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Review Article

Ayurvedic Insights into Agni and GI System

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ABSTRACT

The concept of the gastrointestinal (GI) system has been extensively discussed in classical *Ayurvedic* literature. Ancient texts such as the *Atreya Samhita*, as cited in *Vaidyaka-Shabda Sindhu*, provide detailed and systematic anatomical and physiological descriptions of the gastrointestinal tract. In *Ayurveda*, various terminologies such as *Mahasrotas*, *Annavaha Srotas*, and *Kostha* are employed to describe different dimensions of the GI system. Among them, the *Annavaha Srotas* refers specifically to the channels involved in the transportation and transformation of consumed food. These *Srotas* not only serve as physical pathways but also represent the functional systems involved in digestion, absorption, and the formation of *Rasa Dhatu*, the primary nourishing fluid of the body.

According to *Sushruta*, the *Amashaya* (stomach) is a critical component of the GI tract, while *Charaka* extends this understanding by including both the stomach and small intestine. The *Annavaha Srotas* encompasses the organs and processes related to both mechanical and enzymatic digestion, beginning in the oral cavity and continuing through the stomach and small intestine. It also plays a crucial role in nutrient absorption, leading to the formation of *Rasa Dhatu*, the first of the seven *Dhatus* (bodily tissues). Central to this process are components such as *Agni* (digestive fire), *Pitta*, and *Grahani*, all of which collectively regulate proper digestion and metabolism.

This article aims to explore the Ayurvedic view of the GI system by analyzing the role of *Annavaha Srotas* and the physiological concept of *Agni* in the transformation and assimilation of food.

INTRODUCTION

Ayurveda, regarded as the most ancient system of health and healing, integrates scientific knowledge, philosophical understanding, and spiritual insight to promote well-being. It is not merely a medical tradition but also a holistic lifestyle approach. Rooted in the concept of sustaining wellness and addressing illness, *Ayurveda* offers a unique perspective distinct from that of modern medicine. Its foundational principles form the core for interpreting bodily functions, disease mechanisms, and therapeutic approaches. Regarded as one of the oldest recorded medical systems, *Ayurveda* addresses every aspect of human life and

well-being. Its primary objective is to outline methods for preserving health, enhancing vitality, preventing disease, and ultimately managing illness through natural and time-tested practices.^[1]

Despite its ancient origins, there is a growing need to deeply explore both the theoretical and practical dimensions of *Ayurveda* in light of contemporary scientific understanding. This review aims to explore the concept of *Annavaha Srotas* and highlight its significance in the contemporary context.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

1. Classical *Ayurvedic texts* (*Charaka Samhita*, *Sushruta Samhita*, *Ashtanga Hridaya*) and commentaries were reviewed.
2. Modern references were taken from standard medical literature and peer-reviewed journals.
3. Literature search was done using PubMed, Google Scholar, and *AYUSH Research Portal*.

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Review of Literature

Srotas

The concept of *Srotas* is a fundamental and distinctive feature of *Ayurvedic* philosophy. According to *Acharya Charaka*, *Srotas* are the essential pathways responsible for the transport and transformation of bodily elements or *Dhatus*. The processes of formation and decomposition within the body are dependent on these channels, as they facilitate the circulation of the modified *Dhatus* throughout the system.^[2] *Srotas* are said to be countless in number,^[3] suggesting that possibly every cell in the human body may function as a *Srotas*. The *Moola* or root of each *Srotas* refers to a specific anatomical structure with which it is associated. This root is regarded as the most essential component of the *Srotas*, playing a role similar to that of a tree's root by providing stability and functionality. Although their number is infinite, for practical understanding, they have been classified into distinct types. *Charaka* has presented a well-organized account of the thirteen major bodily channels known as *Srotas*.^[4] In females, an additional *Srotas* known as *Artavavaha Srotas* is mentioned in the context of *Garbha Prakarana*. *Acharya Sushruta*, on the other hand, has identified 11 types of *Srotas*, considering them to exist in pairs. According to *Sushruta*, *Srotas* are internal body structures functioning as channels for the transportation of *Dhatus*. He differentiates them from *Sira* (veins) and *Dhamani* (arteries).^[5] These channels are said to exhibit specific features—each *Srotas* resembles the color of the *Dhatu* it carries, and their size and shape can vary. They may be *Anu* (fine) or *Sthula* (broad), and shaped in forms such as *Vritta* (circular), *Dirgha* (elongated), or *Pratana* (branched).^[6]

