

A Critical Review on the Concept of Prabhava in Ayurveda

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ABSTRACT

Ayurveda defines the pharmacological action of substances through the *Rasa-Panchaka* (Rasa, Guna, Virya, Vipaka, and Prabhava). While the first four follow predictable logical frameworks based on *Panchabhautika* composition, *Prabhava* (specific action) represents the enigmatic, superior, and unique therapeutic potency of a drug. This review critically examines the concept of *Prabhava* across various classical Ayurvedic texts, exploring its etymology, definitions, schools of thought (Atreya vs. Dhanvantari), and its clinical significance in modern therapeutics. The article highlights *Prabhava* as the "soul" of Ayurvedic pharmacology, essential for individualized and rational polyherbal practice.

Keywords: Prabhava, Ayurveda, Achintya Virya, Pharmacological Efficacy.

INTRODUCTION

Ayurveda, often called the 'science of life,' represents the traditional healing system of India. It is crucial to understand that its scope goes far beyond just prescribing remedies; it addresses every dimension of human existence. Essentially, this approach to healthcare prioritizes the active involvement and overall wellness of the individual, rather than just treating the illness. The fundamental principles of Ayurvedic pharmacology are rooted in understanding how a substance interacts with the human body. These are categorized into *Rasa* (taste), *Guna* (qualities), *Virya* (potency), and *Vipaka* (post-digestive transformation). However, clinicians often encounter instances where drugs with identical *Rasa-Panchaka* profiles yield widely divergent therapeutic results. This phenomenon is termed *Prabhava*—the specific, inherent, and often unpredictable power of a substance. In modern science, *Prabhava* is viewed through the lens of pharmacodynamics. It operates via unique molecular pathways, gene expression, and specific receptor-ligand interactions. It is frequently regarded as 'bio-activity' or a 'synergistic effect,' where phytochemicals interact with the body's biological system to produce a specific therapeutic response.

- Two drugs may be similar in taste, attribute, potency and Vipaka, but their action might vary from each other. This is because of the PRABHAVA or specific action of the drug.[1]
- Prabhava can be considered under different synonyms like: Shakti, Vichitra Pratyayarabdha, Vikriti Visham Samveta, Achintya Virya or Achintya, Anavadharaniya, Swabhava etc.[2]

CLASSICAL REVIEW ON PRABHAVA:

ETYMOLOGY

“Prabhavati samarthyā visishtam bhavati dravyamaneneti prabhavam” The property which is responsible for a special or peculiar action of a Dravya is known as Prabhava.[3]

SYNONYMS

Shakthi , Vichitra pratyarabdhatwa, Vikriti Vishama samaveta , Achinthya veerya, Achinthya, Anavadharaniya, Swabhava .

