



**REVIEW ON CONCEPT OF VARNA (SKIN COMPLEXION) IN
AYURVEDA**
Review Article

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ABSTRACT

Ayurveda has given broad meaning to *Varna* by denoting a wide range of synonyms as *Prabha*, *Kanthi*, *Rupa* and *Chaya*. A lot of people concern about their external beauty especially about skin colour. The objective of this study was to enlighten the knowledge of researchers who seek to clarify doubts regarding the skin complexion and its comprising factors. As per Ayurveda, skin consists of seven layers. First is *Avabhasini*, it expresses all *Varna* and illuminates five kinds of *Chaya* (shades/ complexion). *Varnottpatti* is initiated from *Garbhavastha*, controlled by several factors after the birth. *Panca Mahabhutha*, *Thridosa*, *Prakrithi*, *Garbhini paricharya*, *Garbhini Manobhava*, *Thriguna*, *Athma*, *Sukra* and *Gothra* are involved in formation of *Varna* during the *Garbhavastha*. *Jataragni*, *Ahara*, *Dhathu*, *Sara* and *Ojas* affect *Varna* mainly after birth. Behaviors and regimens like *Nidra*, *Ahara Viharana*, *Sneha Karma*, *Sweda Karma*, *Thaila Abhyanga*, *Udvartana*, *Anulepana* and *Vyayama* effect on skin complexion. According to the modern review, the complexion is mainly determined by the melanocytes and the melanin pigments that contributed by several factors as intrinsic and extrinsic. Both Ayurveda and modern sciences commented that the complexion is changed due to the involvement of behaviors and regimens including physical and mental states. It can be concluded that the *Varna* is determined by conglomeration of factors including internal and external. Though the *Varna* is mainly determined by the inherited factors, it can be changed due to environmental factors, behaviors and regimens. *Varna* can be improved by the following guidance and some treatment modalities mentioned in Ayurveda.

Keywords: Ayurveda, *Varna*, Factors, *Chaya*

INTRODUCTION

According to Ayurveda, the word *Varna* means complexion, colour, glowing and lustre of the skin of human body. Ayurveda has given broad meaning to *Varna* by denoting a wide range of synonyms as *Prabha*, *Kanthi*, *Rupa* and *Chaya* etc.

As per the modern view of skin, it comes in a wide variety of colours, varying from shades of dark brown to almost white.

A lot of people today are concerned about their external beauty specially about skin colour and the global cosmetics market size was valued at \$380.2 billion in 2019. Presently, cosmetics have become a vital feature of modern lifestyle of individuals. In addition, growth in consciousness about outside beauty along with individual's internal intellect has become one of the major controlling factors for use of cosmetics in the global market.

Since skin colour is determined by the many factors it is impracticable to focus only on external cosmetics and this account can be used as a reference for a detailed analysis of the skin. The provided correlation between modern and Ayurveda aspects can be of great value for those who seek to acquire knowledge on both the streams.

The skin colour of the individual is influenced by numerous factors, the most significant is its content of a pigment called melanin. Melanin is also the pigment responsible for determining eye and hair colour. Levels of melanin are primarily determined by genetics; individuals born to dark-skinned parents will inherit their parent's dark skin, as individuals born to fair-skinned parents will inherit fair skin. It is evident that two types of factors influence the skin pigmentation according to modern medicine called Intrinsic factors and Extrinsic factors.

Factors that are inherited at birth, which cannot be changed, are referred to as intrinsic factors. Melanin is considered as a pigment found in skin cells. There are two types of melanin which have strikingly different effects on skin pigmentation. Eumelanin creates dark brown pigmentation which is the primary melanin presented in darkly pigmented skin. Since eumelanin is insoluble, its skin-darkening (tanning) effects last a relatively long time. Pheomelanin which is soluble reddens the skin temporarily. It is a red-yellow coloured pigment and the primary type of melanin in fair-skinned individuals. Other such pigments that influence the skin colour are hemoglobin and carotene. Hemoglobin is a red pigment running in the blood vessels. It makes skin redder in places where the blood vessels

come closer to the surface (lips). Carotene is an orange/yellow pigment found in the skin as well as mostly in yellow and orange vegetables. Taking excessive number of vegetables like carrots over a long period of time leads to change the skin colour.

