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Panchamahabhuta- Five Basic Elements and their Utility in Ayurveda: A Review

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ABSTRACT:

There are various principles like *Tri Dosha* (Biomaterials), *Sapt Dhatus* (Tissues) and *Tri Mala* (waste products), *Srotas*, *Agni*, etc. mentioned in Ayurveda, but fundamental of all these is *Panchmahabhuta* principle. In Ayurveda it is stressed that both *Chikitsa Purush* (living human body) and *Dravyas* (Drugs) used for treatment of *Chikitsa Purush*, are made up of *Panchmahabhuta*. So, for any *Vaidya* (Physician) to achieve the ultimate aim of Ayurveda (to maintain health of healthy person and prevent him/her from diseases) it is very important to have deep and through understanding *Panchmahabhuta* concept. In this review article stress is given on clinical application of *Panchmahabhuta* principle in Ayurveda and focused on the inter relation of *Panchmahabhuta* with various other components of body like *Tridosh*, *Dhatu*, *Mala*, *Triguna*, *Rasa* etc.

Keywords: *Panchmahabhuta*, Ayurveda, *Dosha*, *Rasa*, *Triguna*

INTRODUCTION

According to Ayurveda every *Dravya* (matter) present in this universe is composed of *Panchmahabhuta*; be it living or non-living. The concept of *Panchmahabhuta* (five primordial elements) is intensely and scientifically circulated in Ayurveda classics and accredited that human body is *Panchabhautika*.¹ These are the minutest elements, which constitute living and nonliving matters. The word *Panchmahabhuta* is derived from the word 'Pancha' which means five and 'Bhuta' means which exists. The equilibrium of these five elements in the human body denotes the health while the imbalance of these denotes disease. The very first element among these five that involves to existence is *Akash* (Ether). It is most expansive

and least concrete of all. The subsequent element derived is *Vayu* (Air), and then comes *Agni* (Fire), then *Jala* (Water) and lastly *Prithvi* (Earth) element is created. Depending upon the predominance of the content, the matter is classified as *Parthiva*, *Apya*, *Tajasa*, *Vayaviya* and *Akashiya*.²

Relation with Food:

The food that we consume is made up of *Panchmahabhutas* and it undergoes digestion with the help of *Jathragni* (digestive fire), thereafter it nourishes the *Dhatus* (tissues) alike to its properties. This concept in Ayurveda is known as *Samnaya Vriddhi Kaarnam* i.e. like increase like e.g. *Parthiva* (Prithvi dominant) properties of



food will nourish the *Parthiva* component of the body.³ In this manner symmetrical properties of *Mahabhutas* give nutrition to corresponding symmetrical organs of body.⁴

Role of *Bhutagni* in digestion:

Bhutagni is the *Agni* from five basic elements (*Panchmahabhutas*). There are five *Agnis* in each of the five basic elements namely-*Parthiva*, *Apya*, *Tejas*, *Vayavya* and *Akash*.

Each and every cell in our body is composed of the five *Mahabhutas* or five basic elements. Naturally, each cell consists of these five *Bhutagnis* also. All the nutrients in this world that we eat also consists of these five *Bhutagnis* also.

The five *Bhutagnis* act on the respective *Mahabhautik* portion of food and thereby nourish the *Mahabhutas* in body.

Acharya Charak has mentioned that these five *Bhutagnis* digest their own part of the element present in food material.⁵

Evolution of *Panchmahabhuta*:

From the *Avyakta* (the unmanifest principle) is produced, *Mahan*, the second principle-having the same feature or qualities; from the *Mahan*, is produced *Ahankara* (the third principle) having the same feature/qualities. This *Ahankara* is of three kinds, such as *Vaikaarika* (Sativik), *Taijasa* (Rajas) and *Bhutadai* (Tamas).⁶ (Flow Chart 1)

Interrelationship between *Panch Mahabhutas*:

Acharya Sushruta has demonstrated that though all the substances in the universe are composed of all the *Mahabhutas* but properties of every *Mahabhuta* is not clearly manifested in all matters, but is well manifested in substances of their own specific categories and predominance.⁷ e.g. *Shabad Guna* is present in all the five *Mahabhuts*, but clearly visible in *Aakash Mahabhuta* predominance *Dravyas* only. So it is known as chief attribute (*Guna*) of *Aakash Mahabhuta* only.

