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Understanding pancamahabhuta theory in ayurveda

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Abstract

Ayurveda is one of the oldest traditional systems of medicine that has survived and flourished from ages to date. Ayurveda is a knowledge system dealing with what is required to maintain health and cure diseases. The Ayurvedic view of the inherent freedom of pain and pleasure and the ultimate union of the individual soul with the universal soul is taken from Vedanta. The philosophy in Ayurveda does not stand out in dealing with only spiritual aspects as is the case with Indian Philosophies which are now recognized as such, but it forms a useful scientific tool to understand and explain almost all theories and concepts related only to Ayurveda, the chief subject matter of which is health and longevity. Ayurveda was in search of some intrinsic constituents universally found both in living and nonliving beings, and which are responsible for certain of their fundamental structure and function. The Pancabhautika theory was found most suitable for this purpose and hence is applied in all possible ways so much so that it leaves an impression that it is one of the most important concepts of Ayurveda. Many independent theories like Tridosha theory, Pancabhuta theory, Karya-Karama theory, Samanya-Visesa theory, Loka-purusa Samyavada, etc have evolved and on the basis of these many theories, the health service is being rendered even today with full faith and confidence.

Keyword: Pancabhautika, Prithvi, Ap, tejas, vayu, akasa, sukshmbhutas, tanmatraa, caraka-samhita, sutra-sthana, susruta-samhita, marmas

Introduction

The two-fold objectives of Ayurveda viz. “maintenance of health” and “cure of diseases” could only be achieved by knowing the structural and functional aspects of the living beings on the one hand and the universe on the other. It is not just sufficient to know that the body is a blend of tissues, fluids, vessels, waste products-excreta as well as some vital forces enabling operational facets of the human body or that of the plant being constituted of leaves, barks, stem, root, flowers, fruits, etc. enabling sustenance of life. Ayurveda was in search of some intrinsic constituents universally found both in living and nonliving beings, and which are responsible for certain of their fundamental structure and function. The Pancabhautika theory was found most suitable for this purpose and hence is applied in all possible ways so much so that it leaves an impression that it is one of the most important concepts of Ayurveda.

Pancamahabhuta

Prithvi, Ap, Tejas, Vayu, and Akasa are the five accredited bhutas-

“महाभूतानि खं वायुरग्निरापः क्षितिस्तथा।

शब्दः स्पर्शश्च रूपं च रसो गन्धश्च तद्गुणाः”¹

According to Caraka, they are the structural elements of *dravyas-*

“अग्रे तु तावद्द्रव्यभेदमभिप्रेत्य किञ्चिदभिधास्यामः।

सर्वे द्रव्यं पाञ्चभौतिकमस्मिन्नर्थैः तच्चेतनावदचेतनं च, तस्य गुणाः शब्दादयो गुर्वादयश्च द्रवान्ताः, कर्म पञ्चविधमुक्तं वमनादि”²

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¹ (Caraka Samhita, Sarirastanam-1/27)

² (Caraka Samhita, Sutrastanam-26/10)

They are derived from *suksma bhutas* or *tanmatraa*.

Fetus Development and Panca mahabhuta:

The normal fetus development comprises an assortment of processes like vibhajana (Division), paka (cellular metabolism), kledana (Watering), sanghata (Union), and vivardhana (expansion) of garbha pinda. Each of the 5 bhutas plays an important role in making these processes possible. Vayu helps division, Tejas-metabolism, ap-percolation, Prithvi-union, and akasa-expansion of the fetus. Thus, in the embryonic stage of development, Mahabhutas have a major functional role to play.

Fetus material and panca mahabhuta

The embryo is formed by the five mahabhutas and serves as the receptacle of consciousness-

“गर्भस्तु खल्वन्तरिक्षवाय्वग्नितोयभूमिविकारश्चेतनाधिष्ठानभूतः।
एवमनया युक्त्या पञ्चमहाभूतविकारसमुदायात्मको गर्भश्चेतनाधिष्ठानभूतः स
ह्यस्य षष्ठो धातुरुक्तः”॥³

While describing the union of Atma with garbha sarira Agnivesa says that Atma is desirous of creating another body (garbha), first of all, unites with akasa and then with other bhutas whose attributes are more and more manifested successively. All this action takes place in a very short time-

“स गुणोपादानकालेऽन्तरिक्षं पूर्वतरमन्येभ्यो गिणेभ्य उपादत्ते, यथा- प्रलयात्यये
सिसृक्षुर्भूतान्यक्षरभूत आत्मा सत्त्वोपादानः पूर्वतरमाकाशं सृजति, ततः क्रमेण
व्यक्ततरगुणान् धातून् वाय्वादिकांश्चतुरः तथा देहग्रहणेऽपि प्रवर्तमानः
पूर्वतरमाकाशमेवोपादत्ते, ततः क्रमेण व्यक्ततरगुणान् धातून् वाय्वादिकांश्चतुरः।
सर्वमपि तु खल्वेतद्गुणोपादानमणुना कालेन भवति”॥⁴