Annavaaha Srotas

According to *Verma et al.*, *Srotas* can be understood as both structural and functional components of the body that are responsible for the transmission of various substances such as nutrients, molecules, signals, emotions, and thoughts.^[7] Among the various types of *Srotas*, *Annavaaha Srotas* is specifically concerned with the movement of food and is mentioned in all major *Ayurvedic* texts. From a modern anatomical perspective, it largely corresponds to the gastrointestinal tract, excluding the colon. Terms like *Mahasrotas*^[8] and *Kostha*^[9] are often used interchangeably with *Annavaaha Srotas*. However, the colon and the segments of the digestive system beyond it are categorized under *Purishavaha Srotas*.^[10]

Moolasthana of Annavaaha Srotas

Acharya Chakrapani describes the *Moolasthana* as the *Prabhavasthana*^[11] the main anatomical location of a particular *Srotas* where disease processes initially begin. *Charaka* mentions that the *Moolasthana* of the *Annavaaha Srotas* comprises the *Amashaya* (stomach) and the *Vamaparshva* (upper left quadrant of the abdomen). Conversely, *Sushruta* designates the *Amashaya* together with the *Annavaahini Dhamani* as the principal sites of this channel. Any injury to these regions may lead to symptoms such as abdominal bloating, pain, nausea, diminished appetite, vomiting, excessive thirst, dizziness, and even fatality in severe cases.^[12]

Components of Annavaaha Srotas Amashaya (Stomach)

According to *Acharya Charaka*, the *Amashaya* is positioned between the *Nabhi* (navel) and the *Stana* (nipples). It is responsible for carrying out the *Pachan* (digestion) of all types of ingested food.^[13] In modern anatomy, the stomach is described as a muscular, sac-like organ that represents the widest and most expandable segment of the digestive tract. In *Ayurvedic* texts, *Amashaya* is further classified into two parts—*Urdhva Amashaya* (upper portion) and *Adho Amashaya* (lower portion). Several other terms, including *Kshudrantantra*, *Pacyamanashaya*, and *Agnyashaya*, are used to describe it, emphasizing its involvement in digestion and its link to the *Agni* (digestive fire).

Grahani and Pittadharakala

The structure known as *Grahani* holds a somewhat debated position in *Ayurvedic* literature. *Sushruta* locates it between the *Amashaya* (stomach) and *Pakwashaya* (large intestine), designating it as the site of the *Pittadhara Kala*.^[14] *Acharya Charaka* describes *Grahani* as the seat of *Agni* (digestive fire), named so due to its role in retaining food until it is properly digested.^[15] Based on these descriptions, *Grahani* is believed to correspond anatomically to the entire small intestine, encompassing the duodenum, jejunum, and ileum. While *Charaka*, *Sushruta*, and *Vagbhata*^[16] present varying descriptions regarding its structure and placement, the core function remains consistent. *Grahani* receives undigested food from the *Amashaya*, holds it during digestion, and then facilitates the movement of the *Kitta* (waste portion) toward excretion. Therefore, both digestion and absorption occur in this region. Being the primary seat of *Agni*, the activity of *Grahani* is closely linked to the potency of the digestive fire. Hence, *Grahani* and *Agni* are mutually dependent in their functions.^[17] The *Kala* are believed to represent the internal linings of the body, such as mucous

membranes, fascia, or other epithelial structures. These layers not only provide structural support but also help maintain the form and function of various *Ashayas* (body cavities) and organs. [18] *Pittadharakala* is specifically associated with the portion of the gastrointestinal system referred to as *Grahani*, and it plays a crucial role in the digestive process. It is within this layer that the separation of *Sara* (nutrient essence) and *Kitta* (waste) occurs. [19] Identified as the seat of *Antaragni* (internal digestive fire), *Pittadharakala* receives partially digested food from the *Amashaya*, facilitates both *Shoshan* (absorption) and *Pachan* (digestion), and then it passes the *Pakwa Anna* (fully digested food) into the *Pakwashaya* (large intestine). [20]

Yakrit (Liver)

In *Ayurvedic* texts, both *Charaka* and *Sushruta* have classified *Yakrit* (the liver) as one of the vital organs located within the *Koshtha* (abdominal cavity). [21] Among the six types of *Garbhaja Bhava*-namely *Matrija*, *Pitrija*, *Atmaja*, *Satmyaja*, *Satvaja*, and *Rasaja*-the liver is said to originate primarily from *Matrija Bhava*. [22] Each of these developmental factors contributes uniquely to the formation of *Yakrit* and other anatomical structures. Functionally, the liver acts as a central metabolic hub, receiving not only the nutrients absorbed from the *Amapakvashaya* (small intestine) but also the catabolic products of tissues. In this way, it significantly contributes to maintaining nutritional homeostasis in the body. According to *Ayurvedic* physiology, *Rasa Dhatu* is transported to the liver and spleen, where it is transformed into *Rakta Dhatu* (blood tissue). [23] This aligns with the modern understanding where nutrients are absorbed into the liver via the portal vein, and various metabolic processes such as protein, carbohydrate, and fat metabolism are carried out. According to *Ayurveda*, the liver is recognized as the *Moola* (primary root) of *Rakta* and the *Raktavaha Srotas*, [24] underscoring its essential role in the formation, purification, and storage of blood. The formation of red blood cells in organs like the liver and spleen aligns with this *Ayurvedic* understanding.

