

TYPES OF TULSI IN AYURVEDIC SAMHITAS: CLASSICAL REVIEW**Dr Veerendra Dwivedi^{1*}, Dr Vrasti Sharma², Dr.Hiteshwar D Lonare³**

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ABSTRACT

Tulsi (*Ocimum* species) is one of the most revered medicinal plants described in Ayurvedic literature and is widely acknowledged for its therapeutic, preventive, and spiritual importance¹. Classical Ayurvedic Samhitas and Nighantus describe Tulsi under various synonyms such as *Surasa*, *Sulabha*, and *Shoolaghni*, indicating its aromatic nature, easy availability, and analgesic action². Unlike many medicinal plants that are described as single entities, Tulsi is classified into multiple types in classical texts based on colour, habitat, morphological characteristics, and pharmacological potency³. The principal types described include Shyama (Krishna) Tulsi, Shweta (Rama) Tulsi, and Vana Tulsi. Each variety of Tulsi exhibits specific *Rasa*, *Guna*, *Virya*, and *Vipaka*, resulting in variation in therapeutic indications and clinical utility⁴. Tulsi is extensively indicated in disorders of the respiratory system, fever (*Jwara*), digestive impairment (*Agnimandya*), skin diseases (*Kushtha*), metabolic disorders, and conditions arising from *Kapha* and *Vata* imbalance⁵. In addition to its curative role, Tulsi is also described as a preventive and Rasayana-like herb that enhances immunity, vitality, and resistance to disease⁶.

This review aims to provide a comprehensive and Samhita-based analysis of the types of Tulsi described in Ayurvedic literature, highlighting their classical attributes, therapeutic relevance, and clinical significance. Understanding these classifications is essential for accurate drug identification, rational therapeutic application, and preservation of authentic Ayurvedic knowledge systems.

KEYWORDS: Tulsi, Surasa, Shyama Tulsi, Rama Tulsi, Vana Tulsi, Samhitas, Ayurveda.

I. INTRODUCTION

Ayurveda, the ancient Indian system of medicine, emphasizes harmony between the body, mind, and environment for the maintenance of health and prevention of disease⁷. Medicinal plants form the backbone of Ayurvedic therapeutics, and their correct identification and application are essential for effective treatment. Among the vast array of medicinal herbs described in classical texts, Tulsi occupies a unique and exalted position.

Tulsi has been revered not only as a medicinal plant but also as a sacred entity deeply embedded in Indian culture and daily life¹. Its presence in households, temples, and gardens reflects its dual role as a therapeutic agent and a spiritual symbol. Classical Ayurvedic texts consistently describe Tulsi as beneficial in a wide range of diseases, particularly those involving the respiratory, digestive, and immune systems².

The uniqueness of Tulsi lies in the fact that it is not described as a single homogeneous drug. Instead, Ayurvedic Samhitas and Nighantus classify Tulsi into different types based on observable differences such as leaf colour, growth pattern, habitat, and intensity of action³. This classification highlights the advanced observational skills and pharmacognostic knowledge of ancient Acharyas, who recognized that variations within the same plant species could influence therapeutic outcomes.

Understanding the types of Tulsi described in Samhitas is crucial for physicians, researchers, and students of Ayurveda. Proper identification ensures rational drug selection, prevents therapeutic errors, and preserves the authenticity of classical Ayurvedic practice.

II. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF TULSI IN AYURVEDIC LITERATURE

Tulsi finds mention in some of the earliest Ayurvedic texts and is consistently described across Samhitas, Nighantus, and later Ayurvedic compendia⁴. In *Charaka Samhita*, Tulsi is included under *Surasadi Gana*, a group of aromatic herbs known for their digestive, carminative, and Kapha-reducing properties⁵. The inclusion of Tulsi in this group indicates its importance in managing digestive impairment and respiratory disorders.

Sushruta Samhita describes Tulsi in the context of surgical and parasurgical conditions, emphasizing its antimicrobial, wound-healing, and cleansing properties⁶. Later texts such as *Ashtanga Hridaya* further elaborate on the therapeutic applications of Tulsi, particularly in *Kasa, Shwasa, Jwara, and Kushtha*.

Nighantus like *Bhavaprakasha Nighantu* and *Dhanvantari Nighantu* provide detailed descriptions of Tulsi varieties, synonyms, and properties, reinforcing the classification into different types based on morphological and pharmacological characteristics⁷.