DEFINITION

Acharya Charak defines Prabhava as “Rasaviryavipakanam samanyam yatra laksyate Viseshah karmanam caiva prabhavastasya sa smritah” (C.Su.26/67) Prabhava is the property which is characterized by specific actions of substances which cannot be explained in terms of pharmacological actions of various constituents of Dravya when they are considered individually in relation to each other[4]. According to Acharya Charak, drug action is possible by means of three aspects viz. 1. Dravya prabhava – drug action independent of the constituents. Example: Chitraka (Leadwort). Despite having *Katu* (pungent) Rasa and *Ushna* (hot) Virya like many other substances, its specific *Deepana* (digestive stimulant) action is considered a *Prabhava* that is uniquely potent and distinct from its mere constituent profile. 2. Guna prabhava – drug action depending up on the constituents. Example: Madhu (Honey). It possesses *Ruksha* (dry) and *Laghu* (light) Gunas, which directly counteract the *Snigdha* (unctuous) and *Guru* (heavy) qualities of *Kapha* dosha. Its action (Lekhana/scraping) is easily explained through its constituent properties. 3. Dravya- Guna prabhava - drug action depending up on the Dravya as well as Guna. The following actions may be exhibited through prabhava. Example: Amalaki (Indian Gooseberry). Its *Rasayana* (rejuvenating) action is attributed to the combination of its specific *Dravya* identity and its unique constellation of qualities—specifically its *Sheetal* (cooling) Virya combined with its unique *Madhura* (sweet) Vipaka. The result is a tissue-nourishing effect that requires the specific integrity of the whole fruit and its constituent properties working together. Acharya Sushruta did not mention about Prabhava directly. However he indicated Prabhava through the concept of “Achintya virya”. He is of the opinion that the Prabhava Janya karma is Achintya (unpredictable) and Amimansya (un-questionable). One has to follow the classical texts in their understanding. For example: we cannot make the Ambashtadi gana to act as purgative in any form[5]. Acharya Vagbhata mentioned about Prabhava as. “Rasadi samye yat karma visishtam tat prabhavajam” (A.H.Su.17/52) Prabhava may also be defined as the special property which produces actions which are different from and contrary to those attributed to Rasa, Guna, Virya, Vipaka[6]. Acharya Chakrapani considered Prabhava as Achintya since its effect is not comparable to the effects expected generally from the constituents of a Dravya. He also quoted Virya as Chintya and Achintya. The “Achintya Virya” is considered as Prabhava[7]. Acharya Arundatta comments about Prabhava as. “Rasaviryavipakadigunatisayivanalam/ dravya svabhavo nirdishtah yah prabhavam sa krititah Prabhava is said to be that attribute of the drug which overwhelms other principles of drug actions like Rasa, Guna, etc[8]. Acharya Nagarjuna while discussing Virya used the words Achintya and Anavadharaniya for the specific property of a Dravya instead of Prabhava.[9] On the basis of above discussion it is clear that the followers of Atreya school (Acharya Charaka, Acharya Vagbhata etc.) have accepted prabhava as Dravya swabhava (nature of the Dravya) while of Dhanvantari school (Acharya Sushruta, Acharya Nagarjuna etc.) do not accept prabhava as a separate

entity but have included in the context of Virya as „Achintya“ and „Anavadharaniya“. The possible reason behind this is that both are „Shakti“ where one is general (Samanaya shakti) and the other is specific one (Vishishta shakti). In the context of Virya, Acharya Shivdas Sena has mentioned two types of potencies found in Dravyas – Chintya and Achintya – to exert actions. The former is Virya, while the latter is called Prabhava, which cannot be explained as an effect of Rasa, Virya, and Vipaka. In opinion of Acharya Gangadhara, prabhava is the specific natural character which cannot be explained with Rasa, Vipaka etc. and as dissimilar and inexplicable effect where prabhava has been taken as „Karma“ not the cause of karma. In this concern there appears three aspects of prabhava as, 1. Natural character 2. Specific potency 3. Dissimilar effect. Acharya P.V Sharma in this context gives his view that prabhava is the specific potency based on the specific natural (Bhautika) composition of the substance. So it is called as “Dravyasvabhava”, which means that the natural chemical composition of the Dravya responsible for exerting specific action. On this basis the mode of action of Vamana, Virechana Dravyas can be explained. In this condition how can it would be treated as „Achintya“? Some Acharayas and commentators of ancient time have stated prabhava as Achintya because of inexplicability of the nature of the Dravyas. On account of subduing Rasas etc. prabhava has been mentioned as “Sarvatishyayi” (exceeding all properties) as has been advocated by Vagbhata. (A.S.SU.17/15. INDU BHASYA)

EXAMPLES OF PRABHAVA

Chitraka vs. Danti

Here both Chitraka and Danti have Katu rasa, Katu vipaka and Usna virya but Chitraka act as Dipaka where as Danti acts as Virechaka. The Virechana karma exhibited by Danti is considered as prabhavajanya karma.

Yastimadhu vs. Mridwika

Although both Yastimadhu and Mridwika share identical energetic profiles—possessing a sweet taste (*Madhura rasa*), a sweet post-digestive effect (*Madhura vipaka*), and a cooling potency (*Sheeta virya*)—they behave differently in the digestive tract. Mridwika acts as a purgative (*Virechana*), whereas Yastimadhu does not. The fact that Yastimadhu lacks this purgative action despite having the same profile is attributed to its unique *Prabhava*.

