



Review Article

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ACCREDITATION OF CONCEPTS OF RASA (NUTRITION) AND VEERYA (POTENCY) AS FOOD AND MEDICINE DETERMINANTS: A REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Food is the necessity of life. People are concerned with the food so far as it relieves their hunger or satisfies their appetite, and not with whether it supplies their body with all components of good nutrition. Once inside the alimentary tract, the appeal for different types, forms, textures, flavors of food is no longer relevant, because the processes of digestion reduce them all to the same common denominators in a size and form capable of absorption and transportation to individual cells thus providing nutrition. Medicine too is a conditioned necessity of life. Food and medicine consumed according to the needs and conditions of the body are the paramount essentials to sustain the life. Though they share many common parameters, they definitely have individuality. The present communication uplifts the specificity of concept of Rasa and Veerya and their relation to food and medicine respectively. It accepts the accreditation of Chakrapani's quote 'Veerya Pradhanam Aushadha Dravyam, Tatha Rasa Pradhanam Aahaara Dravyam ca' which denote concepts of Rasa (nutrition) as food determinant and Veerya (potency) as medicine determinants.

Keywords: Veerya, Potency, Rasa, Ahara, Aushadha, Food, Medicine.

INTRODUCTION

Doctrines, either guarding or supporting the concepts of cause and effect are pre-established by ancient scientists. Acceptance of these ancient principles by modern thinkers is still in process. Researchers expose the hidden facts behind many happenings in this world and are successful only sometimes. In spite of revolving in every direction, eyeing every nook and corner, most of the times, the miracle continues to remain a mystery. Ayurveda is regarded high with respect to its mysterious, time tested principles. Dravyaguna is one of the indispensable subjects of Ashtanga Ayurveda¹ which throws a limelight on a panchabhautika dravya (substance made up of 5 primary or proto elements)² introduced into the body in form of an ahara (food) or aushadha (medicine)³. Any dravya (drug) will act in the body through a configuration called Rasa panchaka namely Rasa (taste), Guna (property), Veerya (potency), Vipaka (final transformative status) and Prabhava (specific effect) which is its exclusive possession⁴. Among the Rasapanchaka, all together or singly will be contributory for the dravya karma (drug action) because of the predominance⁵. Dravya Karma leads to sama (equilibrium), kshaya (decrease) or vriddhi (increase) of the dhatu (primary units) in the body.⁶ Food and medicine represent the part and parcel of living beings and are linked with concepts of Rasa (nutrition) and Veerya (potency) respectively.⁷

History of food and medicine in India

According to Taitireeya Upanishad diet is regarded as Brahma as it holds a supreme importance in sustaining the life.⁸ Food is considered to be the best preventive medicine and one among the Traya-upastambha (three basic pillars of life) namely Ahara (food), Nidra (sleep) and Brahmacharya (celibacy). By the

optimum use of these triads, the body will be endowed bala (physical and immuological strength), varna (complexion) and upachaya (nourishment) though out the life span provided the person does not indulge in a unhealthy regimen⁹ among which food is the best sustainer of life. Thus food is foundational for the bala (physical and immuological strength), varna (complexion) and ojas (vital essence) of a living being and is planned considering the six tastes of a dravya through permutation and combination. Not only is the food important to living beings on earth, the food is also offered to the divine forces like Brahma, Vishnu, Maheshwara and many other deities who are responsible for the Loka Vyavahaara (Universal action plans) like Utpatti (creation), Sthiti (preservation) and Vinaasha (destruction) through yaga (divine ritual fire). Thus a consumable substance in general is aahara (diet) where rasa (taste), guna (quality), veerya (potency) or vipaka (transformation) are contributory through their performance as nutritive for the body by producing vriddhi (increase), kshaya (decrease) or samya (equilibrium) of the tridosha (three functional units) namely Vata, Pitta and Kapha.¹⁰

Cereals like wheat, barley, rice; Millets like ragi; Pulses like mung, masoor and peas; Oil yielding seeds like mustard and sesame are all known to have existed in the Indus valley before aryan advent and were the items of dietary.¹¹ Dates, coconut, pomegranate, bananas, lemon, brinjal, parwal, flowers of lotus, tamarind are some fruits and vegetables mentioned in pre-aryan Sanskrit writings. Coconut oil, sesame oil were edible oils used ancient days, spice like ginger, turmeric were well known.¹²