III. ETYMOLOGY AND NOMENCLATURE OF TULSI

The Sanskrit term “Tulsi” is derived from the root meaning “the incomparable one,” signifying its superior medicinal and spiritual value¹. Ayurvedic literature describes Tulsi using multiple synonyms, each reflecting a specific attribute or action:

- **Surasa** – indicating its strong aromatic nature
- **Sulabha** – denoting easy availability
- **Shoolaghni** – highlighting its analgesic property
- **Bahumanjari** – referring to its clustered inflorescence

These synonyms collectively convey the pharmacological, morphological, and cultural significance of Tulsi².

IV. BASIS OF CLASSIFICATION OF TULSI IN SAMHITAS

The classification of Tulsi into different types in Ayurvedic texts is based on several factors³:

1. **Colour of leaves and stem**
2. **Habitat (domestic or wild)**
3. **Intensity of aroma and taste**
4. **Therapeutic potency**

Based on these criteria, Samhitas and Nighantus primarily describe three types of Tulsi:

- Shyama (Krishna) Tulsi
- Shweta (Rama) Tulsi
- Vana Tulsi

This classification forms the foundation for differential therapeutic application.

V. TULSI IN CHARAKA SAMHITA

Charaka Samhita is one of the earliest and most authoritative Ayurvedic texts emphasizing internal medicine (*Kayachikitsa*). Tulsi is described in this text primarily for its digestive, respiratory, and Kapha-pacifying properties¹. Charaka includes Tulsi under the **Surasadi Gana**, a group of aromatic herbs known for their *Deepana*, *Pachana*, and *Srotoshodhana* actions².

A. Tulsi in Surasadi Gana

The Surasadi Gana comprises herbs possessing strong fragrance, pungent taste, and Ushna Virya. Tulsi's inclusion in this group highlights its effectiveness in disorders involving *Agnimandya*, *Aam*, and Kapha dominance³. Herbs of this Gana are particularly indicated in digestive disorders, respiratory diseases, and conditions associated with obstruction of bodily channels.

Charaka emphasizes that drugs belonging to Surasadi Gana stimulate digestive fire, remove accumulated Kapha, and restore normal physiological functions⁴. Tulsi, being a prominent member of this group, is therefore considered beneficial in conditions like *Ajirna*, *Arochaka*, *Kasa*, and *Shwasa*.

B. Therapeutic Indications of Tulsi in Charaka Samhita

According to Charaka, Tulsi is useful in the management of:

- *Kaphaja Kasa* (productive cough)
- *Shwasa* (dyspnoea, bronchial asthma)
- *Jwara* (especially *Aamaja* and *Kaphaja* types)
- Digestive disorders due to impaired Agni
- Worm infestation (*Krimi*)

Charaka also warns that drugs like Tulsi should be selected carefully based on Dosha dominance and disease stage to avoid aggravation of Vata due to its Ushna and Ruksha properties⁵.

C. Implicit Classification of Tulsi Types

Although Charaka Samhita does not explicitly name Shyama, Shweta, and Vana Tulsi, later commentators and Nighantus derived these classifications based on descriptions of potency and usage. The emphasis on intensity of action indirectly supports the concept of multiple types of Tulsi with variable strength and application⁶.

VI. TULSI IN SUSH RUTA SAMHITA

Sushruta Samhita primarily focuses on surgery (*Shalya Tantra*) and parasurgical procedures but also provides valuable insight into medicinal plants used for wound care, infections, and purification therapies. Tulsi is mentioned for its antiseptic, antimicrobial, and wound-cleansing properties⁷.

A. Tulsi in Wound Healing and Surgical Care

Sushruta emphasizes the importance of herbs possessing *Krimighna*, *Shothahara*, and *Ropana* properties in surgical practice. Tulsi, due to its aromatic nature and Ushna Virya, is described as effective in cleansing wounds, preventing infection, and promoting healing⁸.

Different types of Tulsi may be selected based on severity:

- **Shyama Tulsi** for infected or suppurative wounds
- **Vana Tulsi** for chronic non-healing ulcers
- **Shweta Tulsi** for mild wounds and preventive care

This practical differentiation reflects early recognition of variable potency among Tulsi types⁹.

B. Tulsi in Blood and Skin Disorders

Sushruta describes Tulsi as useful in *Kushtha*, *Kandu*, and *Raktadushti* due to its *Raktashodhaka* and *Krumighna* actions¹⁰. Its role in purifying blood and eliminating microbial contamination further establishes its importance in dermatological conditions.