In yet another context he explains how these bhutas associated with Atma in garbha sarira derive nourishment and enrichment. According to him, bhutas from the external world enter into the garbha through fathers' sperm and mothers' ovum (which means that sperm and ovum also are made of pancabhutas and thus enrich the 5 bhutas of garbha that had arrived internally with the soul). Further, this combination of bhutas (sperm + ovum + bhutas extant with soul) is nourished by rasa (the essence of food) which is also pancabhautika in composition-

“भूतानि मातापितृसंभवानि रजश्च शुक्रं च वदन्ति गर्भे।
आप्याय्यते शुक्रमसृक् च भूतैर्यैस्तानि भूतानि रसोद्भवानि।।
भूतानि चत्वारि तु कर्मजानि यान्यात्मलीनानि विशन्ति गर्भम्”॥⁵

Here, it should be noted that the bhutas accompanying the soul while he enters the mother's womb are not mahabhutas,

but are suksma bhutas (tanmatra) of suksma sarira-

“अतीन्द्रियैस्तेरतिसूक्ष्मरूपैरात्मा कदाचिन्न वियुक्तरूपः।
न कर्मणा नैव मनोमतिभ्यां न चाप्यहङ्कारविकारदोषैः”॥⁶

Skin color and mahabhutas

The color of the skin of the fetus develops due to the varied combination of mahabhuta. Tejo mahabhuta has a dominant role in color formation. Bhautika's composition of color is as follows-

“तत्र तेजोधातुर्वर्णानां प्रभवः, स यदा गर्भोत्पत्तावब्धातुप्रायो भवति तदा गर्भं
गौरं करोति, पृथिवीधातुप्रायः कृष्णं, पृथिव्याकाशधातुप्रायः कृष्णश्यामं,
तोयाकाशधातुप्रायो गौरश्यामम्”॥⁷

1. Gaura (white complexion) -Tejas + ap
2. Krisna (dark complexion) -Tejas + Prithvi
3. Krisna-syama (brow complexion) -Tejas + Prithvi + akasa
4. Gaura-syama (a mixed complexion) -Tejas + ap + akasa

There is a slight difference of opinion as to the bhautika composition of color formation, between Caraka and Susruta. Bhautika's composition of color of the skin according to Caraka is as follows.

Table- Skin color and mahabhutas

Color	Bhautika predominance
1) Avadata (white)	Tejas + Ap + Akasa
2) Krisna (dark)	Tejas + Prithvi + Vayu
3) Syama (bluish)	All the Bhutas in equal proportion

Bodily elements and Panca mahabhuta

Based on the predominance of bhuta in the formation of a particular bodily element or organ they are classified as parthiva, apya, agneya (taijasa), vayaviya, and akasiya as shown in the table that follows-

(क) “तत्रास्य केचिदङ्गावयवा मातृजादीनवयवान् विभज्य पूर्वमुक्ता यथावत्।
महाभूतविकारप्रविभागेन त्विदानीमस्य तांश्चैवाङ्गावयवान् काश्चित्
पर्यायान्तेणापरांश्चानुव्याख्यास्यामः। मातृजादयोऽप्यस्य महाभूतविकारा एव।
तत्रास्याकाशात्मकं शब्दः श्रोत्रं लाघवं सौक्ष्म्यं विवेकश्च, वाय्वात्मकं स्पर्शः
स्पर्शनं सौक्ष्म्यं प्रेरणं धातुव्यूहनं चेष्टाश्च शारीर्यः, अग्न्यात्मकं रूपं दर्शनं
प्रकाशः पक्तिरौष्यं च, अबात्मकं रसो रसनं शैत्यं मार्दवं स्नेहः क्लेदश्च,
पृथिव्यात्मकं गन्धो घ्राणं गौरवं स्थैर्यं मूर्तिश्चेति”॥

(ख) “आन्तरिक्षाः- शब्दः शब्देन्द्रियं सर्वच्छिद्रसमूहो विविक्तता च; वायव्यास्तु-
स्पर्शः स्पर्शेन्द्रियं सर्वचेष्टासमूहः सर्वशरीरस्पन्दनं लघुता च, तैजसास्तु- रूपं
रूपेन्द्रियं वर्णः सन्तापोः भ्राजिष्णुता पक्तिरमर्षस्तैक्ष्ण्यं शौर्यं च, आप्यास्तु- रसो
रसोनेन्द्रियं सर्वद्रवसमूहो गुरुता शैत्यं स्नेहो रेतश्च, पार्थिवास्तु- गन्धो गन्धेन्द्रियं
सर्वमूर्तसमूहो गुरुता चेति”॥⁸