Man has an inborn craving for medicine and the desire to take medicine is one feature which distinguishes man, from his fellow creatures says Willian Osler (1894)¹³. Evidences for the

existence of well organized system of medicine in India can be traced back to the archaeological remains in Harappa and Mohenjodaro where vegetable, animal and mineral sources were used.¹⁴

Criteria to call a substance as Food

Food helps in abhivruddi (development) of the following-bala indicating utsaaha upachaya lakshana (physical and immunological strength as sign of enthusiasm and growth) aarogya indicating swastya lakshana (health as sign of well being), gauradi varna (complexion like fair etc.), indriya praasada through swa swa vishaya grahana saamartya (individual functionality of the sense organs) and the ojas (vital essence). It is provided to the body in different forms like ashita bhojyam odanaadi (Soft foods like cooked rice), peeta peyam ksheeradi (drinkable food like milk), leeda lehyam madhuvadi, (lickable food like honey), khadita bhaksham modakaadi (Hard food like laddu bitten to eat) and this is consumed singly or with many other dravyas (nanadravyaatmaka). It is prepared with the help of different processes (aneka vidha vikalpa-manda peya vilepi bhaktadaya) and introduces different effects on the body. (nana vidha prabhava- nanaprakaara shakti). It does not lead to aswastyata (unhealthiness) or doshavaishmya (imbalance among dosha)¹⁵.

Food intake: An urge to be attended compulsorily

Food is the chief source of essential materials which the body needs for its well being. It provides the energy and building materials for the countless cells thus inspiring the growth and survival of the living body¹⁶. Sight, aroma, even sounds and a thought of food stimulates the Gastro-intestinal tract¹⁷ If not taken in time, body signals through hunger and thirst a warning of physiology which is counted under swabhavika vyadhis (Naturally occurring diseases).¹⁸ Appetite and food intake are regulated by two centers present in hypothalamus, feeding centre and satiety centre. Feeding centre is in the lateral hypothalamic nucleus, stimulation of which leads to hunger and food intake. Overstimulation leads to hyper-phagia resulting in obesity; Hypo-stimulation of the same leads to loss of appetite (anorexia) and non-willingness to take food. Satiety centre is in the ventro-medial nucleus of hypothalamus. Stimulation causes loss of appetite and cessation of food intake. Hyper-stimulation leads to anorexia conditions, hypo-stimulation leads to hyper-phagia and hypothalamic obesity. Normally feeding center is always active. But its activity is temporarily inhibited by satiety centre after food intake. Both centers are well balanced under normal physiological conditions. Water intake too is regulated by hypothalamus through two mechanisms called thirst mechanism and ADH mechanism.¹⁹

Criteria to call a substance as Medicine

The term 'Osha' refers to veerya (potency) and that which possesses osha (potency) is aushadhi (the potent) and that which originates from aushadhi (the potent) is aushadha (medicine).²⁰ Sanskrit synonyms of rasa include terms like shringara, visha, veerya, guna, raga and drava²¹ which indicates that any dravya with essence is a potentiated medicine. Veerya pradhana dravya (potent substances) is a medicine and is responsible for the evolution and exhibition of the ushna (hot) or sheeta (cold) guna (property) which is identified clinically as ushna veerya (hot potency) or sheeta veerya (cold potency) dravya (substances).²² The medicine in the body exhibit their property with disparity and thus are categorised as teekshna veerya (highly potent) like Shunti (*Zingiber officinalis*); madhyama veerya (moderately potent) like Bilwa (*Aegle marmelos* Corr.) and Agnimantha

(*Clerodendrum phlomidis* Linn.F.) mrudu veerya (mildly potent) like Amalaki (*Embllica officinalis* Gaertn.)²³ Medicines are roga nashaka dravya (substances which get rid of diseases) and have synonyms like Bhesajya, Bhaishajya, Agada.²⁴ Healing of any physical illness is attempted through procedures like Vamana (emesis therapy) Virechana (purgation therapy) and Basti (enema therapy), by Taila (oil), Ghrita (ghee), and Madhu (honey) respectively. Healing of mental illness is by conditioning dheer (intellect), dhairya (courage) and aatmaadi vijñana (spiritual knowledge) which are intrinsic dimensions of Manas (mind). Thus the term medicine may be extended not only to materials but even to Non-materials.²⁵ Medicine has least role in providing poshana (nutrition) to the rasadi dhatu (tissue) instead they are used for targeting vitiated dosha²⁶.

