



# AYURVEDA IN THE PURANAS: A STUDY

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## Abstract

The Puranas occupy a significant place in the Indian knowledge tradition as repositories of ancient wisdom related to religion, philosophy, cosmology, ethics, social conduct, and health sciences. Among the various branches of traditional knowledge reflected in the Puranas, Ayurveda receives extensive treatment in both theoretical and practical dimensions. The present study explores Ayurvedic concepts described in the major Puranas, including principles of creation, body structure, physiology, psychology, sanitation, therapeutics, obstetrics, pediatrics, and mental health. The study further examines references to Dhanvantari, Tridosha, Prakriti, disease examination, medicinal substances, and psychotherapeutic practices. It highlights that the Puranas functioned as popular mediums for disseminating practical Ayurvedic knowledge among the masses. Through descriptive analysis, the paper demonstrates that the Puranic presentation of Ayurveda reflects continuity with classical Ayurvedic texts such as the Charaka Samhita, Sushruta Samhita, and Ashtanga Hridaya.

**Keywords:** Ayurveda, Purana, Dhanvantari, Tridosha, Mental Health, Psychotherapy, Bhootvidya, Garuda Purana, Vishnu Purana

## Introduction

The term *Purana* is frequently found in Vedic literature and is often used alongside the term *Itihasa*. Etymologically, the word *Purana* is derived from “Pura Bhavam,” meaning “that which existed in ancient times.” According to Yaska, “Pura Navam Bhavati Puranam,” meaning that which remains ever new despite being ancient is called Purana. The Padma

Purana defines Purana as that which preserves ancient traditions.

The importance of the Puranas has been emphasized in the famous statement:

“Itihasa Puranabhyam Vedam Samupabrinhayet” which means that the Vedas are supplemented and expanded through Itihasa and Purana. Thus, the Puranas served as vehicles for transmitting practical and spiritual knowledge to the common people.

Traditionally, eighteen Mahapuranas are recognized, including the Matsya, Vishnu, Bhagavata, Agni, Garuda, Brahmanda, Padma, and Skanda Puranas. Acharya Baldev Upadhyay classified the Puranas into ancient, medieval, and later periods on the basis of internal and external evidence.

Apart from cosmology, genealogy, and religion, the Puranas contain valuable information concerning social welfare, ethics, psychology, medicine, and health. Since Ayurveda was regarded as a science of life intended for the welfare of humanity, many of its principles were incorporated into the Puranic tradition for easy public understanding.

## Historical Background of Ayurveda in the Puranas

The Puranas preserve several important references related to the history of Ayurveda. The sage Bharadwaja, associated with the Atreya tradition, is mentioned in the Harivamsha and Matsya Purana. Dhanvantari, considered the divine physician and founder of surgery, receives detailed attention in several Puranas.

According to the Vishnu Purana, Varaha Purana, Agni Purana, and Mahabharata, Dhanvantari emerged during the churning of the ocean (*Samudra Manthana*) along with other divine treasures. The Varaha Purana states that

Dhanvantari appeared on Kartika Krishna Trayodashi, a day later celebrated as Dhanteras. The Agni Purana and Garuda Purana also describe Divodasa, king of Kashi, as belonging to the lineage of Dhanvantari. Such references demonstrate that the Puranas preserved historical and legendary traditions related to the origin and development of Ayurveda.

### **Ayurvedic Principles in the Puranas**

#### **Theory of Creation and Panchamahabhuta**

The cosmological theories described in Ayurveda find close parallels in the Puranas. The Bhagavata Purana explains that creation begins with the imbalance of the three Gunas—Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas. From ego (*Ahamkara*) arise the Panchamahabhutas, sense organs, and mental faculties.

Similarly, the Vishnu Purana states that the universe is formed through the interaction of elemental energies under the influence of Purusha and Prakriti. These descriptions correspond closely to the Ayurvedic understanding of cosmic evolution and bodily constitution.

#### **Structure of the Human Body**

Detailed descriptions of embryology and body structure occur in several Puranas. The Vishnu Purana describes the fetus in the womb as enclosed by membranes with curved bones and limited movement. Different organs such as the head, neck, ears, tongue, teeth, heart, veins, marrow, and nerves are mentioned.

The Padma Purana states that the human body contains 360 bones and mentions 500 muscles in males and 520 in females. Such anatomical observations indicate an advanced understanding of bodily structure in ancient Indian medical thought.

#### **Tridosha Theory and Physiology**

The Garuda Purana contains an elaborate exposition of the Tridosha doctrine. Vata is described as cold, subtle, and mobile; Pitta as hot, acidic, and sharp; and Kapha as heavy, smooth, and stable.

The locations of the Doshas are also identified:

- Vata — lower abdomen and anus
- Pitta — stomach and digestive region
- Kapha — chest, throat, and joints

The text clearly states that equilibrium of Doshas, Dhatus, and Mala leads to health,

whereas imbalance results in disease. This principle is identical to the central doctrine of classical Ayurveda.

The Garuda Purana also discusses four types of digestive fire (*Agni*) and correlates them with disease conditions:

- Mandagni — associated with Kapha
- Tikshnagni — associated with Pitta
- Vishamagni — associated with Vata
- Samagni — state of health

#### **Mind and Mental Health**

The Puranas provide extensive insights into psychology and mental health. The Vishnu Purana considers the mind responsible for both bondage and liberation. The Bhagavata Purana explains that attachment to sensory objects leads to suffering, while detachment leads to liberation.

The natural state of the mind is described as peaceful and pure, similar to calm water. Mental disturbances arise from uncontrolled desires, anger, ego, and attachment.