Extrinsic factors, things outside the body, also effect skin colour and give acquired pigmentation. Exposure to ultraviolet (UV) radiation from the sun is the most significant extrinsic factor. The sun projects UVA and UVB rays and the different types of UV rays have different effects on skin pigmentation. Exposure to UVA rays generate immediate pigmentation by inducing melanin which has already been produced and is waiting in the skin's upper layers. The pigmentation which occurs several days after sun exposure is a result of new melanin being produced in response to UVB exposure.¹

By this compendium, we hope to enlighten the knowledge of bachelor's who seek to clarify their doubts regarding skin and its related disease prognosis.

Varnothpaththi is a comprehensive process consisting of many factors. It can be categorized into main two entities:

- A) Internal factors²⁻⁴⁷
- B) External factors⁴⁸⁻⁵⁷

A) Internal factors involving in formation of Layers and Varna of Skin

According to Acharya Caraka, skin factor derived from the mother.² He has mentioned the four types of *Prakriti Varna* of human beings as *Krisna, Shyava, Shyavaavadhata* and *Avadhata*. Contrarily, he has mentioned the five types of *Vikrithi Varnas* as *Nila, Shyama, Tamra, Haritha* and *Shukla*.³ He further states that persons who are highly white/fair or highly black/dark in colour considered as two

kinds of *Nindithiya Purusha* out of eight types.⁴ According to his advice on the account of the examination of patients, the wise physician should consider about the *Prakrithi* and *Vikrithi Varnas* of the skin to differentiate the various pathological condition of the body including *Arishta Lakshana*.⁵

In the chapter of *Khuddhika Garbavakranthi Shareera*, *Acharya Caraka* has mentioned that the complexion determined during the fetal period. A healthy embryo formed due to the coitus of man and women who are having *Anupahatha Shukra* and *Shonitha*. After the association with *Jivathma*, it enters the uterus. It grows the involvement of *Rasa* which is governed from the mother and divided into major and minor body parts including the important factors as *Bala* and *Varna*. This *Garba* consists of *Bavas* of *Matrija*, *Pithrija*, *Athmaja*, *Sattavaja*, *Sathmyaja*, and *Rasaja*.⁶

Acharya Susrutha has mentioned the formation of skin with the involvement of *Shukra* and *Shonitha*. The Union of *Shukra* (spermatozoon) and *Shonita* (ovum) while being cooked (processed by heat) gives rise to the seven (layers of) *Tvaca* (skin), just like the formation of cream when milk boiled. He named the first layer of skin as *Avabhasini*. The term *Avabhasini* literary means the reflector in functioning. It expresses all the *varna* (colour), illuminates the five kinds of *Chaya* (shades of colour/complexions) is of eighteen parts of *Vrihi* (paddy/rice grain) in thickness and is the seat of diseases like *Sidhma* and *Padmakantaka*.⁷

Ayurveda has mentioned set of internal factors which affect with the skin complexion. According to *Acharya Caraka*, in the sixth month of pregnancy, the strength and complexion of the fetus

are higher than in other months and if delivery has occurred the most severe damages occur to the *Bala* and *Varna* of the mother.⁸

As per *Acarya Vagbhatta*, in the sixth month of pregnancy, the tendons, veins, hair, strength, colour, nails and skin become manifested.⁹

Both *Acharya Caraka* and *Susrutha* explained the role of *Pancamahabhuta* for the determination of skin colour. *Acharya Caraka*'s view of the effectiveness of *Pancamahabhuta* on the origin of skin colour is unique. He has quoted that *Avadatha* (white complexion) determined by the predominant association of *Agni*, *Udaka* and *Anthareeksa Mahabhutas* in the foetal period. In the same way, *Krishna Varna* (black complexion) formed due to the predominance of *Prithvi* and *Vayu Mahabhutas* and *Shyamavarna* (brown complexion) determined by the involvement of all *Mahabhutas* in equal proportion. Under the chapter of *Mahagarbashaareera*, *Acarya Caraka* mentions, *Rupa*, *Darshana*, *Prakasha*, *Pakthi* and *Ushna* forms by the involvement of *Agni Mahabhutha*.¹⁰