Kshira vs. Ghrita

Milk (*Kshira*) and ghee (*Ghrita*) present a unique pharmacological paradox in Ayurveda. Even though both possess identical attributes—specifically *Madhura Rasa*, *Madhura Vipaka*, and *Sheeta Virya*—milk acts as a digestive suppressant (*Agnimandya kara*), while ghee serves to ignite and boost the digestive fire (*Agni*).

Kaphavatahara karma of Lasuna

Garlic (*Lasuna*) manages to calm both *Vata* and *Kapha* without causing either to flare up. Normally, pungent tastes (*Katu*) aggravate *Vata*, and heavy, oily qualities (*Guru* and *Snigdha*) increase *Kapha*. However, garlic works as an exception to the rule: its pungent nature lowers *Kapha*, and its heavy, moist nature lowers *Vata*, without any negative side effects. This specific dual-action (*Vata-kaphahara*) is a classic example of *Prabhava*.

Vishaghna Karma of Shirisha

Shirisha and Haridra are considered as Vishaghna Dravyas (one which reduces poisonous effects) and Swapana (sleep) and Megha (cloudy atmosphere) are aggravating the poisonous condition. Here both Vishaghna and Vishvardhaka Karmas are said as prabhavajanya Karma.

Raktashali and Yava

Here both Raktashali and Yava have similar properties i.e both are Madhur in Rasa, Snigdha and guru in Guna and Sheet Virya Dravya but Raktashali is Vatahara and Yava is Vatakara. Raktashali has Vatahara action on the basis of its properties, but Yava is not. Vatakara action of Yava is prabhava.

CONCEPT OF PRABHAVA

Prabhava has been explained while describing virya like, Dravya gatha shakthi of 2 types

1. Chinthya (Logical/Predictable): This category operates on the principle of cause and effect (*Karya-Karana Bhava*). Because its actions can be logically analyzed and predicted, it is known as "Chinthya".
2. Achinthya (Beyond Logic/Unpredictable): This is based on the substance's inherent natural state (*Sahaja Dravya Swabhava*). While we can observe its effects through practical application (*Yukti-pratipadya*), these effects cannot be explained by standard intellectual reasoning (*Buddhigamya*).

Based on their Panchabhoutika (five elemental) composition, substances (Dravya) are categorized into two groups.

1. Samanya Pratyarabdha Dravya: These are substances where the primary pharmacological and therapeutic effects match the dominance of their elemental composition. In simple terms, their structure and their action are consistent and predictable.
2. Vichitra Pratyarabdha Dravya: These are substances that do not follow the standard rule of structural similarity. Their therapeutic actions often differ from what one would expect based on their basic elemental structure.

Vichitra Pratyarabdha Dravya examples

Dravya	Prakara	Guna	Karma
Godhooma	Samanaprathyarabdha	sweet, heavy	Vatahara
Yava	Vichitra prathyarabdha	sweet, heavy	Vatakara
Milk	Samanaprathyarabdha	sweet, heavy	Cold
Fish	Vichitra prathyarabdha	sweet, heavy	hot
Pork	Samanaprathyarabdha	sweet, heavy	Madhura Vipaka
Lion	Vichitra prathyarabdha	sweet, heavy	Katu Vipaka
Pigeon meat	Samanaprathyarabdha	heavy	Adeepana
Curd	Vichitra prathyarabdha	heavy	Deepana
Dhataki	Samanaprathyarabdha	Astringent	Sheeta veerya, grahi
Hareetaki	Vichitra prathyarabdha	Astringent	Ushna veerya, rechaka

There are two additional classifications for how substances (Dravya) act, which relate to their structure and function:

- Prakritisama Samaveta: These are essentially the same as *Samanya Pratyarabdha*. Their therapeutic action is directly based on and follows the properties of their components.
- Vikriti Vishama Samaveta: While these substances have components that are similar in structure, they produce a unique, special therapeutic effect that does not follow the normal rules of those components.

Based on this, Prabhava (the special, unpredictable power of a substance) can be divided into two main categories:

- Vikriti-Vishama Samaveta: These substances are structurally similar (in their composition) but behave in a functionally dissimilar way (due to their special *Prabhava*).
- Vichitra Pratyarabdha: These substances are structurally dissimilar (in their composition) but exhibit functionally similar therapeutic effects.

