja, and Pāryāyaratnamālā had no problem pertaining to identification and use of *kuṣṭa*. But in 16th century A.D. Bhāvaprakāśa again created confusion by giving the name *kuṣṭabheda* for *puṣkarmūla*. Later in the beginning of the 19th century A.D. Falconer made it clear that there were two drugs having distinct features, one was *kuṣṭa* and the other was *puṣkarmūla*. He also named *kuṣṭa* as *Saussurea lappa* and *puṣkarmūla* as *Inula racemosa*.

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