Similarly, *Acarya Susrutha* has quoted complexion is determined by the *Teja Mahabhutha*. *Tejas* element is the causative factor of complexion at the time of conception. If it predominantly associates *Ap* element. It bestows the foetus a fair complexion and the predominance of *Prithivi* element causes a black one. He further describes *Prithivi* and *Akasha* elements give rise to blackish complexion while *Ap* and *Akasha* element makes a fair complexion to the fetus.¹¹

Tridosha defines the three fundamental energies of the body on the physical and emotional aspects. According to *Acarya Vagbhatta*, *Pitta* in its normal state attends

to digestion, maintenance of body temperature, vision, and production of hunger, thirst, appetite, complexion, intelligence, courage, valour and softness of the body and when increased produces a yellow colouration of the skin.¹² Type of *Pitta* located in the skin is *Brajaka* because it helps the exhibition of complexion.¹³

Acharya Caraka, in the *Thrishothiya Adhyaya*, of *Sutrasthana* describes the normal functions of *Pitta* as *Darshana*, *Pakthi*, *Ushma*, *Kshut*, *Trishna*, *Mardhava*, *Prabha*, *Prasada* and *Medha*. Here the word *Prabha* describes bestowing of complexion to the skin is a normal function of *Pitta*.¹⁴

Acharya Susruta highlights the fact that *Pitta* present in the skin is *Brajakagni*. It is responsible for the expression of the colour of the skin.¹⁵

The term *Prakrithi* mentioned in various branches of Indian philosophies like *Upanishad*, *Veda*, *Ramayanaya*, *Purana*, *Mahabharatha* and *Samhitas*. In Ayurveda main seven types *Prakrithi* have been described.¹⁶

According to *Acharya Caraka*, the *Prakrithi* of a human being is not determined by a single factor. It is a conglomeration of *Shukrasronitha Prakrithi*, *Matruaharaviharana Prakrithi*, *Kalagarbhasaya Prakrithi* and *Mahabhuta Prakrithi*.¹⁷ In *Shareerasthana*, it has been clearly mentioned that the personality of human including the development and compactness of body parts, the quality of *Bala*, *Varna*, *Sattva*, *Sanhanana* etc. are determined by the *Prakrithi*.¹⁸

As per *Acharya Vaghbhatta*, as far as *Prakrithi* is concerned *Vata Prakrithi* people have *Bhuri*, *Krisna* (black) or *Dhusara* (grey) colour skin. In *Pitta Prakriti* people have clear and *Tamra Vvarna* (coppery colour) skin and among

the *Kapha Prakrithi* individual, the body colour maybe like *Durva*, *Indivara*, sword, fresh *Nimba* fruit, *Priyangu* or *Sarakanda* and it is *Shukla* (whitish colour).¹⁹

Ayurveda defines the unique concept on *Varnotpatti* in relation to *Garbaniparicarya*, *Mathurahara* as well as psychology of mother. After the combination of *Shukra* and *Shonitha*, the *Athma* combines with the developing embryo and consciousness is occurred. *Acarya Caraka* has specially quoted that *Gharba* developed by the nutrients from mother's *Rasa*. The proper conduction of *Garbaniparicarya* makes the baby healthy with the optimum level of energy, compactness, mind and complexion.²⁰

As per *Acharya Susruta*, Growth of the fetus brought by *Rasa* and *Maruthadhamana*.²¹ The *Nabhinadi* of the fetus connects with the *Rasavahanadi* of the mother. This cord conveys the essence of food and vitality from the mother that nourishes the foetus. The foetus develops from the time of deposition until all the major and minor parts which are undeveloped become clearly differentiated and developed fully. The foetus derives its nourishment by Law of *Upasnehana* way through the *Rasavahadhamani* which spread obliquely.²² So, the dietary pattern of the mother is directly influencing to determine the condition of various factors in fetus including the complexion.