Converging factors of food and medicine

Dravya (substance) is the indispensable reason for existence of guna (property) and karma (action).²⁷ Rasapanchaka, counted under the concept of guna, is a common matter to be discussed in context of ahara and aushadha dravyas and have many things in common. Both have affinity towards physical or mental faculties. Bhagavat Gita quotes that the food substances have to be perceived under three categories-satvika, rajasika and tamasika. This illustrates the selectivity, affinity and influence of a particular food by one's body, senses, the mind and even the soul.²⁸ Medicines too definitely have an affinity towards a specific organs and tissues of the body or the senses, mind or the spirit. To quote some, yastimadhu (*Glycyrrhiza glabra*. L.) is best chakshushya having inclination towards eyes and vision thus indicating the influence on a specific indriya (sense organ)²⁹, pippali (*Piper longum* L.) is drug of choice in diseases of pleeha (spleen) and guggulu (*Commiphora mukul*) is indicated for diseases of medha dhatu (fat tissue)³⁰ which refers to their influence towards specific organs of the body. Water as the drug of choice for giving ashwasana (assurance)³¹ madhya (Alcoholic beverage) for eradicating shoka (depression) and brahmi (*Bacopa monneiri* L.) for promoting memory³² indicate their inclination and influence towards manas (mental faculty). Seeds of tulasi (*Ocimum tenuiflorum* L.) and rudraksh (*Eleocarpus ganitrus*) apart from being medicinal are also used for spiritual topping, their parts being used in manidharana (wearing them as sacred beads)³³. Medicine effective as Rasayana (Rejuvenators) influences every nook and corner of the personality, thus targeting all seven dhatu because of their high potency³⁴.

Differentiating and deciding factors of food and medicine

Ayurveda believes in everything existing can be definitely utilized for a healthy living³⁵ and can be adopted as per suitability as either food, regimen or medicine³⁶. Chakrapani defines food as rasa pradhana and medicine as veerya pradhana³⁷. Thus 'ahara' and 'aushadha' are two different terminologies with different meaning. There appears one more term called 'visha' (poison or toxin) which also encompasses food and medicine. Following may be some points to be accredited for the orientation of Rasa to food and Veerya to medicine.

Rasa and Veerya modalities may be mutually complementary but are not identical and are exclusively linked with food and medicine.³⁸ Rasa is an important criteria to plan a diet. eg. Madhura rasa (sweet tasting food) should be first taken followed by the other rasa³⁹. But in a medicine not only the rasa, overall veerya encompassing rasapanchaka of the drug is taken in to account for its planning⁴⁰. Rasa is a highlighted criteria in food because among six rasa where tikta (bitter), kashaya (astringent) rasa are not much preferred. But in medicine, irrespective of its

tastefulness or nutrition, the potency is highlighted criteria. The food influences the dhatu and the medicine influences the dosha. The term rasa is suggestive of tastefulness or nutrition which helps the dhatu building. The term veerya is qualification oriented and influences the dosha. However, it is also evident that food can influence dosha and medicine can have effect on the dhatu. But the impact of food on dosha is not to the extent of impact of medicine.

Similarly impact of medicine on tissue building or nourishment is not to the extent of impact of food. Food aims at development and growth of rasa dhatu (primary tissue) and successively the next dhatu. Evolving of sheeta (cold), ushna(hot) etc veerya vachi (symbolizing potency) qualities are not prominent instead they maintain the body, and do not concentrate on any manipulation or alteration in the body. Eg: Godhuma (*Triticum aestivum* L.) shaali (*Oryza sativa*), yava (*Hordeum vulgare*), mudga (*Vigna radiata*), masha (*Vigna mungo*). Here the primary concern is about the overall nutrition it can provide to the body, and also about the maintenance of a regular, routine physiology. Medicine aims at the equilibrium of all the units in the body with regards to their quantity and quality. Upavasa (fasting) where no food is taken too is thus considered as medicine where the growth and development of dhatu are checked so as to bring back the equilibrium. Mudga (*Vigna radiata*), Kulatta (*Dolichos biflorus*), Yava (*Hordeum vulgare*), etc are dietary substances but can be medicine too. Thus classifying substances as food or medicine is also based on their application (prayoga). It is witnessed that medicine materials may also be used as food materials and vice versa. It is important to specify the aims and objectives of the prescribing a dravya.