Definition of a Living Organism:

As per Ayurveda classics, *Purusha* (living human being) is the product of intimate union of *Panchmahabhutas* (five primary elements) with *Sariri* (soul), and known as *Karma Purusha*. This *Karma purusha* is the subject of medical treatment.^{8,9}

Definition of *Swasth Purush*:

Person in whom *Dosha* (Biomaterials), *Agni*(digestive power), *Dhatu*s (tissues), *Malas* (waste products) and their activities are normal, his soul, sense organs and mind are clear/calm, is called *Swastha*/healthy person.¹⁰

Relation of *Panchmahabutas* with Universe and Human Body:(Table 1)

There is one principle mentioned in Ayurveda named *LOK-PURUSHSAMYA SIDDHANT*. Here word Lok means Universe. This principle clarifies that universe and human body have various similarities in their qualities, functions and structure. Various processes which occur in the universe also happen in the body of human beings.¹¹

Properties of *Panchmahabhutas*: :(Table 2)

Each *Mahabhuta* has dominant inherent functions related to the sense organs. Various body characteristics are attributed because of *Mahabhuta*.¹²

Relation with *Tri Doshas*: :(Table 3)

There are mainly three types of *Prakriti* named *Vata*, *Pitta* and *Kapha Prakriti*. Each *Prakriti* is because of predominance of one particular *Dosha* along with other two *Dosha*. These three *Doshas* are constituted by specific *Mahabhuta* as depicted in table.¹³

Based on this composition, *Mahabhuta* play vital role in determining *Prakriti* (basic constitution) of human being as well as treatment of diseases e.g. in case of an ailment occurring due to decrease in *Vata*, *Dosha*, the regimen which increases *Vayu* and *Akasha Mahabhuta* will be effective in curing that particular ailment.

Relation with *Dhatu*s and *Mala*¹⁴:(Table 4)

Relation between *PanchMahabutas* and *Gyanendriya* (Sense Organs): :(Table 5)

Although *Gyanendriya* are not formed from *Panchmahabhuta* but these *Gyanendriya* can not deliver their functions without support of *Panchmahabhuta*. In Charak Sutra Sthan chapter no.8 Acharya Charaka described relation between *Panch Gyanendriya* & *Panchmahabhutas* as depicted below:

Influence of *Panchamahabhuta* in Embryogenesis:

Mahabhutas play vital role during Embryogenesis. When sperm and ovum unite together an ovum is formed. All five *Mahabhutas* act on this ovum. After formation of foetus (*Garbha*), *Vayu* performs function of cell division/multiplication (*Vibhajana*) of foetus in to *Dosha*, *Dhatu*, *Mala*; *Agni* carries function of metabolism (*Pachana*); *Jala Mahabhuta* maintains the moisture in foetus (*Kledana*); *Prithvi* carries function of providing compactness or formation of mass (*Samhanana*); and *Akasha* perform function of enlargement of size (*Vivardhana*). If these functions are administrated in normal proportion, the traditional structure of body (*Sharira*) i.e. *Shadang Sharira* is formed.¹⁵

Panchamahabhuta role in formation of Rasa and effect on Dosha: :(Table 6)

Main subject of *Rasanindriye* (senses of Taste) is known as *Rasa*. For the formation of a *Rasa*, *Prithvi* and *Jala* are basic requirement. Rest of three *Mahabhutas* (*Aakash*, *Vayu*, *Agni*) are involved in categorizing *Rasa* in to six specific types.¹⁶ Each *Rasa* is composed of two of the *Pancha Mahabhutas* as depicted below in table:^{17,18}

Panchmahbhuta role in Determining Complexion: :(Table 7)

In the intrauterine life of fetus *Panchamahabhuta* unite in certain combination to give a particular complexion to fetus.¹⁹

Panchamahabhuta and Trigunas Relation: :(Table 8)

Satva, *Raja*, *Tama* are called as *Tri Guna* in Ayurveda. These *Triguna* in different proportions influence the mental and intellectual caliber of every individual. Among these three, *Raja* and *Tama* are called as *Mansik Dosha* (as these two are responsible for number of psychiatric disorders).²⁰

