

PANCHAMAHABHUTA: CONCEPT, AYURVEDIC RELEVANCE, AND UTILITY IN DISEASE MANAGEMENT

***Dr. Shilpa Soni, MD Kriya Sharir**

Assistant Professor, Bhojraj Bhondekar Ayurvedic Mahavidyalaya Sirsi, Bhandara.

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***Corresponding Author: Dr. Shilpa Soni**

Assistant Professor, Bhojraj Bhondekar Ayurvedic Mahavidyalaya Sirsi, Bhandara.

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ABSTRACT:

The universe is described as *Panchabhautika*, indicating that all entities are constituted from five fundamental elements (*Panchamahabhuta*). As the human body (*Pinda*) is considered a microcosm of the universe (*Brahmanda*), whatever exists in the cosmos must also be represented within the body. In *Samkhya* philosophy, *Panchamahabhutas* are classified among the sixteen *Vikaras* (final evolutes), whereas in *Vaisheshika* philosophy, grossness appears in *Bhutas* at the stage of *Trisarenu*, at which point they are termed *Mahabhutas*. Ayurveda explicitly states that the human body is formed through *Panchabhautik Sanghatana* (Akasha, Vayu, Agni, Jala and Prithvi) and emphasizes that its development and maintenance depend on appropriate lifestyle and diet (*Ahara*), both of which are themselves *Panchabhautika* in nature. The present review elaborates the utility of *Panchamahabhuta* in the context of Ayurvedic theory and clinical relevance.

KEYWORDS: *Panchabhautika, Ayurveda, Brahmanda, Pinda, Ahara*

INTRODUCTION:

In humans, five sense organs—ears, skin, eyes, tongue, and nose—perceive the external world as sound, touch, form, taste, and smell, respectively. These sensory impressions are not merely perceived but also assimilated as forms of energy, providing the experiential basis for categorizing all phenomena into five elemental groups, known in Indian classics as the five *Mahabhutas*: *Akasha, Vayu, Agni, Jala, and Prithvi*.

Each *Mahabhuta* inherently contains attributes of the remaining four, yet is designated by the element that predominates, conventionally approximated as fifty percent of its composition; this composite nature is elaborated in the doctrine of *Panchikarana* (quintuplication) in Indian philosophy. Interestingly, the *Panchikarana* concept shows conceptual parallels with modern physics and chemistry: subatomic particles such as electrons, protons, and neutrons exemplify *Prithvi* (solidity), the cohesive forces binding them correspond to *Jala*, the energy generated within the atom reflects *Agni*, the dynamic motion of electrons aligns with *Vayu*, and the intervening space represents *Akasha Mahabhuta*.

Panchmahabhoota philosophical and Ayurvedic view:

Panchamahabhuta is viewed both philosophically and clinically in *Ayurveda*, with the universe and human body composed of five fundamental elements—*Akasha*, *Vayu*, *Agni*, *Jala*, and *Prithvi*—each linked to a specific sensory quality: sound, touch, vision, taste, and smell, respectively.^[1] In *Samkhya* philosophy, these *Panchamahabhutas* are counted among the sixteen *Vikaras* (final evolutes), while in the *Vaisheshika* system, they attain grossness at the *Trisarenu* stage and are then termed *Mahabhutas*.

Ayurvedic concepts regarding Akasha:

Akasha, from an Ayurvedic viewpoint, is described in *Charaka Samhita* as the element possessing the single primary quality of sound (*Shabda*).^[2] *Sushruta Samhita* further characterizes *Akasha* as a *Satva Guna*—predominant substance,^[3] imparting attributes such as softness, lightness, subtlety, and smoothness, thereby promoting porosity and lightness within the body.^[4] During bodily development, properties like audition, spatial distinction, subtlety, and lightness are considered to arise from *Akasha*,^[5] and along with the other *Mahabhutas*, it participates in the origination and evolution of *Tridosha*.^[6]

Qualities of Vayumahabhuta:

Vayu Mahabhuta is described as possessing six principal attributes—*Shabda*, *Sankhya*, *Parimana*, *Prithaktva*, *Samyoga*, and *Vibhaga*—linking it to sound, enumeration, measurement, distinction, conjunction, and disjunction in classical *Darshana* literature. In contrast, medicinally, *Akasha Mahabhuta* contributes to bodily development by imparting audition, the sense of spatial inclusion, lightness, subtlety, and distinctness, thereby supporting porosity and reduced density within tissues.

Vayu Mahabhuta: From an Ayurvedic standpoint, *Vayu* is a *Rajoguna*-dominant *Mahabhuta*,^[7] defined in *Tarkasangraha* as a substance imperceptible to vision yet apprehended through touch,^[8] originating from *Akasha*^[9] and primarily recognized by *Sparsha Guna*.^[10] Functionally, *Vayu Mahabhuta* underlies *Vata Dosha*^[11] which is subdivided into five types—*Prana*, *Udana*, *Samana*, *Vyana*, and *Apana*^[12]—each with distinct locations and physiological roles as detailed in *Charaka Samhita*, *Sushruta Samhita*, and *Ashtanga Samgraha*.