³ (Caraka Samhita, Sarirastanam-4/6)

⁴ (Caraka Samhita, Sarirastanam-4/8)

⁵ (Caraka Samhita, Sarirastanam-2/34-35)

⁶ (Caraka Samhita, Sarirastanam-2/37)

⁷ (Susruta Samhita, Sarirastanam-2/35)

⁸ (क) (Caraka Samhita, Sarirastanam-4/12)

(ख) (Susruta Samhita, Sarirastanam-1/19)

Table 1: Bodily elements and Panca mahabhuta

Composition of Bhautika predominance	Properties	Bodily elements or Organ Functions
1. Parthiva	Gross, Stable, Firm, Healthy, Rough, and Hard	Nails, bones, teeth, muscles, skin, stools, hairs, beards, mustache, ligaments, smell, nose, etc.
2. Apya	Fluid, Dull, Slimy, Soft, Unctuous, Cold	Lymph, blood, fat, phlegm, bile, juice, urine, sweat, taste, and tongue.
3. Agneya	Hot, Sharp, Subtle, light, dry, clear, etc.	Color, complexion, temperature, shape, and eyes. Digestion and metabolism, anger, bravery.
4. Vayaviya	Light, cold, dry, brittle, clear, subtle	Respiration, blinking of eyes, all actions like flexion, extension, rotation, etc. stimulation, absorption, retention, skin and tactile senses, circulation, pulsation.
5. Akasiya	Soft, light, subtle, smooth	Intercellular space or any space in the body found in vessels, joints, tissues, etc.

All the tissues or excreta are, of course, pancabhautika by composition. Still, on the basis of the predominance of bhutas in the composition of particular tissue or excreta, they are named under the bhautika classification as shown below.

Bhautika classification of Bodily elements

Table- Bhautika classification of Bodily elements

Bodily elements/factors	Bhautika predominance
1) Vata	Vayu
2) Pitta, Artava, intellect	Agni
3) Kapha, Rasa, Majja, Semen, Sweat, Breast milk, Ojas.	Ap
4) Muscles, Feces	Prithvi
5) Rakta (blood)	Agni + Ap
6) Urine	Ap + Agni
7) Fat	Prithvi + Ap
8) Bones	Prithvi + Vayu

Susruta quoting others, opinion, has considered the body constitution on the basis of bhutas as parthiva, vayaviya, akasiya, agneya, apya constitution apart from constitutions based on Saririka and Manasika dosas-

“प्रकृतिमिह नराणां भौतिकीं केचिदाहुः पवनदहनतोयैः कीर्तितास्तास्तु तिस्रः।
स्थिरविपुलशरीरः पार्थिवश्च क्षमावाञ् शुचिरथ चिरजीवी नाभसः खैर्महद्भिः”
॥⁹

Influence on Bioenergies

Vata, Pitta and Kapha are stated to be basically constituted by mahabhutas. Vata is predominant of vayu and akasa mahabhuta, Pitta of Tejas, and Kapha of ap and Prithvi mahabhutas. This apart, Susruta gives yet another piece of information regarding the relationship between Dosas and Panca mahabhutas which is practically useful in adopting treatment. According to him Vata, pitta, and Kapha get aggravated or alleviated by mahabhutas as hereunder-

“तत्र, वायोरात्मैवात्मा पित्तमाग्नेयं श्लेष्मा सौम्य इति ॥
त एते रसाः स्वयोनिवर्धना अन्ययोनिप्रशमनाश्च” ॥¹⁰

Table- Influence on Bioenergies

Dosas	Alleviating bhutas	Aggravating bhutas
Vata	Parthiva or Taijasa dravyas	Akasiya and Vayaviya dravyas
Pitta	Parthiva, Vayaviya or Apya dravyas	Taijasa dravyas
Kapha	Akasiya, Taijasa or vayaviya dravyas	Parthiva and Apya dravyas

Influence on Digestion and Metabolism

Digestion and metabolism are among the chief physiological processes. It is the process of conversion of food materials into bodily constituents through the mediation of Agni. The role of Agni in this process is greatly deliberated in Ayurveda. This Agni is predominant in tejo mahabhuta. In general, it is stated to be of 13 types 1 Jatharagni, 5 Bhutagni, and 7 Dhatvagni. Jatharagni is the one which is situated in the alimentary tract, dhatvagnis are those which are situated in the respective srotas of different tissues, and bhutagni which are 5 in number and called parthiva, apya, taijasa, vayaviya, nabhasa. Agnis are meant to digest such portions of the food as belonging to parthivadi bhutas respectively. It means that the parthiva component of the food consumed is digested by parthivagni and helps to be assimilated with the parthiva bodily elements and so on. The Parthiva component of the food nourishes parthiva elements of the body and the remaining components of each bhuta will similarly nourish the corresponding bhuta component of the bodily elements-