If a substance is used with the intention of nutrition then it is food and if used as a remedial tool it is medicine.⁴¹ Eg. Spice like shunti (*Zingiber officianalis*), mareecha(*Piper nigrum*), pippali(*Piper longum*) can be an additive in food preparation or may be used singly or in combination termed trikatu as a medicine. Food is planned according to bhojana kala⁴² (time specific for consuming), ritu (season) and agni (digestive power). Medicine is planned according to stage and condition of the disease and is prescribed along with anupana (adjuvant) during specific bheshajakala. Food is always introduced through mukha (oral route) but for medicine, bheshaja marga.⁴³ (routes of administration) can vary as per conditions including oral, nasal, rectal, dermal etc. The quantity can be taken as a criteria, diet is recommended to be consumed hita mita (wholesome and adequate) as per the status of the agnibala (digestive power) of the individual and as per kukshi vibhaga (stomach division).⁴⁴ The medicine is prescribed as per science of posology in specific required quantity namely karsha, pala etc as per the potency differing as mrudu, madhyama and teekshna veerya⁴⁵.

Food can be generally be classified as i) those that contribute to formation of body tissues. ii) those that serve as fuel which are burnt to provide the energy required for all activities of life and its processes.⁴⁶

Medicine are classified in general as i) that which maintains health ii) that which alleviates disorders and restores health.⁴⁷

In practice, food choice and its habits are the outcome of influence of geography, custom and tradition or cultural heritage where one dwells. Economic and social factors too play an important role. But medicine surpasses influence of geography, custom, traditions etc. Food in trade is more oriented towards economy development of the country. But need of a specific medicine may make the victim transported to different country where the medical assistance is available, or medicine may be

imported crossing even the legal barriers to save the patient. Choice of food is associated with one's convenience and is devoid of specificity. It is a matter of survival and one food can be substituted with another without much bothering. But to avail a medicine every possible effort is made as it is the matter of existence and specificity is such that it cannot be substituted. Food of plant origin is active nutrient because of the primary metabolites or reserve materials like carbohydrates, lipids and proteins thus directly responsible for the growth and development of the body. Plant origin medicines are active therapeutics agents because of secondary metabolites or excretory products like alkaloids, steroids, terpenoids, resins, tannins etc⁴⁸. Though specific and regular medicine is prescribed in certain diseases, specific food too plays an important role enhancing the power of medicine. E.g. Basic food plan in diabetes mellitus should be rich in complex carbohydrates and dietary fibre; low in simple sugars, fats and cholesterol, moderate in protein.⁴⁹

CONCLUSION

Food is that which is certified by the Rasanendriya (the organ of taste), which benefits the rasa dhatu (first primary unit of body) to the maximum thus ensuring the efficient and balanced Preenana(nourishment).It itself is medicine if it is altered as per the phase of the life like pregnancy, lactation, infant, child, teenage, adult, physical work quality and quantity; if designed according to the frame of rules and regulations for food intake called Ahara vidhi vidhaana); if does not cause any damage to the stabilizing factors of the body like three dosha, seven dhatu and three mala. Food is medicine but never vice versa. Where the food alone fails in balancing equilibrium, there starts the role of medicine. Planning the medicine involves a great deal more than matching the name of the drug to the name of a disease; it requires knowledge, judgment, skill and wisdom, but above all the sense of responsibility. Best physician knows every aspects of medicine. But the deep knowledge of food too is indispensable for the physician who advises and ensures on svasthanuvrutti (maintenance of health) and roga nigrhana (control of disease) and all these factors are contributory to call food as Maha bhaishajya.(supreme medicine). Thus Food is obligatory; Medicine is complimentary.

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