1. **Pranavayu** - *Pranavayu* resides in the head, chest, throat, tongue, mouth, and nose, governing respiration, deglutition, expectoration, sneezing, and belching.^[13]
2. **Udanavayu** - *Udanavayu*, seated in the navel, chest, and throat, regulates speech, effort, enthusiasm, strength, and complexion.^[14]
3. **Samanavayu** - *Samanavayu* located around the digestive fire and channels of sweat, *Dosha*, and water, harmonizes *Agni* and supports digestion and assimilation.^[15]
4. **Vyanavayu** - *Vyanavayu* pervades the entire body, coordinating circulation, locomotion, extension, contraction, and blinking.^[16]
5. **Apanavayu** - *Apanavayu*, situated in the testes, urinary bladder, pelvis, thighs, groin, and anus, controls retention and expulsion of semen, urine, stool, and the foetus.^[17]

Properties of Vayu Mahabhuta:

Vayu Mahabhuta is described as possessing nine principal properties: *Sparsha* (touch), *Sankhya* (number), *Parimana* (dimension), *Prithaktva* (distinctness), *Samyoga* (conjunction), *Vibhaga* (disjunction), *Paratva* (priority), *Aparatva* (posteriority), and *Samskara* (impression/latent disposition).^[18] These attributes underlie perceptual and kinetic phenomena such as contact, separation, ordering, and experiential traces in classical Indian philosophy.

Medicinal utility of Vayu Mahabhuta:

Within Ayurveda, the *Panchamahabhuta* doctrine forms a basic framework for understanding *Tridosha*, wherein *Vata Dosha* predominantly represents the combined functions of *Vayu* and *Akasha Bhutas*. *Charaka Samhita* notes that physiologically balanced *Vata* sustains and coordinates all organs and systems, governing movements, neural conduction, circulation, and other dynamic processes in the body.

Tejasmahabhuta:

Tejas Mahabhuta (Agni) is said to arise subsequent to and through *Vayu*, functioning as the illuminator that dispels darkness and manifests as light, colour, and radiance.^[19] It is characterized by predominance of *Sattva* and *Rajas Guna*^[20] and *Vaisheshika Darshana* defines *Tejas* as that which possesses *Rupa* and *Sparsha*^[21]—heat and luminosity being its hallmark features^[22]

Qualities of Tejasmahabhuta:

Tejas Mahabhuta (Agni) is endowed with eleven classical attributes: *Rupa* (colour), *Sparsha* (touch), *Sankhya* (number), *Parimana* (measurement), *Prithaktva* (separation), *Samyoga* (combination), *Vibhaga* (division), *Paratva* (priority), *Aparatva* (posteriority), *Dravatva* (liquidity), and *Samskara* (latent impression). These qualities collectively explain *Tejas* as the principle of transformation, illumination, and dynamism within matter and living systems.

Medicinal qualities of Tejasmahabhuta:

Medicinally, *Tejas* predominates in substances that are hot, sharp, subtle, light, non-unctuous, and non-slimy, with a predominance of sour, salty, and pungent tastes, thereby promoting combustion, metabolism, lustre, radiance, and pigmentation of the body.^[23] Charaka Samhita further identifies *Tejas*, incorporated within *Pitta* in the body, as the determinant of wholesome or unwholesome effects in both balanced and vitiated states, governing digestion and indigestion, vision and blindness, thermoregulation, normal and abnormal complexion, as well as psychological states such as courage, fear, anger, exhilaration, confusion, and clarity.^[24]

Jalamahabhuta:

Jala Mahabhuta arises sequentially from *Agni Mahabhuta*^[25] in the cosmogenic series and is characterized by predominance of *Sattva* and *Tamas Gunas*.^[26]

Qualities of Jala Mahabhuta

Jala Mahabhuta is described as possessing fourteen attributes: *Rupa* (colour), *Rasa* (taste), *Sneha* (unctuousness), *Sparsha* (touch), *Sankhya* (number), *Parimana* (measurement), *Prithaktva* (distinctness), *Samyoga* (conjunction), *Vibhaga* (disjunction), *Paratva* (priority), *Aparatva* (posteriority), *Gurutva* (heaviness), *Dravatva* (liquidity), and *Samskara* (impression). These properties explain its roles in cohesion, fluidity, nourishment, and structural stability within the body.

Medicinal qualities and therapeutic relevance -

Jala is intimately related to the sense of taste (*Rasa*), which in Ayurveda is classified into six types: *Madhura* (sweet), *Amla* (sour), *Lavana* (salty), *Katu* (pungent), *Tikta* (bitter), and *Kashaya* (astringent). Proper utilization of these *Rasa* maintains *Dosha*, *Dhatu*, and *Mala* equilibrium, whereas improper use leads to *Dosha* vitiation; hence, Sad-*Rasa* theory is central to *Samana* (palliative) therapy, while in *Shodhana* (purificatory) procedures—*Vamana*, *Virechana*, *Basti*—vitiating *Doshas* are expelled predominantly in liquid medium through the agency of *Jala Mahabhuta*.