Agni (Digestive Fire)

The essential significance of *Agni* in sustaining human life has been profoundly acknowledged by *Ayurvedic* scholars. *Charaka* equates the importance of *Agni* to that of roots sustaining a tree. [25] The term *Agni* encompasses both the physical fire and the biological processes of digestion. While physical *Agni* refers to external fire, biological *Agni* pertains to the metabolic fire within living beings, with no major conceptual difference apart from their domain of action. *Agni* is primarily responsible for breaking down food into its simplest

components, making nutrients bioavailable for absorption and bodily use. [26] These physiological roles of *Agni* are what modern science refers to as digestion and metabolism. In *Ayurvedic* literature, this internal digestive force is explained through both *Agni* and *Pitta*, both of which perform functions such as *Dahana* (combustion), *Pachana* (digestion), and *Tapan* (heating). In modern terms, these processes are executed by various enzymes distributed throughout different organs, each carrying out specific metabolic activities.

Pitta and Agni

Ayurvedic texts classify *Pitta* into five distinct types: *Pachaka*, *Ranjaka*, *Sadhaka*, *Alochaka*, and *Bhrajaka*. Similarly, *Ayurveda* recognizes thirteen distinct forms of *Agni*: one *Jatharagni*, five types of *Bhutagni*, and seven types of *Dhatvagni*. [27] According to *Sushruta*, *Pitta* is essentially equivalent to *Agni*, as it carries out the transformative and metabolic functions akin to fire, and is therefore also known as *Agni* or *Antaragni* (internal fire). [28] *Hemadri* states that while *Pachaka Pitta* and *Agni* are alike in both nature and function, the remaining subtypes of *Pitta* vary from *Agni* in their inherent qualities and specific functions. [29] Consequently, *Agni* represents a wider framework, incorporating both physiological mechanisms and physico-chemical processes. On the other hand, *Pitta* is more specifically confined to physiological functions within living organisms.

Pitta and Bile

In *Ayurvedic* understanding, bile produced by the liver is considered a *Mala* (waste product) derived from *Rakta* (blood). Its chief function is to expel waste materials from the body. Both *Charaka* and *Vagbhata* have emphasized that *Pitta* is a modified or vitiated form of *Rakta*, [30] highlighting the close relationship between the two. This association is evident not only in their shared ability to disturb one another but also in their similar characteristics-namely, color and odor. Additionally, both *Pitta* and *Rakta* are predominantly located in the *Yakrit* (liver) and *Pliha* (spleen), highlighting their close interrelationship. Support for the idea that hepatic bile is a waste product of *Rakta* can be found in classical *Ayurvedic* references, where symptoms of *Pitta Vridhi* (increase in *Pitta*) are described. These include yellow discoloration of urine, stool, eyes, and skin, along with heightened hunger, excessive thirst, a burning sensation throughout the body, and sleeplessness. [31] Particularly, the yellowish hue of the body fluids and tissues aligns with the modern medical explanation of elevated bilirubin levels in the blood-a condition known as *hyperbilirubinemia*.

The Process of Pachan (Digestion)

Pranavayu is responsible for transporting *Anna* (ingested food) to the *Koshtha* (gastrointestinal tract), where it undergoes initial breakdown through the action of *Drava* (body fluids) and is lubricated by *Sneha* (oily substances). *Saman Vayu* enhances the activity of *Agni* (digestive fire), allowing food taken at the appropriate time and in proper quantity to be efficiently digested, which contributes to longevity and overall health.^[32] Digestion occurs primarily through the function of *Agni*, particularly *Jatharagni*, with support from *Bhutagni* and *Dhatvagni*. *Pachaka Pitta*, responsible for the breakdown of food, can be likened to various modern digestive enzymes, including secretin, cholecystokinin, enterokinase, lipase, amylase, invertase, and enterogastrone.

Vipaka (Post-digestive Taste Transformation)

According to *Ayurveda*, food possesses six *Rasa* (primary tastes). *Vipaka* refers to the transformation of these food substances after ingestion, under the influence of *Jatharagni*.^[33] Initially, during digestion, the food is converted into a *Madhura Vipaka* (sweet taste), leading to the production of *Kapha*, which is described as frothy in nature. As digestion progresses, the food develops an *Amla Vipaka* (sour post-digestive taste), especially when it passes through the pyloric sphincter, triggering the secretion of bile and lipids. Eventually, upon reaching the large intestine, the digested material attains a *Katu Vipaka* (pungent post-digestive effect).^[34]

Stages of Pachan (Digestion)

The initial phase of digestion, known as *Madhura Bhava*, is facilitated by *Bodhaka Kapha*-the salivary component-and *Kledaka Kapha*, which acts within the fundic region of the stomach.^[35] This indicates the commencement of *Avasthapaka*, the phase in which food initiates its transformation. Partial digestion happens during the second phase, which occurs in the stomach.

