



Review Article

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CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF RASAYANA FOR MENTAL HEALTH IN ELDERLY

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ABSTRACT

Vardhakya (old age) is characterized by deterioration in the levels of vital capacity, energy, sexual potency, speech, perception, absorption, retention, memory and intellectual abilities along with predominance of Vata (Basic body humour). Vata is the main controller of functions of mind. Due to this shared association of Manas (Mind), old age and Vata, impairment of mental functions are commonly observed in geriatric age group. In the present criterion, care towards psychological wellbeing in the geriatric age group is of utmost importance due to the increasing senile population and altered social situations. Ayurveda confers the knowledge of Rasayana, where various pharmacological and non-pharmacological modes (Achara Rasayana) of therapies are used for prevention, promotion and management of diseases. Medhya Rasayana (nootropic), a group of Rasayana medicines are known for their action on psychological and intellectual functioning. Rasayana can heighten mental health in old age by its unique effects on Vata.

Keywords: Ayurveda, Rasayana, Medhya, Vata, Old age, Mental health.

INTRODUCTION

Ageing is a natural and inevitable physiological process. Old age is the phase of life which has multi factorial effects on quality of life. With increased life expectancy, the population of old aged is mounting day by day. The world's population aged 60 years and above is expected to grow from 77 million (7.4 % of total population) in 2001 up to 300 million (17 %) by 2050.¹ By 2026, elderly population of India is expected to share about 12.4 % of the total population.² With these demographic changes, there is an alarming raise in the concern towards the wellbeing of geriatric age group. W.H.O. has revealed its concern for old age by dedicating the year 2012 towards the theme "healthy ageing". Ayurveda, the science of life, has given guidelines towards the understanding of the process of ageing, the changes observed, prevention, measures to delay ageing signs and treatment to manage the diseases if any. Vardhakya (old age) is characterized by deterioration in the levels of vital capacity, energy, sexual potency, speech, perception, absorption, retention, memory and intellectual abilities along with predominance of Vata (one of the body humor).³

Decennial decline in biological factors like childhood, growth, beauty, intellect, gleam of skin, sexual ability, vision, perceptive ability, cognitive functioning and locomotor activities are highlighted as signs of ageing.⁴ The process of senescence takes over both body and mind simultaneously. By nature, psychological and behavioural changes are observed in old age along with above mentioned features. They are poor in retention and recall process, fall in learning capability and creativity, loss of sense of humour, rigid personality, more occupation with self, changes in interest, narrowing of interest in recreational activities, social derangement etc.⁵

Additional to these changes, greying population also tend to suffer from a number of mental disorders. Though,

mental illnesses are very common in old age but most remain undetected. These mental disorders induce functional disability; disturbs the quality of life; create burden on family and social systems. Social factors like loss of spouse, loneliness, dispersed family and financial insufficiencies also contribute to the impaired mental health.

Somatic disease conditions add on to the deteriorating circumstances. There is a very intricate connection between somatic diseases, mental health and social factors in old age. If this link is not well knit, then a cluster of diseases may harness the life of elderly individuals. The average prevalence of mental health problems both in rural and urban communities indicates that 20.5 % of the older adults are suffering from one or the other problems.⁶ In old age, psychiatric illnesses can precipitate morbidity and early mortality. Commonly encountered mental diseases in this age group are depression, anxiety, dementia, senile psychosis, delirium and menopause related disturbances.

Forthcoming years will evidence a sudden increase in the number mental health sufferers in old age. Other somatic illnesses like hypertension, endocrinal diseases, stroke, Parkinsonism, multiple sclerosis are also known to produce secondary mental disturbances. Hence a comprehensive approach towards physical, mental and spiritual wellbeing in the greying population is very essential.

Ayurveda considers Shareera, Atma and Manas as the trivet of life and these faculties are to be maintained in healthy status throughout the different phase of life. Ayurveda describes the knowledge of Rasayana (rejuvenatory therapy) which is used for prevention, promotion and management of somatic and psychological diseases.