Clinically, *Jala Mahabhuta* plays a key role in *Kapha*-dominant pathologies such as *Tandra* (drowsiness), *Mukha Srava* (hypersalivation), *Apakti* (indigestion), and *Galaganda* (goitre), where excess liquidity, heaviness, and unctuousness contribute to disease manifestation.

Prthivimahabhuta:

Prithvi Mahabhuta is defined in *Vaisheshika Darshana* as the substance endowed with *Rupa* (colour), *Rasa* (taste), *Sparsha* (touch), and *Gandha* (smell), with *Gandha* considered its unique,^[27] distinguishing attribute absent in other *Mahabhutas*; hence the *Nyaya* aphorism “*Tatra gandhavati Prithivi*” is regarded as precise and free from logical defect.^[28]

Qualities of *Prthivimahabhuta* -

Prithvi Mahabhuta is described as possessing fourteen attributes—*Rupa*, *Rasa*, *Gandha*, *Sparsha*, *Sankhya*, *Parimana*, *Prithaktva*, *Samyoga*, *Vibhaga*, *Paratva*, *Aparatva*, *Gurutva*, *Dravatva*, and *Samskara*—accounting for its roles in solidity, weight, structure, and stability.

Medicinal qualities of *Prthivi Mahabhuta*-

Medicinally, *Prithvi* governs formation, shape, and growth of the body; its gross manifestations such as earth, minerals, and plant materials form the basis of many Ayurvedic drugs, while therapeutic instruments and utensils (pots, mortars, knives, etc.) also represent *Prithvi*-dominant entities, underscoring that almost all dietary and pharmaceutical substances are ultimately composites of the five elements with a prominent *Prithvi* component.^[29]

Practical utility of Five elements in Ayurveda-

In Ayurveda, which integrates physical, mental, and spiritual dimensions of health, the human body is understood as a composite of the five *Mahabhutas*. The same elemental

framework applies to all external substances used as *Ahara* (diet) and *Aushadha* (medicine), making *Panchamahabhuta* a core practical tool rather than a purely philosophical construct.

Embryological and physiological roles-

During embryogenesis, once *Shukra* (sperm) and *Shonita* (ovum) unite, *Vayu Mahabhuta* governs cellular division and movement, *Agni Mahabhuta* mediates cellular metabolism and transformation, *Jala Mahabhuta* provides moisture and fluid milieu, *Prithvi Mahabhuta* imparts solidity and structural form, while *Akasha Mahabhuta* allows spatial expansion and cavity formation.^[30] In the grown individual, the same five elements continue to sustain tissue integrity and function, and therapeutic modulation of these elements through food and drugs becomes central to Ayurvedic disease management.

In a healthy individual, homeostasis is characterized by *Samadhatu*, *Samadosha*, *Samamala*, and *Samakriya*, reflecting a balanced proportion of the five Mahabhutas within body tissues and functions. Various internal biochemical and enzymatic processes, however, can disturb this elemental equilibrium, leading to relative excess or deficiency of specific *Mahabhutas* and, consequently, *Dosha* imbalance.

The body possesses an inherent tendency to restore balance by eliminating surplus *Mahabhutas* and replenishing deficient ones through *Ahara* (food), *Pana* (drink), *Vihara* (activities), and environmental inputs such as heat and air. Exogenous *Panchamahabhuta*, received via diet and lifestyle, are transformed into endogenous elements through digestion and metabolism, making the five-element theory practically valuable for understanding and correcting pathological states in Ayurvedic therapeutics.

The evolution of the cosmos—from atomic to mountainous forms—is understood in Ayurveda to occur through permutations and combinations of the five *Mahabhutas*. Sensory experience of vision, taste, smell, touch, and hearing likewise rests on these elements, each sense being primarily linked with a specific *Mahabhuta*.

Within the human body, the five elements manifest functionally as *Doshas* (*Vata*, *Pitta*, *Kapha*), structurally as *Dhatu* (the seven tissues such as *Rasa*, *Rakta*, *Mamsa*, etc.), and as *Mala* (excretory products like urine, sweat, and stool). In drugs and dietary substances, the same elements are expressed through *Rasa* (taste such as *Madhura*, *Amla*), *Guna* (qualities like hot/cold, light/heavy), *Virya* (potency), and *Vipaka* (post-digestive effect), providing a

comprehensive basis for pharmacodynamics and pharmacokinetics in Ayurveda. Consequently, the *Panchamahabhuta* theory serves as a practically indispensable framework for diagnosis, drug selection, and treatment planning in Ayurvedic clinical practice.

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