Charaka refers to this semi-digested material as *Vidagdha Ahara* or *Pakwapakva* (partially processed food). When food enters the duodenum, which forms the upper part of the *Grahani*, it triggers Brunner's glands to release digestive fluids. At the same time, bile from the liver and enzymes from the pancreas are secreted into the duodenum to help break down the acidic chyme.

During the stages of *Avasthapaka*, food of any *Rasa* (taste) gradually transforms. Initially, it develops a *Madhura Vipaka* (sweet post-digestive effect), leading to the generation of *Kapha*. As digestion advances, the food progressively transforms first into an *Amla* (sour) phase, followed by a *Katu* (pungent) phase, which in turn facilitates

the sequential formation of *Pitta* and subsequently *Vata dosha*.^[36]

RESULTS

1. The review established that *Annavaaha Srotas* in *Ayurveda* corresponds broadly to the gastrointestinal tract up to the small intestine, excluding the colon.
2. The *Moolasthana* of *Annavaaha Srotas* is described differently by *Charaka* (*Amashaya* and *Vamaparshva*) and *Sushruta* (*Amashaya* and *Annavaahini Dhamani*).
3. Functional components-*Amashaya*, *Grahani*, *Pittadharakala*, and *Yakrit*-were identified as central to digestion and absorption.
4. The concept of *Agni* (digestive fire) was found to be the core regulator of metabolism, with *Pachaka Pitta* correlating to modern digestive enzymes.
5. Digestion was described in three sequential stages (*Avasthapaka*), each linked with changes in *Vipaka* and *Dosha* predominance.
6. *Ayurvedic* descriptions align with modern GI physiology, particularly regarding enzyme action, bile secretion, and nutrient absorption.

DISCUSSION

The findings highlight the remarkable depth of *Ayurvedic* anatomical and physiological concepts in describing the GI system. The identification of *Annavaaha Srotas* as both a structural and functional entity parallels modern recognition of the GI tract as an integrated system of digestion, absorption, and metabolic regulation.

Ayurvedic texts demonstrate a layered understanding-linking specific organs like *Amashaya*, *Grahani*, and *Yakrit* with distinct roles in digestion and systemic nourishment. The *Moolasthana* descriptions show how ancient scholars localized disease origins within precise anatomical sites, an approach comparable to current pathophysiological mapping.

The role of *Agni*, particularly *Jatharagni*, emerges as the primary determinant of digestive health. Its dependency on *Pachaka Pitta* is consistent with enzyme-mediated biochemical processes in modern science. The three phases of *Avasthapaka* and the concept of *Vipaka* offer a functional model that corresponds with the sequential breakdown and assimilation of nutrients observed today.

Furthermore, the *Ayurvedic* integration of structural components (*Srotas*, *Kala*, *Dhatus*) with functional processes (*Pachana*, *Shoshana*) offers a holistic framework that extends beyond reductionist models. This indicates that ancient insights can enrich modern gastroenterology by emphasizing systemic balance, individualized digestion, and preventive health strategies.

CONCLUSION

The *Ayurvedic* understanding of the gastrointestinal (GI) system, especially through the lens of *Annavaha Srotas*, offers a holistic and deeply interconnected view of digestion, absorption, and metabolism. Classical texts by *Acharyas* like *Charaka* and *Sushruta* present not only anatomical correlations-such as *Amashaya* with the stomach and *Grahani* with the small intestine-but also emphasize physiological dynamics governed by *Agni*, *Pitta*, and the various *Vayus*. The concept of *Srotas* extends beyond physical structures to include the functional systems responsible for the transformation of *Anna* (food) into *Rasa Dhatu*, the essence of bodily nourishment.

Modern physiological parallels can be drawn between *Pachaka Pitta* and digestive enzymes, while the progression of *Avasthapaka* reflects the staged biochemical breakdown of nutrients. *Vipaka*, categorized into *Madhura*, *Amla*, and *Katu*, symbolizes the internal metabolic activities and the dynamic balance of *Doshas* in the digestive system. Additionally, organs such as the *Yakrit* (liver) are acknowledged both as metabolic centers and as seats of vital tissues like *Rakta Dhatu*, reaffirming *Ayurveda's* comprehensive perspective.

This integrative understanding underscores the relevance of *Ayurvedic* GI physiology even in the context of contemporary science. It highlights the sophisticated interplay between structure and function, energy and matter, and digestion and systemic health-reminding us that wellness begins at the very root of nutrition and assimilation.

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