Rasayana

Rasayana is one among the eight branches of Ayurveda with high importance in Ayurvedic therapeutics with objectives like rejuvenation, regeneration, anti-ageing, better cognitive functioning and immunomodulation. Different pharmacological and non pharmacological measures are used to improve the quality of life by their action on senescence and disease.⁷ Rasayana has multiple benefits viz longevity, memory, intelligence, health, lustre, better sensory and motor abilities etc.⁸

Different varieties of Rasayana are mentioned in Ayurveda. Medhakamya Rasayana or Medhya (nootropic), Naimittika (promoter of specific vitality in specific diseases), Ajasrika (dietary Rasayana) and Achara Rasayana (conduct Rasayana) are very useful in the prevention and treatment of mental disorders in old age.

Pharmacological Rasayana

Rasayanas which are specific to brain and nervous system are known by the name of Medhya Rasayana (Nootropic). They include a specific group of herbs, which are used to boost up the cognitive functioning like memory, concentration and retention and so on. An improved cognitive ability can have better influence on psychological aspects like mood, thinking skill and ability to cope with stress.

Some of these Medhya Rasayanas can be enlisted as Mandukaparni (*Centella asiatica*), Yashtimadhu (*Glycyerrhiza glabra*), Guduchi (*Tinospora cordifolia*), Shankhpushpi (*Convolvulus pluricalis*), Ashwagandha (*Withania somnifera*), Vacha (*Acorus calamus*), Jyotishmati (*Celastrus panniculata*), Brahmi (*Bacopa monneri*) and Jatamansi (*Nardostachys jatamansi*).¹⁰

The cognition-promoting effect of Medhya Rasayanas is best seen in children with memory deficits, or when memory is compromised following head injury or a prolonged illness and in old age.¹¹ These drugs are judiciously used in different conditions to prevent and manage mental illnesses. In old age, Medhya drugs are used in single or in formulations to attain delaying of senile degenerative process. Most of these are known to balance the deranged Vata.

Non Pharmacological Rasayana

Ayurveda is not mere a science of therapeutics, but also instructs the discipline of psychological, emotional, spiritual and social well being. Habitual practice of Achara Rasayana (behavioural rejuvenatory therapy) or certain social conducts and behavioural codes help to accomplish healthy living. These have special influence on psychosomatic health.

Respecting elders, practicing auspicious activities like Mantra (Hymn), Japa (~prayer) and worshipping Gods, practicing meditation and truth, maintaining calm and peaceful state of mind, being humble, kind and well behaved, studying religious books, non indulgence in wrong habits like alcohol and excessive sex, not harming anybody verbally / physically and not being angry fall under this Rasayana.¹² Regular use of milk, ghee and other nutritious elements of diet is the practice of Ajasrika rasayana. These practices ensure enhanced Satwika

(good) quality and thus balances of disturbed Rajas and Tamas, the two Manodoshas (mental humors). By adopting these practices, a person can be free from the emotional conflicts and lead stress free life. These measures teach avoiding over response to stimuli and maintain emotional harmony.

In old age, such practices help to fight and cope up with age related problems pertaining to physical disturbances, social instabilities and mental stressors.

The consumption of dietary supplements like milk and ghee enhances the nutritious status and induces better sleep. Probably Japa and Tapas, normalizes the important neurotransmitters like serotonin, nor epinephrine, gamma amino butyric acid metabolism and regulates a wide variety of neuro-psychological processes like mood disturbances, sleep induction.¹³ These in turn decrease the chance of being a prey of mental illnesses in the old age.

CONCLUSION

Old age encompasses many physical, mental, intellectual, social changes. Diverse external and internal factors make old age vulnerable to various somatic and psychological disorders. Mostly mental disorders in this age are undetected. With increasing incidence of mental diseases, there is raised concern towards the management. Ayurveda caters the knowledge of food, lifestyle and certain therapeutic measures to maintain better mental health and fight different mental diseases like dementia, depression, schizophrenia and other neuropsychiatric illnesses effectively.

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