So, by knowing the level of *Satva*, *Raja* and *Tama* in body, physician can decide treatment type in the patient on the basis of *Panchmahabhuta*.²¹ Moreover, *Satva Pariksha* (mental strength examination) is one of the ten diagnostic tools mentioned by Acharya Charaka to assess the *Manobal* (Mental strength) of the patient.²²

Marma (Vital points) and their Panchbhautic Constitution: :(Table 9)

The term *Marma* is defined as "Marayantiiti Marma" that spot which when injured, kills the person. This is a broad general definition. All such spots do not cause death; some cause deformities and severe pain. The *Marma* (vital points) in body is classified in five categories on the basis of their harmful effect on body. The harmful effect depends upon fundamental composition of *Mahabhuta* as depicted below:²³

Thus, it is obvious that we can cure *Marma* related disorder by altering the composition of concerned *Mahabhuta*.

Panchbhutas role in mode of action of Drugs: :(Table 10)

Panchmahabhuta play important role in deciding particular action of a drug.²⁴ On the basis of this concept, we can understand pharmacodynamics of different Ayurvedic drugs. Clinical Significance of Individual *Mahabhutas*: :(Table11)

CONCLUSION

From this review article study it is now obvious that

Panchmahabhuta principle plays a key role in diagnosis as well as treatment of various diseases in Ayurveda. The concept of *Panchmahabhutas* in Ayurveda is useful in *Nidan* and *Chikitsa* of various disorders, thus fulfilling the aim of *Dhatusamya*. *Panchmahabhutas* are the basic elements in the human body. Imbalance of these elements in the body can cause different types of illnesses. These elements in equilibrium within the body are indicative of health. The universe is *Panchbhautic* and all the diseases are also due to imbalances of *Panchbhutas*. If any of these *Mahabhuta* gets vitiated in the body and cause the disease, then that *Mahabhuta* can be normalized by giving the *Dravya* and *Aahar* having *Mahabhuta* of opposite properties than the vitiated one. As *Vayu Mahabhuta* gets vitiated, it can be treated by giving *Jala*, *Prithvi Mahabhuta Dravya* as they comprise opposite property of *Vayu Mahabhuta*. In this regard, the present review article also opens a new research window in the field of Ayurveda research on *Panchmahabhuta* principle.

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Flow Chart 1

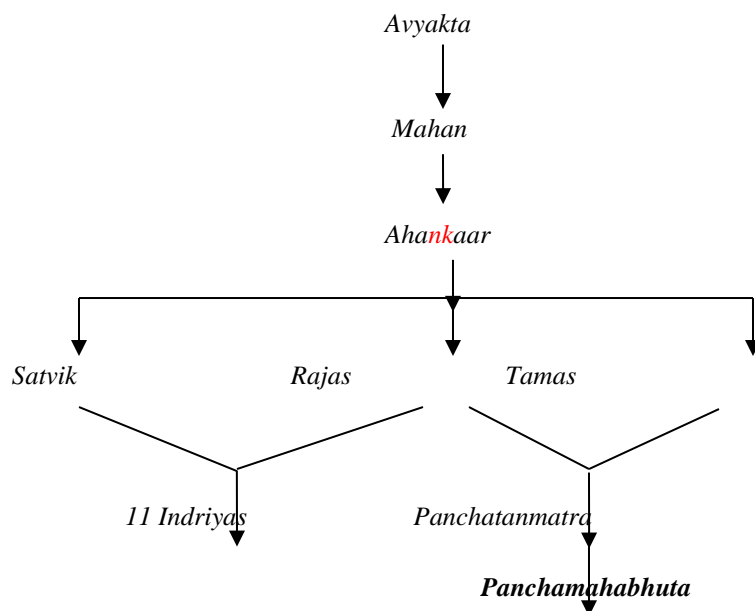


Table 1 Shows Relation of Panchmahabutas with Universe and Human Body:

Sr.No.	Mahabhuta	Universe	Body
1	Aakasha	Space in universe	All the body channels,pores or empty spaces symbolizes Aakasha.
2.	Vayu	Air or gases present in Atmosphere viz O ₂ ,Co ₂ etc.	Represents movements like that of motor or sensory nerves impulses, Neurotransmitter transmission, food in GIT ,
3	Agni	Sunlight, Heat of Atmosphere	Represents enzymatic activities, stomach acids, digestive enzymes, rate of metabolism and corresponds to intelligence.
4	Jala	Water of rivers, sea etc.	Represents blood, lymph and other fluids bringing nutrition, carrying away wastes products ,regulating temperature, bringing immune cells to site of infection etc.
5	Prithvi	Soil, Stone and other solid material	Represents hard parts of body like bones, teeth, flesh, and hair etc.

