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Kaiyadeva Nighantu: A Brief Review of its Structure, Significance, and Contribution to Ayurvedic Pharmacology

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ABSTRACT

The evolution of Ayurvedic pharmacology saw a major transition from the *Samhitā* period to the *Nighaṇṭu* period, which emphasized systematic documentation of medicinal substances. Among the classical *Nighaṇṭus*, *Kaiyadeva Nighaṇṭu*, also known as *Pathyapathyavibodhaka*, holds a unique place due to its thematic classification of drugs, linguistic clarity, and therapeutic depth. Composed in the 15th century CE by Acharya Kaiyadeva, this lexicon includes over 500 medicinal plants, minerals, animal products, food items, and lifestyle elements, systematically categorized under eight Vargas. This review critically explores the structure, content, and lasting significance of *Kaiyadeva Nighaṇṭu*, establishing its relevance to modern Ayurvedic practice and pharmacological research.

Keywords: Ayurvedic Pharmacology, *Nighantu*, *Aushadhi Varga*, *Dravyaguna*, *Kaiyadeva Nighantu*, Therapeutics.

Introduction

The tradition of *Nighantu* literature in Ayurveda serves as a cornerstone in the discipline of *Dravyaguna Vigyana* (Ayurvedic pharmacology). These lexicons provide detailed synonyms, pharmacological actions, and therapeutic uses of drugs. With increasing complexity in the identification and usage of herbal and mineral substances, *Nighantus* played a pivotal role in systematizing knowledge beyond what was documented in early texts like *Charaka Samhita* and *Sushruta Samhita*.ⁱ One such remarkable contribution is the *Kaiyadeva Nighantu*, composed by Vaidya Kaiyadeva Pandit around the 15th century CE. This lexicon represents a major advancement in Ayurvedic materia medica, providing not only medicinal properties but also *Pathya-Apathya* (wholesome-unwholesome), lifestyle factors, and formulations relevant to day-to-day practice.ⁱⁱ

Historical and Biographical Overview

The *Kaiyadeva Nighantu*, formally titled *Pathyapathyavibodhaka Nighantu*, is a classical Ayurvedic lexicon named after its author, Vaidya Kaiyadeva Pandit. While its full title highlights its focus on guiding the use of medicinal drugs based on their suitability (*pathyapathyavibodhaka*), the work is more widely recognized by the name of its distinguished compiler.

Kaiyadeva Pandit was a renowned Ayurvedic scholar from a learned Brahmin family in Gujarat, with deep expertise in the Vedas, Puranas, and Ayurveda. He was the grandson of *Padmanabha* and the son of *Sharnga* (also spelled *Sharnaga*), both of whom were celebrated for their contributions to Ayurvedic knowledge. His intellectual lineage includes figures like *Bhanupratap Gosvami*. His father *Sharnga* was a particularly esteemed physician and Ayurvedic authority, known for authoring *Virasimhavalokanam*, a text composed for King *Virasimha* of Gujarat. In addition to the *Kaiyadeva Nighantu*, *Kaiyadeva Pandit* is credited with compiling the *Namaratnakara*, a text that systematically lists medicinal herbs by name along with their synonyms, offering a linguistic and taxonomic reference for Ayurvedic scholars. The *Kaiyadeva Nighantu* was written to classify and describe the *guna* (properties) and *karma* (actions) of medicinal substances, with particular attention to their appropriateness in health and disease contexts. It remains an important text in Ayurvedic literature, reflecting the integration of traditional knowledge with practical therapeutic application.

Estimated Period of Kaiyadeva Nighaṇṭu

Scholarly analysis suggests that the *Kaiyadeva Nighantu* was composed between the 14th and 15th centuries CE, based on both internal textual evidence and external literary references. Several factors support this time frame:

- Reference to diseases described after the 12th century:

The text includes descriptions of conditions such as *Shitalika* and *Somaroga* under the *Vihara Varga* (lifestyle-related disorders). These diseases were first documented in earlier works like *Gadanigraha* and the treatise of *Vangasena*, both composed around the 12th century CE. This implies that the *Kaiyadeva Nighantu* must have been written after the 12th century.