“पञ्चभूतात्मके देहे ह्याहारः पाञ्चभौतिकः ।
विपक्वः पञ्चधा सम्यग्गुणान् स्वानभिवर्धयेत्” ॥¹¹

The food materials and drugs (both animate and inanimate) are also composed of Panca mahabhutas-

“तत्र पृथिव्यप्तेजोवाय्वाकाशानां समुदायाद् द्रव्याभिनिर्वृत्तिः,
उत्कर्षस्त्वभिव्यञ्जको भवति- इदं पार्थिवभिदमाप्यमिदं तैजसमिदं
वायव्यभिदमाकाशीयमिति” ॥¹²

That means all Karya dravyas (gross and subtle) are composed of panca mahabhutas. The mechanism of formation of a dravya by a sequential combination of panca mahabhutas has also been explained in Ayurveda.

Six tastes and Panca mahabhuta

The concept of taste of a drug is one of the unique concepts of Ayurveda. This is an important concept of Ayurveda pharmacology, which explains why a drug or a food article acts in a particular fashion. This helps also to identify a drug on the basis of taste. The pancabhautika composition of a drug can also be identified by inference on the basis of taste which can be directly perceived by the tongue. The identification of Pancabhautika composition also helps to decide its utility or otherwise in a given disease depending on the increase or decrease of corresponding Bhutas in the body. In order to facilitate all these, it was necessary to decide the Bhautika

⁹ (Susruta Samhita, Sarirastanam-4/76)

¹⁰ (Susruta Samhita, Sarirastanam-42/5-6)

¹¹ (Susruta Samhita, Sarirastanam-46/526)

¹² (Susruta Samhita, Sarirastanam-41/3)

composition of taste of a drug, and hence all Acharya's have given a correlation of pancabhautika composition to tastes, in their respective texts.

Table 2: Six tastes and Panca mahabhuta

Taste	Bhautika composition
1) Sweet	Prithvi + Ap
2) Sour	Tejas + Prithvi
3) Salt	Ap + Tejas
4) Bitter	Akasa + Vayu
5) Pungent	Tejas + Vayu
6) Astringent	Prithvi + Vayu

Marmas (vital points) and Pancamahabhuta

There are 107 vital points in the body. They are also constituted of Mahabhutas. These are the vital anatomical spots, injury to which may lead to sudden death, little delayed death, death immediately after removal of foreign body from such vital spots, or permanent crippling or severe pain. These are considered to be the prime seat of prana. These vital spots (anatomical regions) are basically stated to be constituted by muscled, blood vessels, snayus, bones, and joints, where prana is specially located. Such 107 vital spots are identified in the living body. The deleterious effects of the injury to these, vary from one Marma to another. The reason for this variance in effect is supposed to be the Bhautika composition of the spot affected-

“तत्र सद्यः प्राणहराण्यग्नेयानि, अग्निगुणेष्व्वाशु क्षीणेषु क्षपयन्ति; कालान्तरप्राणहराणि सौम्याग्नेयानि, अग्निगुणेष्व्वाशु क्षीणेषु क्रमेण च सोमगुणेषु कालान्तरेण क्षपयन्ति; विशल्यप्राणहराणि वायव्यानि, शल्यमुखावरुद्धो यावदन्तर्वायुस्तिष्ठति तावज्जीवति, उद्धृतमात्रे तु शल्ये मर्मस्थानाश्रितो वायुर्निष्क्रामति, तस्मात् सशल्यो जीवत्युद्धृतशल्यो म्रियते (पाकात्पतितशल्यो वा जीवति); वैकल्यकराणि सौम्यानि, सोमो हि स्थिरत्वाच्छैत्याच्च प्राणावलम्बनं करोति; रुजाकराण्यग्निवायुगुणभूयिष्ठानि, विशेषतश्च तौ रुजाकरौ; पाञ्चभौतिकीं च रुजामाहुरेके” ॥¹³

Conclusion

Ayurveda has utilized almost every important concept of philosophic thoughts one way or the other in order to make itself a complete health science in the true spirit of the term. It left no stones unturned in so far as its presence in literary form with a secular, broad-minded, dispassionate approach to the topic of health problems and in finding a solution to ever bothering miseries of mankind both here and hereafter. Many independent theories like Tridosha theory, Pancabhuta theory, Karya-Karama theory, Samanya-Visesa theory, Loka-purusa Samyavada, etc have evolved and on the basis of these many theories, the health service is being rendered even today with full faith and confidence. Ayurveda vows its existence very much to the great seers of the past who were not only saints but also scientists. Salutations to those great men who are versatile in classical literature, efficient, pure, proficient in the practical demonstration, in whose hand the success lies, and are self-restraint.

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