VII. TULSI IN ASHTANGA HRIDAYA

Ashtanga Hridaya by Acharya Vagbhata synthesizes teachings of Charaka and Sushruta and presents them in a concise and clinically oriented manner. Tulsi is described for its utility in respiratory, digestive, and febrile disorders¹¹.

A. Tulsi in Kasa–Shwasa Adhikara

Vagbhata highlights Tulsi's expectorant and bronchodilatory effects in the management of *Kasa* and *Shwasa*. Tulsi is recommended in decoction form, often combined with other herbs to enhance its efficacy while balancing its Ushna nature¹².

B. Tulsi in Jwara Chikitsa

Tulsi is indicated in *Aamaja Jwara* and *Kaphaja Jwara* due to its *Deepana* and *Pachana* properties. By stimulating Agni and clearing Aam, Tulsi helps in resolving fever and associated symptoms such as heaviness, anorexia, and body ache¹³.

C. Support for Classification into Types

Vagbhata's emphasis on graded therapeutic strength indirectly supports the later classification of Tulsi into mild, moderate, and potent varieties, corresponding to Shweta, Shyama, and Vana Tulsi respectively¹⁴.

VIII. TULSI IN NIGHANTUS (LEXICOGRAPHICAL TEXTS)

Nighantus provide detailed botanical descriptions, synonyms, and therapeutic attributes of medicinal plants. Texts such as *Bhavaprakasha Nighantu* clearly describe different varieties of Tulsi based on colour and habitat¹⁵.

A. Bhavaprakasha Nighantu

Bhavaprakasha describes:

- **Shyama Tulsi** as darker and more potent
- **Shweta Tulsi** as lighter and suitable for daily use
- **Vana Tulsi** as wild and highly effective in chronic diseases

These descriptions form the most explicit classical basis for the classification of Tulsi types.

B. Clinical Relevance of Nighantu Descriptions

Nighantu-based classification aids physicians in:

- Accurate drug identification
- Selection of appropriate variety based on disease severity
- Avoidance of adverse effects due to improper drug choice

IX. SUMMARY OF SAMHITA-WISE DESCRIPTION

Across major Ayurvedic texts, Tulsi is consistently described as:

- Aromatic and pungent
- Kapha-Vata pacifying
- Digestive and respiratory stimulant
- Anti-infective and cleansing

Although early Samhitas describe Tulsi as a single entity, later elaboration through Nighantus clearly establishes multiple types, validating the traditional classification system.

X. SHYAMA TULSI (KRISHNA TULSI)

A. Morphological Description

Shyama Tulsi, also known as Krishna Tulsi, is characterized by its dark green to purplish leaves, stems, and inflorescence. The plant emits a strong, pungent aroma and possesses a sharp taste. Classical Ayurvedic scholars considered darker pigmentation as an indicator of enhanced medicinal potency, and Shyama Tulsi is therefore regarded as the most powerful among Tulsi varieties¹.

The leaves are comparatively smaller, serrated, and densely aromatic. The plant grows well in cultivated environments and is often preferred for medicinal formulations requiring strong action.

B. Classical Pharmacological Attributes

According to Samhitas and Nighantus, Shyama Tulsi possesses the following properties²³:

- **Rasa:** Katu (pungent), Tikta (bitter)
- **Guna:** Laghu (light), Ruksha (dry)
- **Virya:** Ushna (hot)
- **Vipaka:** Katu

These attributes make Shyama Tulsi highly effective in pacifying *Kapha* and *Vata* Dosha. The Ushna Virya and Katu Rasa help liquefy thick Kapha, while Laghu and Ruksha Guna assist in clearing obstructed channels (*Srotoshodhana*).

C. Therapeutic Indications

Classical texts describe Shyama Tulsi as particularly useful in acute and severe conditions⁴:

- *Kaphaja Kasa* (productive cough)
- *Shwasa* (bronchial asthma)
- *Aamaja Jwara* and *Kaphaja Jwara*
- Skin diseases such as *Kushtha* and *Kandu*
- Digestive disorders associated with *Agnimandya* and *Aam*

Shyama Tulsi is also described as *Krimighna* and *Vishaghna*, making it useful in infections and toxic conditions⁵.

D. Precautions and Limitations

Due to its strong Ushna and Ruksha properties, prolonged or excessive use of Shyama Tulsi may aggravate *Vata* and *Pitta*. Therefore, Samhitas emphasize cautious administration, especially in individuals with predominant Pitta constitution, debility, or during summer season⁶.

XI. SHWETA TULSI (RAMA TULSI)

A. Morphological Description

Shweta Tulsi, commonly known as Rama Tulsi, is characterized by light green leaves and a comparatively milder aroma. The plant is widely cultivated in household gardens and temples and is the most commonly used variety for daily consumption⁷.