According to *Acarya Caraka*, excessive intake of *Amla Rasa* by the mother during the period of pregnancy leads to skin disorder of child in later life and *Kasaya Rasa* causes to the child having *Shyava Varna* skin. The women who excessively consume *Amla Rasa* may deliver a child having *Rathpitta* condition or various skin diseases. On the other hand, if she has taken *Kashaya Rasa* in high amounts, it

will cause to delivery of a baby who has *Shyava* colour skin.²³ Also, the pregnant mother who consumes gruel prepared with milk and mixed with ghee in eight months of pregnancy will be delivering a baby who is having ideal complexion.²⁴

According to *Acarya Vagbhata*, excessive intake *Madhura Rasa* substances during the period of pregnancy, the skin colour of the baby will be *Gaura Varna* (whitish-yellow) and *Vidhahiahara* (heartburn) such as *Tila*, the skin colour of the baby will be *Krishna* (black). With the use of the mixed type of food, the colour will be blue-black, the colour of the child will be different even per the region, race and occupation. He further states that pregnant women who consume the foods which increase the *Kapha* will be either of white skin or *Pandu Varna*.²⁵

Some say that diet of whatever colour is used by the pregnant the progeny becomes of the similar complexion.²⁶

Psychology is one of the key aspects that govern the human body. In the time of pregnancy, causes like anxiety, depression, stress, delusion etc. can vitiate the *Dosha* in the mother and affect the foetus psychosomatically. According to *Acharya Caraka*, the mother should be allowed to consume food, follow a regimen, manners, visit a country of her own choice and should associate with people who admire her. He further states the fact that the child whom she is bearing will bestow with the same mental conditions that the mother had during her pregnancy. The psychosomatic relationship between the mother and the child established during this time. The state of *Sattva*, *Rajas* and *Thamas* will influence the child's mental condition. These states will influence the *Panchabauthika* status in the body which

in turn will decide the *Varna* of the foetus.²⁷

Acharya Susrutha has emphasized that different entities and body parts of the foetus are governed and derive from *Garbhaposkaka Bhavas*. Both *Acarya Caraka* and *Susrutha* have mentioned that the determiner of the complexion of *Garbha* is *Athma*.^{28, 29}

While describing the importance of indulgence of wholesome things or habituation during pregnancy *Acharya Caraka*, *Acarya Vagbhatta* and *Acarya Susrutha* quoted that skin colour determined by the *Sathmaja Bhavas*.^{28, 30, 31}

As per *Acharya Vagbhata*'s view, the essence that forms from the food after its proper digestion and which has produced the *Dhathu* in sequential order up to the stage of *Majja* derives the name *Shukra* at its next stage. Just as ghee present in milk and jaggery in sugarcane juice, *Shukra* is present all over the body and also in the *Shukradhara Kala*. It is cold in potency, unctuous, heavy, white, sweet in taste, slimy, more in quantity, thick in consistency and resembles ghee, oil and honey in colour. Such a *Shukra* will only be suitable for producing an embryo.³²

If the semen is white like *Grithamanda* (supernatant fluid of ghee) the colour of the offspring will be whitish-yellow, if it is of the colour of oil the offspring will be black, and if the semen is of the colour of honey the offspring will be bluish-black.³³

Agni plays significance role in the determination of skin colour. According to *Acharya Caraka*, *Agni* converts food in the form of energy, which is responsible for all the vital functions of our body. Therefore, Ayurveda considers that *Dehagni* is the cause of life, complexion, strength, health, nourishment, lustre, *Oja*,

Teja (energy) and *Prana* (life energy).³⁴ Food is the main factor which sustains and supports the *Dhathu*, *Ojas*, *Bala*, *Varna* and whole process depend upon the proper digestion by *Agni*. Only in the balanced state of *Agni* perform above actions and when it deviates all diseases rise because *Dhathvagni* is responsible for the formation of its own *Dhatu*. The *Ojas* forms as the essence of all *Dhatu*. So, *Agni* is the main factor that responds to the formation of *Ojas*.³⁵