The Bhagavata Purana also analyzes human psychology in different stages of life, especially youth, where uncontrolled passions lead to anger, pride, and suffering.

#### **Health Care and Daily Regimen**

The Vishnu Purana describes a comprehensive daily regimen (*Dinacharya*) for maintaining health. It advises waking during Brahma Muhurta, maintaining personal hygiene, proper methods of urination and defecation, and observing dietary discipline.

The Padma Purana classifies food into six categories:

1. Bhakshya – chewable food
2. Bhojya – eatable food
3. Peya – drinks
4. Lehya – lickable substances
5. Choshya – suckable substances
6. Khadya – solid food

These classifications closely resemble Ayurvedic dietary principles.

#### **Obstetrics and Pediatrics**

The Vishnu Purana and Padma Purana contain important descriptions of fetal development. Monthly growth of the fetus and the pains associated with childbirth are discussed in detail.

The Agni Purana and Garuda Purana extensively describe pediatric disorders and *Balagrahas* (childhood afflictions). Various medicinal fumigations (*Dhupana*) and herbal therapies are prescribed for treating childhood diseases such as fever, cough, diarrhea, and breathing disorders.

### Medicinal Plants and Therapeutics

Numerous medicinal substances are mentioned throughout the Puranas. The Vishnu Purana lists grains, pulses, sesame, barley, wheat, and legumes as medicinal substances useful in rituals and health preservation.

The Garuda Purana discusses the properties of tastes (*Rasa*):

- Sweet taste — nourishing and strengthening
- Sour taste — digestive and stimulating
- Bitter taste — detoxifying and fever-relieving
- Astringent taste — absorbent and healing

The concepts of *Virya* (potency), *Vipaka* (post-digestive effect), and drug action are also discussed.

### Disease Diagnosis and Examination

The Garuda Purana emphasizes proper examination before treatment. Physicians are instructed to assess:

- Place (*Desha*)
- Time (*Kala*)
- Digestive power (*Agni*)
- Age
- Constitution (*Prakriti*)
- Strength
- Nature of disease

Characteristics of Vata, Pitta, and Kapha constitutions are described in detail. The text also identifies signs of incurable diseases and terminal conditions.

### Psychotherapy and Mental Disorders

The Puranas contain sophisticated descriptions of mental disorders and psychotherapy. Mental suffering is linked to uncontrolled desires, attachment, anger and ignorance.

The Agni Purana classifies insanity into:

1. Doshaja (caused by bodily humors)
2. Agantuja (externally caused)

Further classifications include Vataja, Pittaja, Kaphaja, and Sannipataja forms of insanity.

Symptoms described include:

- Suicidal tendencies
- Repetitive gestures
- Loss of hunger and thirst
- Emotional instability
- Delusion and fear

The Puranas prescribe various psychotherapeutic measures such as:

- Association with saints
- Meditation and Pranayama
- Devotion to God
- Moral conduct
- Satvik diet
- Control of desires

The Bhagavata Purana specifically recommends:

- Renunciation for controlling desire and anger
- Spiritual wisdom for grief
- Compassion for worldly suffering
- Sattvic qualities for mental purification

These approaches closely resemble Ayurvedic concepts of *Satvavajaya Chikitsa* (psychotherapy).

### Bhootvidya in the Puranas

One of the most distinctive contributions of the Puranas is their detailed discussion of *Bhootvidya*—the branch of Ayurveda dealing with mental disorders attributed to supernatural influences.

Different categories of spirits, ghosts, demons, and grahas are described in texts such as the Agni Purana, Kurma Purana, and Markandeya Purana. Their origins, classifications, symptoms, and treatments are systematically explained.

The Agni Purana mentions sixteen categories of grahas, including:

- Pret
- Dakini
- Vetala
- Pishacha
- Yaksha
- Rakshasa
- Putana
- Vinayaka

The treatment methods include rituals, fumigation, herbal medicines, and spiritual practices. These descriptions indicate the strong interconnection between medicine, religion, and psychology in ancient Indian society.

## Discussion

The study reveals that the Puranas played an essential role in popularizing Ayurvedic knowledge among common people. While classical Ayurvedic texts such as the Charaka Samhita and Sushruta Samhita were scholarly works intended for physicians, the Puranas simplified and transmitted practical health-related information to society.

The Ayurvedic concepts described in the Puranas correspond closely with classical Ayurvedic doctrines, particularly regarding:

- Panchamahabhuta theory
- Tridosha
- Prakriti
- Dietetics
- Embryology
- Pediatrics
- Psychotherapy

The emphasis on safe, accessible, and commonly available medicines suggests that the Puranic tradition aimed to provide first-aid and preventive healthcare knowledge to the masses. Furthermore, the integration of spiritual practices, moral conduct, and mental discipline demonstrates the holistic nature of ancient Indian medicine.

## Conclusion

The Puranas constitute an important source for understanding the historical and practical dimensions of Ayurveda. They preserve valuable information concerning anatomy, physiology, pathology, psychology, therapeutics, dietetics, pediatrics, and mental health.

The Puranic approach to health reflects the holistic philosophy of Ayurveda, where physical, mental, moral, and spiritual well-being are interconnected. The texts emphasize preventive healthcare, ethical living, psychological balance, and spiritual purification as essential components of healthy life.

The study also demonstrates that the Puranas acted as effective cultural instruments for disseminating Ayurvedic wisdom among the general public. Their practical orientation, narrative style, and accessibility made them influential in shaping traditional Indian concepts of health and healing.

Thus, the study of Ayurveda in the Puranas offers significant insights into the development of Indian medical thought and highlights the

enduring relevance of traditional holistic healthcare systems.

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