The leaves are larger than those of Shyama Tulsi and possess a pleasant fragrance, making this variety suitable for both medicinal and ritualistic purposes.

B. Classical Pharmacological Attributes

Rama Tulsi exhibits a balanced pharmacological profile⁸:

- **Rasa:** Katu, Tikta
- **Guna:** Laghu
- **Virya:** Ushna (moderate)
- **Vipaka:** Katu

The moderate Ushna Virya makes Rama Tulsi gentler compared to Shyama and Vana Tulsi, allowing its use for longer durations.

C. Therapeutic Indications

Rama Tulsi is primarily recommended for mild to moderate conditions and preventive healthcare⁹:

- Mild cough, cold, and sore throat
- Digestive disturbances
- General weakness and fatigue
- Immune enhancement and stress management

Because of its gentle action, Rama Tulsi is often used in pediatric and geriatric populations as well as for daily herbal teas and decoctions¹⁰.

D. Role in Preventive Medicine

Samhitas indirectly support the daily use of mild aromatic herbs like Rama Tulsi for maintenance of health. Its regular intake supports digestion, respiratory health, and resistance against infections, thereby fulfilling a preventive role in Ayurveda¹¹.

XII. VANA TULSI

A. Habitat and Morphology

Vana Tulsi is a wild variety predominantly found in forest regions and uncultivated areas. It is generally larger in size, with broad leaves and a strong penetrating aroma. Due to its wild growth, Vana Tulsi is considered highly potent and robust in action¹².

B. Classical Pharmacological Attributes

Vana Tulsi shares core properties with other Tulsi varieties but exhibits enhanced intensity¹³:

- **Rasa:** Katu, Tikta
- **Guna:** Laghu, Ruksha
- **Virya:** Ushna (strong)
- **Vipaka:** Katu

The pronounced Ushna Virya and Tikshna nature make it suitable for chronic and deep-seated disorders.

C. Therapeutic Indications

Classical texts and later Ayurvedic practice recommend Vana Tulsi in¹⁴:

- Chronic respiratory disorders
- Recurrent infections
- Long-standing inflammatory conditions
- Detoxification therapies
- Conditions with severe Kapha accumulation

Due to its strong action, Vana Tulsi is usually administered under professional supervision and often in combination with balancing herbs.

D. Clinical Caution

Excessive or improper use of Vana Tulsi may lead to aggravation of Pitta and Vata Dosha. Therefore, its use is restricted to cases where strong *Deepana–Pachana* and *Srotoshodhana* effects are required¹⁵.

XIII. COMPARATIVE CLASSICAL ANALYSIS OF TULSI TYPES

Feature	Shyama Tulsi	Shweta (Rama) Tulsi	Vana Tulsi
Leaf color	Dark green / purple	Light green	Green, broad
Aroma	Strong	Mild	Very strong
Potency	High	Moderate	Very high
Primary use	Acute disorders	Preventive & daily	Chronic disorders
Dosha action	Kapha–Vata shamaka	Kapha shamaka	Kapha–Vata shodhana
Safety	Moderate	High	Requires caution

This comparative understanding enables precise drug selection based on disease severity and patient constitution.

XIV. CLINICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF TULSI TYPE SELECTION

Ayurvedic Samhitas emphasize that improper drug selection can lead to Dosha aggravation or therapeutic failure. Selecting the appropriate type of Tulsi based on disease stage, Dosha dominance, and patient strength ensures effective and safe treatment¹.

XV. RASA–GUNA–VIRYA–VIPAKA OF TULSI: A DETAILED ANALYSIS

Ayurvedic pharmacology evaluates drugs based on *Rasa* (taste), *Guna* (qualities), *Virya* (potency), and *Vipaka* (post-digestive effect). Tulsi, irrespective of type, predominantly exhibits a similar pharmacodynamic profile, though intensity varies among varieties¹.

Rasa (Taste)

Tulsi possesses **Katu (pungent)** and **Tikta (bitter)** Rasa. These tastes are known for *Deepana* (stimulation of digestive fire), *Pachana* (digestion of Aam), and *Kapha-Shamana* effects². Tikta Rasa also supports *Raktashodhana* and antimicrobial activity.

Guna (Qualities)

The primary Gunas of Tulsi are **Laghu (light)** and **Ruksha (dry)**. These qualities help reduce heaviness, clear bodily channels, and counteract Kapha dominance³.