Both Acharya's states, *Roopa (Lavanya)* – Vision (Sight) / Beauty / Attraction *Darshana / Roopendriya* – Organ of Sight (Eye) *Prakasha / Deepti / Bhrajishnuta* – Brightness, Glow, Light *Pankti / Paripaka* – Digestion *Oushnya / Paritapa / Santapa* – Heat *Varna* – Colour and complexion *Amarsha / Krodha* – Anger *Taikshnyam / Ashukriya* – Quick action, Intense *Shourya* – Courage considered as the functions of *Agni* in its equilibrium state.^{36, 37}

Ahara (food), *Nidra* (sleep) and *Brahmacharya* (celibacy) are the *Trayopastambhas* (Three pillars) explained in Ayurveda.³⁸ Among these *Ahara* is a major pillar which maintains health and life. The food which taken in proper quantity provides certainly strength, complexion and happiness to the person without disturb normalcy. It mentions in *Caraka Samhita*, *Ahrara* not only forms the body itself but also forms the diseases which occur in us. If the *Hitha Ahara* is responsible for *Sukha* (happiness) and *Ahitha Ahara* causes *Dukha* (misery).³⁹ According to Acharya *Caraka*, a food considered as *Prana* of the living being. The food which has *Varna*, *Gandha*, *Rasa*, and *Sparsha* pleasing to one's mind and well-formed and digested by *Antaragni*, this food strengthens the mind. It nourishes and strengthens the body and tissues,

enhances strength and colour, brings pleasantness of the senses. It maintains the quality of other important factors which responsible for the skin colour such as the condition of *Ojas* and *Dhathu Sara*.⁴⁰

The term "Sara" is derived from the root *Sr-Sthire* with the suffix -*Ghan* meaning essential, most excellent, best, true, strong, and vigorous. *Chakrapani* has mentioned *Sara* as the purest form of *Dhatu*.⁴¹

Acharya *Caraka* in *Vimanasthana* explains the characteristics of *Tvaksara* person as of skin with unctuous, smooth, soft, clean and adorable with fine thin, deep, rooted and delicate hairs and is lustrous.⁴² Also, that of a *Rakthasara* person, ear eye, face, tongue, nose, lips, palms, soles, nails, forehead and genitals to be unctuous, red, beautiful, and shinning.⁴³ According to him, *Vishuddha Rudhira* (pure blood) promotes *Bala*, *Varna*, *Sukha Ayu*. He further describes that a person considered as having pure blood (*Vishuddha Raktha Purusha*) if he has glowing complexion, well-functioning sense organs and is cheerful.⁴⁴

Ojas is the essence of all *Dhathus* starting from *Rasa Dhathu* and ending with *Sukra* (semen) that itself is *Bala* (strength) of the human body and it acts as a considerable factor of complexion. The normal function of *Ojas* follows firm and well-developed muscles, unobstructed movements, clarity of voice and complexion and normal function of motor and sensory organs.⁴⁵

As per Acharya *Vagbhata*, *Ojas* undergo a decrease by anger, hunger, worry, grief, exertion. With such a decrease the person becomes fretful, debilitated, worries, feel discomfort in the sense organs, develops bad complexion, bad mentation and dryness. He has mentioned the *Ojas Vridhhi Lakshana* (signs and symptoms of increased *Ojas*) such as Happiness,

Nourishment of the body, Increase body strength etc. The person who is having diminution of *Ojas* gives signs and symptoms such as fearfulness, pain in sense organs, loss of complexion, loss of body strength, the roughness of the body and emaciation.⁴⁶

B) Effect of External factors on Layers and Varna of Skin

Sleep is considered in Ayurveda to be one of three pillars of life. It gives the body and mind senses a chance to refresh and rejuvenate. When the mind including sensory and motor organs are exhausted and they dissociate themselves from their objects then the individual sleeps.⁴⁷

According to *Acarya Susrutha*, one should not keep awake at night and sleep during the day. The wise considering both these as harmful should take moderate sleep. Thus, the person remains free from diseases, cheerful, endowed with strength and complexion, sexually potent, of moderate physique and glorious and lives for a hundred years.⁴⁸ Sleeping proper time promotes development, strength, enthusiasm, digestive fire, non-drowsiness, the equilibrium of *Dhatu* and complexion.⁴⁹