Table 2 Shows Properties of Panchamahabhutas:

<i>Mahabhuta</i>	Specific Characteristics	General Characteristics	Chief sense Attribute
<i>Akasha</i>	<i>Apratighatata</i> (free flow /non-resistance).	A material with the predominance of <i>Akashamahabhuta</i> possesses the following characteristics: .Soft/ <i>Mridu</i> .Light/ <i>Laghu</i> .Subtle/ <i>Sukshma</i> Smooth/ <i>Shlakshna</i>	Shabda /sound
<i>Vayu</i>	<i>Chalatva</i> (mobility)	<i>Sparsa</i> (touch) Light/ <i>Laghu</i> Dry/ <i>Ruksha</i> Rough/ <i>Khara</i> Clear/ <i>Vishada</i> Subtle/ <i>Suksma</i> (Su.Sutar 41/4)	<i>Sparsh</i> /touch
<i>Agni</i>	<i>Usnatva</i> (heat)	<i>Roop</i> (vision) Hot/ <i>ushna</i> Sharp/ <i>teekshna</i> Subtle/ <i>sukshma</i> Light/ <i>laghu</i> Dry/ <i>ruksha</i> Clear/ <i>vishada</i>	Rupa/vision
<i>Jala</i>	<i>Dravatva</i> (liquidity)	A substance with predominance of <i>Jalamahabhuta</i> possess the following characteristics (Ch.Sutra 26/11) Fluid/ <i>Drava</i> Unctuous/ <i>Snigdha</i> Cold/ <i>Sheeta</i> Slow/ <i>Manda</i> Soft/ <i>Mridu</i> Slimy/ <i>Pichchila</i> Rasa (Taste)	Rasa/taste
<i>Prithvi</i>	<i>Kharatva</i> (roughness)	A substance with predominance of <i>Prithvimahabhuta</i> possess the following characteristics (Ch.Sutra 26/11) Smell/ <i>Gandha</i> Heavy/ <i>Guru</i> Rough/ <i>Khara</i> Hard/ <i>Kathina</i> Slow/ <i>Manda</i> Stable/ <i>Sthira</i> Clear/ <i>Nonslimy/Vishada</i> Dense/ <i>Sandra</i> Gross/ <i>Sthula</i>	<i>Gandha</i> /smell

Table 3 Shows Relation with Tri Doshas:

Doshas	Panchamahabhuta Constitution
<i>Vata</i>	<i>Vayu , Akasha</i>
<i>Pitta</i>	<i>Agni</i>
<i>Kapha</i>	<i>Jala , Prithvi</i>

Table 4 Shows Relation with Dhatus and Mala:(Su.Su.15/8 Chakrapani)

Dhatu	Panchamahabhuta Constitution	Mala	Panchamahabhuta Constitution
<i>Rasa</i>	<i>Jala</i>	<i>Mutra</i>	<i>Agni, Jala</i>
<i>Rakta</i>	<i>Agni</i>	<i>Purish</i>	<i>Prithvi</i>
<i>Mansa</i>	<i>Prithvi</i>	<i>Sweda</i>	<i>Jala</i>
<i>Meda</i>	<i>Jala, Prithvi</i>		
<i>Asthi</i>	<i>Prithvi, Vayu, Agni</i>		
<i>Majja</i>	<i>Jala</i>		
<i>Sukar</i>	<i>Jala</i>		

Table 5 Shows Relation between PanchMahabutas and Gyanendriya (Sense Organs):