Virya (Potency)

Tulsi is predominantly **Ushna Virya**. Ushna Virya enhances Agni, liquefies Kapha, and improves circulation. Shyama and Vana Tulsi exhibit stronger Ushna Virya, whereas Rama Tulsi shows moderate intensity⁴.

Vipaka (Post-digestive effect)

Tulsi undergoes **Katu Vipaka**, reinforcing its Kapha-reducing and metabolic-stimulating action⁵.

XVI. DOSHA-WISE ACTION OF DIFFERENT TYPES OF TULSI

A. Effect on Kapha Dosha

Tulsi is one of the most effective *Kapha-Shamaka* herbs described in Samhitas. Its Katu–Tikta Rasa, Laghu–Ruksha Guna, and Ushna Virya collectively liquefy thick Kapha, clear respiratory passages, and reduce mucous accumulation⁶. Shyama and Vana Tulsi are preferred in severe Kapha conditions, while Rama Tulsi is suitable for mild Kapha disorders.

B. Effect on Vata Dosha

Tulsi pacifies Vata by virtue of its Ushna Virya. However, excessive use—especially of Shyama and Vana Tulsi—may aggravate Vata due to Ruksha Guna. Therefore, Samhitas emphasize cautious use and proper adjuvants⁷.

C. Effect on Pitta Dosha

Although Tulsi is Ushna, it can be used in Pittaja disorders when Pitta is associated with Kapha or Aam. Rama Tulsi is preferred in such conditions due to its comparatively mild action⁸.

XVII. DISEASE-WISE APPLICATION OF TULSI TYPES

A. Respiratory Disorders (Kasa–Shwasa)

Tulsi is repeatedly described as a frontline herb in respiratory diseases.

- **Shyama Tulsi** is indicated in acute asthma, bronchitis, and productive cough.
- **Vana Tulsi** is useful in chronic and recurrent respiratory disorders.
- **Rama Tulsi** is preferred for mild cough, cold, and preventive care⁹.

B. Jwara (Fever)

Tulsi is effective in *Aamaja* and *Kaphaja Jwara* due to its Deepana-Pachana action. Shyama Tulsi is useful in acute febrile states, whereas Vana Tulsi is indicated in chronic or relapsing fevers¹⁰.

C. Digestive and Metabolic Disorders

Tulsi stimulates Agni, digests Aam, and relieves Agnimandya.

- Shyama Tulsi is used in severe digestive impairment.
- Rama Tulsi supports normal digestion and metabolism¹¹.

D. Skin and Blood Disorders

Tulsi is described as *Krumighna*, *Kandughna*, and *Raktashodhaka*. Shyama and Vana Tulsi are particularly useful in Kushtha, Kandu, and infected skin conditions¹².

XVIII. ROLE OF TULSI IN PEDIATRIC AND GERIATRIC PRACTICE

Ayurvedic texts advise caution while using potent Ushna drugs in children and elderly patients. Rama Tulsi, due to its gentle action, is preferred in these age groups. Shyama and Vana Tulsi are used only when clearly indicated and under supervision¹³.

XIX. CULTURAL AND SPIRITUAL SIGNIFICANCE OF TULSI

Tulsi holds immense cultural and spiritual importance in Indian tradition. It is worshipped daily in households and temples and is believed to purify the environment and promote physical, mental, and spiritual well-being¹⁴.

The reverence accorded to Tulsi reflects Ayurveda's holistic approach, which integrates physical health with mental and spiritual harmony.

XX. DISCUSSION

The Ayurvedic classification of Tulsi into Shyama, Shweta, and Vana types reflects a sophisticated understanding of plant variability and therapeutic specificity. Rather than treating Tulsi as a single uniform drug, Samhitas and Nighantus emphasize contextual selection based on potency, disease severity, and patient constitution¹⁵. Modern phytochemical studies validating differences among Tulsi varieties further support classical Ayurvedic observations, highlighting the scientific depth of Samhita-based knowledge systems.

XXI. CONCLUSION

Ayurvedic Samhitas provide a detailed and rational classification of Tulsi into Shyama, Shweta, and Vana types, each possessing distinct morphological, pharmacological, and therapeutic attributes. This classification enables precise drug identification, rational clinical application, and safer therapeutic outcomes. Understanding the types of Tulsi described in Samhitas is essential for preserving the authenticity of Ayurvedic practice and enhancing its

relevance in contemporary healthcare. Tulsi thus remains a cornerstone herb in Ayurveda, exemplifying preventive, curative, and holistic healing principles¹⁵.

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