Sneha Karma and *Sweda Karma* are considered as *Purva Karmas* in Ayurveda. The person using *Sneha* regularly becomes with ignited digestive power, evacuated bowel, fresh *Dhatu*, superior strength and complexion, firm organs, delayed senility and lives a hundred years. As same, the lustre of the skin promoted by *Sweda Karma*.⁵⁰

The general massage dealing with all part of the body is highly beneficial in many ways. Oil massage softens the body, checks *Kapha* and *Vata*, promotes *Dhatus* and provides cleanliness, complexion and strength.⁵¹

As per *Acharya Vaghbhatta*, oil massage delays ageing relieves exertion and excess of *Vata*, improves vision, nourishes body tissues, prolongs age, induces a night of good sleep, improves skin tone and complexion.⁵²

Udvarthanam and *Anulepana Karma* also have positive effect on complexion. According to *Acharya Susrutha*, the dry massage pacifies the *Vata*, dissolves *Kapha* and fat, stabilizes body parts and provide brilliance to skin. Dry anointments cause beyond doubt, widening of the opening of blood vessels and stimulation of the heat of skin and alleviates itching, allergic patches and *Vata*. Rubbing with a brick piece stimulates tactile heat, cleanse opening of blood vessels and removes itching and allergic rashes.⁵³

As per *Acharya Vaghbhatta*, powder massage mitigates *Kapha Dosa*, helps to burn fat, bring stability of body parts, improves strength and skin complexion.⁵⁴ After paste provides charm, complexion, cheerfulness, energy, strength, eliminates sweat, foul smell, abnormality of complexion and fatigue.⁵⁵

Ayurveda has highlighted the effect of *Vyayama*, *Jatradharana*, *Sukhasana*, *Vanavara*, *Samvahana*, & *Chaya Sevana* for enhancing the quality of the skin.

The work involving the exertion of the body is known as *Vyayama*. Physical exercise causes physical development, lustre, compactness of body parts, stimulation of digestive power, absence of illness, firmness, lightness, cleanliness, tolerance to fatigue, exhaustion, thirst heat, cold and provides optimum immunity.⁵⁶

According to *Acharya Susrutha*, holding an umbrella, sitting comfortably, holding an armour, gently rubbing off the body and association of shade promotes the complexion.⁵⁷

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

According to above description *Varna* of an individual is depended on several factors. The procedure of *Varnotpatti* is initiated from *Garbhavastha* and controlled by several factors and causes after the birth. *Panca Mahabhutha*, *Thridosa*, *Prakrithi*, *Garbhini-paricharya*, Psychological condition of pregnant women, *Thriguna*, Involvement of the *Athma*, *Sukra* and *Gothra* are involved for formation of *Varna* during the *Garbhavastha* and *Jataragni*, *Ahara*, *Dhatu*, *Sara* and *Ojas* are the considerable factors that effecting *Varna* mainly after the birth. Apart of that some behaviours and regimen which are followed by the person like Sleeping, *Sneha Karma*, *Sweda Karma*, *Thaila Abhyanga*, *Udvartana*, *Anulepana* and *Vyayama* effect on forming and changing the *Varna*.²⁻⁵⁷

According to the modern view the complexion is mainly determined by the functions of the melanocytes and the melanin pigments and contributed by the several factors. As the summary all factors can be categorized into two divisions called intrinsic and extrinsic. The factors which are non-modified, inherited and genetical come under the intrinsic. The factors which are modified and outside of the body come under the extrinsic.¹

Both Ayurveda and modern sciences commented that the complexion is changed due to the involvement of behaviours and regimens including physical and mental states of the living being.

CONCLUSION

Varnotpatti is started from the conception and contributed by various factors during the *Garbhavastha*. It is maintained by the conglomeration of factors including

internal and external. Though the *Varna* is mainly determined by the inherited factors, it is changed due to several environmental factors, behaviours and the regimens. *Varna* can be improved by the following of guidance and treatment modalities which are mentioned in Ayurveda.

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