S.No.	Panchamahabhoot	Gyanendriya	Site of Sense	Quality
1.	<i>Prithvi</i>	<i>Ghran</i>	Nose	<i>Gandha</i>
2.	<i>Jala</i>	<i>Rasan</i>	Tongue	<i>Rasa</i>
3.	<i>Agni</i>	<i>Chakshu</i>	Eye	<i>Rupa</i>
4.	<i>Vayu</i>	<i>Saparshan</i>	Skin	<i>Sparsh</i>
5.	<i>Aakash</i>	<i>Shrotra</i>	Ear	<i>Shabda</i>

Table 6 Shows Panchamahabhuta role in formation of Rasa and effect on Dosha:

Sr.No.	Rasa	Mahabhut Composition	Effect on Dosha
1	<i>Madur</i> (Sweet)	<i>Prithivi+Jala</i>	Pacification of <i>Vata,Pitta</i>
2	<i>Amla</i> (Sour)	<i>Prithivi+Agni</i>	Pacification of <i>Vata</i>
3	<i>Lavna</i> (Salty)	<i>Jala+Agni</i>	Pacification of <i>Vata</i>
4	<i>Katu</i> (Spicy)	<i>Vayu+Agni</i>	Pacification of <i>Kapha</i>
5	<i>Tikta</i> (Bitter)	<i>Vayu+Aakash</i>	Pacification of <i>Kapha,Pitta</i>
6	<i>Kashaya</i> (Astringent)	<i>Vayu+Prithvi</i>	Pacification of <i>Kapha,Pitta</i>

Table 7 Shows Panchmahbhuta role in Determining Complexion:

Complexion	Mahabhut Responsible
Fair (<i>Avdat</i>)	<i>Agni, Aakash, Jala</i>
Black (<i>Krishan</i>)	<i>Agni, Prithvi, Vayu</i>
Shyam (Sky like bluish)	Equilibrium of all five <i>Mahabhuta</i>

Table 8 Shows Panchamahabhuta and Trigunas Relation:

Mahabhuta	Tri Guna
<i>Aakash</i>	<i>Satva</i>
<i>Vayu</i>	<i>Raja</i>
<i>Agni</i>	<i>Satva+Raja</i>
<i>Jala</i>	<i>Satva+Tama</i>
<i>Prithvi</i>	<i>Tama</i>

Table 9 Marma (Vital points) and their Panchbhautic Constitution:

Type of Marma	Panchabhautic constitution
<i>Sadyapranahara</i> (that which cause immediate death)	<u><i>Agni</i></u>
<i>Kaalantarapranahara</i> (that which cause death after some time)	<u><i>Jala, Agni</i></u>
<i>Vishalyaghna</i> (that which cause death by removal of foreign body)	<u><i>Vayu</i></u>
<i>Vaikalyakara</i> (that which cause disability or deformities)	<u><i>Jala</i></u>
<i>Rujakara</i> (that which cause pain)	<u><i>Agni, Vayu</i></u>

Table 10 Shows Panchbhutas role in mode of action of Drugs:

Action	Mahabhut Responsible
<i>Virechan</i>	<i>Prithvi, Jala</i>
<i>Vaman</i>	<i>Agni, Vayu</i>
<i>Sanshaman</i>	<i>Aakash</i>
<i>Sangrahi</i>	<i>Vayu</i>
<i>Deepan</i>	<i>Agni</i>
<i>Lekhan</i>	<i>Vayu, Agni</i>
<i>Brinhan</i>	<i>Prithvi, Jala</i>

Table 11 Shows Clinical Significance of Individual Mahabhutas:

Mahabhuta	Clinical Significance
Aakash:	<p>The <i>Vata Dosha</i> is constituted from <i>Vayu</i> And <i>Akasha Mahabhuta</i>(A.S.Su.20/2) So in <i>Vata Prakriti</i> individual, the dominance of properties of <i>Aakasha Mahabhuta</i> are observed. So in <i>Vataj</i> disorders treatment should be focused on reducing <i>Aakasha Mahabhuta</i>. <i>Akasha Mahabhut</i> predominate drugs are <i>Sanshaman</i> (pacifying) in nature. The drugs which are <i>Tikta</i> in <i>Rasa</i>(taste) have <i>Vayu</i> and <i>Aakasha Mahabhuta</i>..So this can produce Softness (<i>Mardava</i>), Porousness (<i>Saushirya</i>) and Lightness (<i>Laguta</i>) in the body. (Ch.Sutra 26/11).</p>
Vayu	<p><i>Vayu Mahabhuta</i> predominance drugs cause withholding (<i>Sangrahi</i>) effect, do absorption of fluid (<i>Shoshana</i>), scarifying (<i>Lekhna</i>) effect and do therapeutic emesis (<i>Vamana</i>).(Su.Sutra 41/6). The substances which are pungent, bitter and astringent in taste have dominancy of <i>Vayu</i> and <i>Aakasha Mahabhuta</i> (Su.Sutra 42/3). So by wisely prescribing the drugs having above tastes, we can pacify <i>Kapha Dosha</i> in the body.</p>
Agni	<p>The blood (<i>Rakta Dhatu</i>) has predominance of <i>Agni Mahabhuta</i>(Su.Sutra 15/10). <i>Agni</i> with <i>Prithvi</i> and <i>Vayu Mahabhuta</i> together form Bone (<i>Asthi Dhatu</i>) (Su.Sutra 15/10). <i>Agni</i> with <i>Jala</i> and <i>Vayu</i> together form Muscle (<i>Mansa Dhatu</i>) (Su.Sutra 15/29) The drugs which are sour, salty and pungent have dominance of <i>Agni Mahabhuta</i> (Ch.Sutra26/40). By wisely prescribing the drugs having above taste, one can increase <i>Pitta Dosha</i> in the body <i>Agni</i> and <i>Vayu Mahabhuta</i> having lightness as their property used in therapeutic emesis (<i>Vamana</i>). The substances having light (<i>Laghu</i>) property possess <i>Vayu</i> and <i>Agni Mahabhuta</i> predominance. Intake of such food items increase digestive fire.(Ch.Sutra 5/6) <i>Agni Mahabhuta</i> is also used in scrapping (<i>Lekhna</i>), sudation (<i>Swedana</i>), appetizer (<i>Deepan</i>)and digestive (<i>Pachan</i>) Karma. (Su.Sutra 41/6)</p>
Jala	<p>The gustatory system including tongue and taste buds have predominance of <i>Jala Mahabhuta</i> (Ch.Sutra 8/14). The liquidity and fluidity of blood (<i>Rakta</i>) is a result of <i>Jala Mahabhuta</i>. (Su.Sutra 14/9). The moisture, unctuousness, softness and delightfulness in the body are decided by <i>Jala Mahabhuta</i>. (Ch.Sutra 26/11).Abnormality in these functions are observed to assess the varying proportions of <i>Jala Mahabhuta</i> in the body. The increase or decrease in <i>Kapha Dosha</i> and other body components with above properties depend upon <i>Jala Mahabhuta</i>. e.g. due to reduction of <i>Jala Mahabhuta</i> there will be depletion of <i>Rasa Dhatu</i> in the body. It leads to thirst (<i>Trishna</i>)and other features of depletion of <i>Rasa</i> (<i>Rasa Kshaya</i>) (Ch.Chikitsa 22/16) <i>Udaka</i> form is best for production of soothing effect/refreshing agent/<i>Ashwasakaranam</i> (Ch.Sutra 25/40)</p>
Prithvi	<p>The substances which are heavy (<i>Guru</i>) to digest have predominance of <i>Prithvi</i> and <i>Jala</i>. These substances decrease <i>Agni</i>(digestive fire).(Ch.Sutra 5/6) The drugs which are Sweet (<i>Madhur</i>) and sour (<i>Amla</i>) taste have predominance of <i>Prithivi Mahabhuta</i>. Medicines for therapeutic purgation (<i>Virechena</i>) have predominance of <i>Jala</i> and <i>Prithvi Mahabhuta</i>. Since both of these <i>Mahabhuta</i> have heaviness as their property ,it carries the <i>Doshas</i> in downward direction(Su.Sutra41/6) and thus it helps in expelling the <i>Dosha</i> through rectal route(Ch.Kalpa1/5) Drugs predominant of qualities of <i>Prithvi and Jala Mahabhuta</i> are nourishing (<i>Brimhana</i>) in nature(Su.Sutra41/6)</p>