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The Role of Pañcamahābhūta in the Pathogenesis and Pathways of Disease: A Literary Review in Ayurveda Samhita

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Abstract

Background: Ayurveda emphasizes the concept of *Pañcamahābhūta* (five great elements) as the foundational principle of the human body, health, and disease. Disease progression and manifestation occur through defined channels known as *Roga-mārga* (pathways of disease), as described in *Bruhatrayī*¹. Understanding the interplay between *Pañcamahābhūta*, *Doṣa*, and *Roga-mārga* enhances diagnostic precision and therapeutic decision-making. **Objective:** This review explores the role of *Pañcamahābhūta* in determining disease manifestation and *Roga-mārga*, through a literary analysis of classical Ayurvedic texts supplemented with contemporary perspectives. **Methods:** Classical references from *Caraka Saṃhitā*, *Suśruta Saṃhitā*, and *Aṣṭāṅga Hṛdaya* were critically reviewed²⁻⁷. Contemporary commentaries and modern scientific correlations were also analyzed⁸⁻¹⁰. **Results:** Each *Mahābhūta* exerts dominance over particular *Doṣa*, influencing disease site, manifestation, and progression through specific *Roga-mārga* (*Koṣṭha*, *Śākhā*, *Marmāsthī-sandhi*)³. This mapping not only reflects Ayurvedic nosology but also supports holistic management strategies. **Conclusion:** The *Pañcamahābhūta* theory provides a unique framework to understand disease pathways in Ayurveda. Its application in clinical research and practice could refine personalized approaches to prevention and treatment.

Keywords: Ayurveda, Sthaulya, Atisthūlya, Insulin resistance, Medoroga, Metabolic syndrome, Ashta Doṣa

Introduction :

Ayurveda, the ancient Indian system of medicine, is built upon the fundamental doctrine of *Pañcamahābhūta* — *Ākāśa* (ether), *Vāyu* (air), *Agni/Tejas* (fire), *Āp* (water), and *Prthvī* (earth) ^[1]. These five elemental principles constitute not only the universe but also the human body (*Śarīra*), physiological processes, and disease mechanisms ^[2]. Health is defined as the state of equilibrium among *Doṣa*, *Dhātu*, *Mala*, and *Agni*, whereas disease arises when this equilibrium is disturbed ^[3]. Importantly, disease does not manifest randomly but follows specific routes or pathways (*Roga-mārga*) as described by *Caraka*: *Koṣṭha* (visceral), *Śākhā* (peripheral tissues), and *Marmāsthī-sandhi* ^[4] (vital points, bones, joints). This article explores how *Pañcamahābhūta* influences disease manifestation through *Roga-mārga*, thereby enriching both understanding and clinical utility of Ayurvedic pathogenesis (*Samprāpti*).

Materials and Methods :

A literary review was conducted using primary Ayurvedic sources — *Caraka Saṃhitā*, *Suśruta Saṃhitā*, and *Aṣṭāṅga Hṛdaya*. Commentaries like *Ayurveda Dīpikā* of *Cakrapāṇi* were considered. Contemporary peer-reviewed articles from PubMed, Scopus, and Google Scholar were screened to identify modern scientific correlations. Data were synthesized to conceptualize the role of *Pañcamahābhūta* in *Roga-mārga*.

Literature Review :

1. *Pañcamahābhūta* and *Doṣa*

Each *Doṣa* is derived from specific *Mahābhūta* ^[5]:

- *Vāta*: *Ākāśa* + *Vāyu*

- *Pitta*: *Agni* + *Āp*

- *Kapha*: *Āp* + *Prthvī*

Thus, disturbances in elemental balance directly influence *Doṣa* and subsequently lead to disease.

2. *Pañcamahābhūta*: The Five Great Elements

<i>Mahābhūta</i>	Attributes & Functions ^[6]	Pathological Role ^[7]
<i>Ākāśa</i> (Ether)	Subtlety, lightness, expansiveness; provides space for organs and channels (<i>srotas</i>).	Imbalance leads to tissue depletion or abnormal expansion.
<i>Vāyu</i> (Air)	Mobility, dryness, movement, neural transmission, circulation.	Excess causes neurological and degenerative disorders.
<i>Agni/Tejas</i> (Fire)	Heat, sharpness, transformation, metabolism.	Excess causes inflammation; deficiency causes sluggish digestion
<i>Āp</i> (Water)	Liquidity, cohesion, smoothness, fluid balance.	Excess causes edema; deficiency causes dryness.
<i>Prthvī</i> (Earth)	Stability, heaviness, structure.	Excess causes obesity and blockages; deficiency causes fragility.

3. Concept of Roga-mārga

Caraka classifies disease pathways as^[8]:

- **Koṣṭha mārga:** internal organs, GI tract
- **Śākhā mārga:** peripheral tissues (*Dhātu*-s like *rasa*, *rakta*, *māṃsa*)
- **Marmāsthī-sandhi mārga:** bones, joints, vital points

Roga-mārga	Pathway	Dominant Elements	Clinical Correlates
Koṣṭha	Viscera (GI tract, internal organs)	Agni, Āp, Pṛthvī	Digestive disorders, visceral inflammation
Śākhā	Peripheral tissues (muscles, skin, vessels)	Vāyu, Ākāśa	Pain, neuropathy, peripheral disorders
Marmāsthī-sandhi	Bones, joints, vital points	Pṛthvī, Vāyu	Degenerative disorders, injuries

4. Correlation of Pañcamahābhūta, Doṣa, and Roga-mārga :

Mahābhūta	Dominant Doṣa	Example Roga	Roga-mārga	Clinical Correlates
Ākāśa	Vāta	Gridhrasī, Vātavyādhī	Śākhā	Nerve compression, radiating pain
Vāyu	Vāta	Sandhivāta, Pakṣāghāta	Śākhā / Marmāsthī-sandhi	Neuromuscular disorders
Agni	Pitta	Amlapitta, Jvara	Koṣṭha	Gastritis, febrile conditions

Mahābhūta	Dominant Doṣa	Example Roga	Roga-mārga	Clinical Correlates
Āp	Kapha	Śoṭha, Kaphaja Roga	Koṣṭha / Śākhā	Edema, respiratory congestion
Pṛthvī	Kapha	Sthaulya, Sandhivāta	Marmāsthī-sandhi	Obesity, bone degeneration

Discussion :

The *Pañcamahābhūta* model provides a diagnostic and therapeutic scaffold for Ayurveda. Recognizing *Mahābhūta* dominance allows clinicians to localize disease origin, predict course, and select treatment modalities.

Clinical Significance:

- **Diagnostic Utility:** Enables precise localization of disease initiation and progression.
- **Therapeutic Planning:** *Śodhana* for *Koṣṭha* diseases, *Snehana-Svedana* for *Śākhā* diseases.
- **Preventive Approach:** Understanding *Prakṛti* and elemental dominance helps anticipate vulnerabilities.

Modern Perspectives

- **Ayurgenomics:** Genetic expression patterns correlate with *Prakṛti*, reflecting elemental constitution^[9].
- **Systems Biology:** *Pañcamahābhūta* can be interpreted as functional archetypes linking structure, metabolism, and environment.^[10]

Conclusion :

The doctrine of *Pañcamahābhūta* forms the cornerstone of Ayurvedic understanding of health and disease. Its interplay with *Doṣa* and *Roga-mārga* not only elucidates the pathogenesis but also guides therapeutic strategies. Integrating this ancient wisdom with modern science can strengthen personalized and holistic healthcare.

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Declaration :

Conflict of Interest : None

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