- **Botanical advancements compared to earlier Nighantus:**

The *Kaiyadeva Nighantu* describes yellow *Karavira* (*Thevetia peruviana*), a plant not mentioned in earlier compilations such as the *Madanapala Nighantu*, which is dated to around 1374 CE. This botanical inclusion indicates that the *Kaiyadeva Nighantu* was composed after the *Madanapala Nighantu*.

- **Quotations in later works:**

The text is directly cited in *Raghavabhatta's* commentary on *Sharadatilaka*, which is known to have been written in 1493 CE. Therefore, the *Kaiyadeva Nighantu* must have been composed before 1493 CE.

Based on these points, scholars generally agree that the *Kaiyadeva Nighantu* was written sometime between 1374 and 1493 CE, with most placing it firmly within the 15th century. This timeframe situates the work after the *Madanapala* tradition but prior to the emergence of late medieval Ayurvedic compilations, marking it as a significant transitional text in the evolution of Ayurvedic pharmacology.

Manuscripts and Preservation

Manuscripts of *Kaiyadeva Nighantu* are preserved in several prestigious institutions, including:

- Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi.
- Saraswati Bhavan Library, Varanasi.
- Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, Pune.
- Theosophical Society Library, Chennai.

These sources confirm the authenticity and widespread circulation of the text among classical scholars.

Structural Organizationⁱⁱⁱ

The *Kaiyadeva Nighantu* is organized into eight major *Vargas*:

<i>Varga</i>	Contents
<i>Aushadhi Varga</i>	514 medicinal plants
<i>Dhātu Varga</i>	59 mineral/metal-origin substances
<i>Dhānya Varga</i>	56 cereals and pulses
<i>Drava Varga</i>	8 types of liquids including milk, ghee, oil, etc.
<i>Kṛtāṇṇa Varga</i>	62 therapeutic dietary preparations
<i>Māṃsa Varga</i>	Describes meat from aquatic, amphibious, and terrestrial animals
<i>Vihāra Varga</i>	52 lifestyle regimens
<i>Miśraka Varga</i>	116 entries on compound preparations, formulations, and procedures

This classification is noteworthy for integrating *Pathya-Apathya* concepts with pharmacological and culinary elements, thereby offering a holistic approach to therapeutics.

Distinct Features and Literary Contributions

1. Inclusion of Food and Lifestyle Dravyas

Kaiyadeva's inclusion of *kritanna varga* and *vihara varga* is notably original. No other earlier *nighantu* integrates dietary preparations and behavioural patterns in such detail, making this text a holistic guide to *pathya* (wholesome) and *apathya* (unwholesome) practices.

2. Detailed Classification of Dietary Substances

Out of the eight total categories, four *vargas* (*dhanya*, *drava*, *kritanna*, *mamsa*) deal with non-medicinal daily life *dravyas*, an innovation not found in prior works. The comprehensiveness of entries in each *varga*, especially the granularity of *guna-karma*, adds significant practical value.

3. Practical Utility in Disease Management

The text links *dravyas* not only to their pharmacological properties but also to specific clinical conditions, thus assisting physicians in choosing remedies appropriate for individual patients and circumstances.

4. Geographical and Seasonal Considerations

It provides a *bhumi-anusara* (region-based) and seasonal perspective in assessing the *guna-karma* of substances—highlighting local adaptability and Ayurvedic ecological wisdom.

5. Dasha-Kashaya Kalpana

The *Kaiyadeva Nighantu* is among the earliest texts to systematically discuss *dasha-kashaya kalpana* (the ten classical types of herbal decoctions), further adding to its pharmacological richness.

Relevance in Contemporary Research

In the context of integrative medicine and evidence-based phytotherapy, *Kaiyadeva Nighantu* offers a multidimensional view on plant pharmacology, dietetics, and lifestyle—a triad central to holistic health. Its data can support clinical and pre-clinical investigations of Ayurvedic substances when mapped with modern pharmacological parameters.