Examples for Vikriti – Vishama Samaveta

Dravya	Rasa	Veerya
Agarce	Tikta	Ushna
Amalaki	Amla	Sheeta
Anupa mamsa	Madhura, Kashaya, Tiktha	Ushna
Arka	Tikta	Ushna
Mahat Panchamula	Madhura, Kashaya, Tiktha	Ushna
Saindhava lavana	Lavana	Sheeta

PRABHAVA IN MODERN PHARMACOLOGY

Prabhava: According to Modern Pharmacology: Prabhava can be explained in following ways: Prabhava is considered as non-specific activity of drugs. There are many pharmacological properties mentioned in Modern pharmacology which results in non-specific activity. Usually it is believed that drugs with similar chemical structure will have similar pharmacological actions. But it is not possible to predict their activity on the basis of chemical structure alone. Some times drugs with similar chemical structure may have entirely different actions. Ex: Morphine and papavarine are structurally similar but their pharmacological action is different, the former is narcotic and CNS depressant while the later is non-narcotic and muscle relaxant. There are certain drugs like phenobarbitone chloral hydrate paraldehyde etc, which are structurally different but all are CNS depressants.

In pharmacology, the drug activity can be classified as.

1. Structurally non-specific
2. Structurally specific

Structurally Non-specific: This activity is dependent on physical properties like solubility partition coefficients and vapor pressure and not on the presence or absence of some chemical group. Substances such as alkanes, alkenes, alkynes, alcohols amides, ethers, ketones & chlorinated hydrocarbons exhibit narcotic activity and potency of each substance is related to its partition coefficient structurally non-specific action results from accumulation of a drug in some vital part of a cell with lipid characteristics.

Structurally specific: This activity is dependent upon the factors such as the presence or absence of certain functional groups, intra-molecular distance and shape of molecule. Activity is not easily correlated with any physical property and small changes in structure often leads to changes in activity structurally specific activity is dependent upon interaction of the drug with a cellular receptor.

DISCUSSION:

The concept of *Prabhava* in Ayurveda acts as a vital bridge between ancient empirical observation and modern pharmacology. While traditionalists define it as *Achintya* (incalculable)—an inherent power transcending standard *Rasa-Guna-Vipaka* parameters—modern scholars like P.V. Sharma view it as a

manifestation of complex *Bhautika Sanghatana* (molecular composition). In the contemporary era, this "unexplained" efficacy can be correlated with advanced mechanisms such as ligand-receptor binding, synergistic "entourage effects" in complex herbal matrices, and epigenetic regulation. Rather than viewing *Prabhava* merely as a mystical property, the modern integration of Ayurveda requires us to treat it as a frontier for systems biology. By utilizing techniques like metabolomics to map these complex chemical synergies, we can demystify the "inexplicable" actions of drugs. Ultimately, this approach does not diminish the value of ancient wisdom; instead, it elevates *Prabhava* from an abstract concept into a measurable, evidence-based pillar of personalized medicine, ensuring Ayurveda's relevance in global clinical practice.

CONCLUSION:

The concept of *Prabhava* serves as the cornerstone of Ayurvedic pharmacology, representing the "extraordinary" dimension of drug action that defies standard predictive models. This review highlights that while *Prabhava* was traditionally categorized as *Achintya* (inexplicable) due to the limitations of ancient diagnostic tools, it is fundamentally a manifestation of precise *Bhautika Sanghatana* (molecular composition). By integrating the ancient vision of *Vishishta Shakti* (specific potency) with modern concepts like systems biology, pharmacogenomics, and synergistic "entourage effects," we move beyond the binary debate of tradition versus science.

Ultimately, *Prabhava* should not be treated as a barrier to scientific inquiry but as a beacon for it. It challenges us to look beyond single-molecule pharmacology toward a more holistic, complex, and personalized understanding of medicine. Bridging this gap will not only validate the profound clinical insights of our *Acharyas* but will also pave the way for a new era of evidence-based, integrative healthcare where the "unexplained" becomes the "undiscovered" potential of natural medicine.

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