Discussion

In the *Kaiyadeva Nighantu*, both the *Aushadhi Varga* (medicinal drugs) and *Ahara Varga* (dietary items) are treated with remarkable depth and structure, illustrating an integrative Ayurvedic vision where medicine, diet, and lifestyle are interconnected. The *Aushadhi Varga* presents individual medicinal substances with their synonyms, pharmacological characteristics (*rasa, guna, veerya, vipaka*), and detailed therapeutic indications. This section also features 12 *Mishraka Ganas* (classical herbal combinations), including groups such as *Brihat Panchamula*, *Dashamula*, *Jivaniya Gana*, *Triphala*, and *Panchavalka*, which are central to Ayurvedic therapeutics even today. *Kaiyadeva* demonstrates diagnostic precision by differentiating medicinal uses based on plant parts such as roots, leaves, bark, or fruits as seen in entries for *Bilva*, *Gambhari*, *Patala*, *Shigru*, *Kapitha*, and others. The text also delves into conditions not commonly addressed in earlier literature, such as afflictions attributed to supernatural influences including *Grahapida*, *Bhutabadha*, and *Rakshasa*, prescribing specific herbs like *Tulsi*, *Agadamani*, *Shankhapushpi*, and *Arishtaka*. A notable pharmacognostic feature is the method prescribed for distinguishing genuine *Kasturi* (musk) from synthetic imitations, using sensory and combustion-based tests—an early example of quality control in Ayurveda.

Equally significant is the treatment of dietary substances under various categories in the *Ahara Varga*, where *Kaiyadeva* documents not only their nutritional value but also their therapeutic roles. Subcategories include types of *Ikshubheda* (sugarcane), *Sharkarabheda* (sugar derivatives), and *Madhubheda* (honey), each described with specific names such as *Paundraka*, *Yashasharkara*, *Makshika Madhu*, and *Navina Madhu*, which differ in qualities and effects. Similarly, variations in common fruits and botanicals such as *Kadalibheda* (bananas), *Dadimabheda* (pomegranates) and *Badrabheda* (jujubes) are listed alongside multiple forms of aromatic herbs and culinary spices, including types of *Jiraka* (*Cuminum cyminum* L.), *durva* (*Cynodon dactylon* Pers.), and *chandan* (*Santalum album* L.). The inclusion of *Karpura* (*Cinnamomum camphora* Nees & Eberm.) and resinous substances like *Guggulu* (*Commiphora mukul* Engl.) each presented with several variants, shows *Kaiyadeva's* commitment to comprehensive classification. What sets this lexicon apart is its blending of medicinal and dietary knowledge something largely absent in earlier *Nighantus* offering a holistic understanding of health where food, medicine, and behaviour operate as mutually supportive therapies. The integration of both *Aushadhi* and *Ahara* in a single text reflects *Kaiyadeva's* forward-thinking approach and underlines the relevance of his work for both traditional practice and modern research in dietetics and pharmacology.

Conclusion

Kaiyadeva Nighantu is not merely a compendium of medicinal plants but a multidimensional reference manual integrating pharmacognosy, nutrition, and behavioural sciences. Its structural uniqueness, coupled with practical classification and disease-oriented approach, makes it one of the most original and impactful *Nighantus* in Ayurvedic tradition. It deserves more scholarly attention, translation, and contemporary validation for broader applications in integrative health sciences.

ⁱ Choudhary, N., S.K. S., Verma, D., & 4, P. (2021). AN INTRODUCTION ABOUT SODHALA NIGHANTU. *February 2021*. <https://doi.org/10.46607/iamj1509022021>

ⁱⁱ Vaishali, V., P, J., & K, R. (2021). A REVIEW ON THE PRAMEHAHARA DRAVYA OF KAIYADEVA NIGHANTU – REVIEW ARTICLE. *International Ayurvedic Medical Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.46607/iamj12p5062021>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Sharma PV. *Kaiyadeva Nighantu (Pathyapathya Vibodhaka)*. 1st ed. Varanasi: Chaukhambha Orientalia; 1979