

Importance of Agnikarma in Surgery – A Review Article

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ABSTRACT

Acharya Sushruta, revered as the father of surgery in Ayurveda, classified Agnikarma as one of the Anushastras, or Para surgical procedures. He posited that conditions unresponsive to Bheshaja (medicinal treatments), Shastra (surgical interventions), or Ksharkarma (alkaline cauterization) could be effectively managed through Agnikarma. Furthermore, diseases treated with Agnikarma are believed to have a low recurrence rate, underscoring its therapeutic efficacy.

In contemporary times, there is a growing demand for rapid pain relief, and Agnikarma stands out as a swift and effective procedure for alleviating pain, also known as Vedana. Modern medicine recognizes Agnikarma as therapeutic burns or cauterization, a technique that has evolved from ancient practices. It serves multiple purposes: as a preventive measure, a postoperative procedure, and a haemostatic intervention.

Agnikarma is particularly beneficial for disorders affecting the bones (Asthi), joints (Sandhi), ligaments, and tendons (Snayu).

Ayurveda, as an enduring and comprehensive system of medicine, emphasizes not only the treatment of diseases but also the promotion of health. The ultimate goal of medical science is to enhance human well-being by eradicating diseases without causing adverse side effects.

Ayurvedic treatments encompass Shamana (palliative) and Shodhana (purificatory) therapies. Among the various procedures outlined in Ayurvedic texts, such as Ksharkarma and Lepam, Agnikarma holds significant importance. In today's fast-paced lifestyle, patients often seek immediate relief from pain, and Agnikarma offers a rapid solution. Many classical texts, including Charaka, Sushruta, Vagbhatta, and Harita, provide detailed descriptions of Agnikarma, covering its indications, contraindications, and techniques. Acharya Dalhana, in his commentary, elaborates on the different forms of Agnikarma, highlighting its versatility. This ancient practice forms the foundation of modern cauterization techniques. This review aims to provide comprehensive insights into Agnikarma, enhancing understanding and appreciation of this time-honoured therapeutic approach.

Keywords: Agnikarma, Ayurveda, Para-surgical, Samhita

1. INTRODUCTION

1. DEFINITION OF AGNIKARMA:

Agnikarma is a therapeutic procedure in Ayurveda that involves the application of controlled heat or fire to treat various ailments. The term is derived from two Sanskrit words: 'Agni' meaning fire, and 'Karma' meaning procedure or action. Thus, Agnikarma refers to a procedure performed using fire to address specific medical conditions.⁽¹⁾

2. HISTORICAL CONTEXT:

- **Charaka Samhita:** In this foundational Ayurvedic text, Acharya Charaka describes Agnikarma as one of the 36 Upakramas (therapeutic procedures) for treating wounds, specifically under the category of Dwi-Vraniya Chikitsa.⁽²⁾

- **Sushruta Samhita:** Acharya Sushruta emphasizes the significance of Agnikarma, dedicating an entire chapter (Sutra Sthana Chapter 12) to its methodology. He considers it superior to other para-surgical procedures like Kshara Karma (alkali cauterization) and Shastra Karma (surgical incisions). Sushruta outlines various instruments and materials used for the procedure, including long pepper (Pippali), goat excreta, cow teeth, arrowheads (Shara), metal rods (Shalaka), and black stone pieces resembling the fruit of *Syzygium cumini* (Jambavoushta).^{(3) (4) (5)}
- **Ashtanga Sangraha and Ashtanga Hridaya:** These texts provide detailed descriptions of Agnikarma, with the 40th chapter of Sutra Sthana in Ashtanga Sangraha and the 30th chapter of Sutra Sthana in Ashtanga Hridaya elaborating on its techniques and applications.
- **Harita Samhita:** Acharya Harita mentions Agnikarma as one of the eight essential treatment modalities and indicates its use in various diseases.⁽⁶⁾

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The information regarding Agnikarma was sourced from classical Ayurvedic texts, including the Samhitas, textbooks, and previous publications available in journals and electronic media. A comprehensive review was conducted to gather relevant details on Agnikarma, focusing on its features, types, and methods of application.

1. Observations and Results:

Dahanopakarana (Instruments Used for Cauterization):

According to Acharya Sushruta, Dahanopakarana are classified into three groups based on the tissue involved:

1. Twak Dhatu (Skin):

- Pippali
- Ajashakrit
- Godanta
- Shara
- Shalaka

2. Mamsa Dhatu (Muscle):

- Jambaushta
- Other metals

3. Sira, Snayu, Sandhi, Asthi Dhatu (Vessels, Ligaments, Joints, and Bones):

- Madhu (Honey)
- Guda (Jaggery)
- Sneha (Oils or Fats)

These instruments are selected based on the specific tissue to be treated, ensuring effective application of Agnikarma.

2. Dahana Vishesha (Patterns of Cauterization):

Acharya Sushruta described several patterns for the application of Agnikarma:

- Valaya (Circle)
- Bindoo (Dot)
- Vilekha (Parallel Line)
- Pratisarana (Rubbing)

Additionally, Ashtanga Samgrahakara introduced three more patterns:

- Ardhachandra (Half Moon)
- Swastika
- Ashtapada (Eight Intersecting Lines)



Figure of Dahana Vishesha

These patterns are employed based on the specific condition and location of the disease.

3. Indications for Agnikarma:

Agnikarma is indicated for various conditions, including:

- Vatakantaka (Sciatica)
- Shiroroga (Headaches)
- Ardhavabhedaka (Migraine)
- Vratma Roga (Fistula)
- Pakshmakopa (Epilepsy)
- Arsha (Hemorrhoids)
- Bhagandara (Fistula-in-ano)
- Granthi (Cyst or Tumor)
- Nadivrana (Sinus)
- Various skin diseases
- Joint and ligament disorders
- Neurological conditions

These indications are based on the therapeutic benefits of Agnikarma in alleviating pain and promoting healing in the affected areas.

4. Contraindications for Agnikarma:

Agnikarma should be avoided in the following conditions:

- Bhinna Kostha (Internal Hemorrhage)
- Pitta Prakriti (Individuals with a Pitta constitution)
- Daurbalya (Weakness)
- Vriddha (Old age)
- Antah Shonita (Internal Hemorrhage)
- Anuddhrata Shalya (Unremovable Foreign Body)
- Bala (Children)
- Bhiru (Fearful Individuals)
- Multiple Vrana (Multiple Wounds)
- Conditions contraindicated for Sudation (Swedana) therapy, such as:
 - Pandu (Anemia)
 - Pramehi (Diabetes)
 - Pittarakti (Pitta and Rakta Prakriti)
 - Kshaya (Emaciation)
 - Ajirna (Indigestion)
 - Udara Roga (Abdominal Diseases)
 - Visha (Poisoning)
 - Trishna (Excessive Thirst)
 - Chhardi (Vomiting)
 - Garbhini (Pregnant Women)
 - Alcohol Consumption
 - Jwara (Fever)
 - Abala (Debilitated Individuals)

These contraindications are outlined in classical texts to ensure the safety and efficacy of Agnikarma therapy.

3. IMPORTANCE OF AGNIKARMA⁽⁷⁾:

Agnikarma is highly esteemed in Ayurveda for its effectiveness in treating various ailments. Diseases addressed through Agnikarma are believed to have a low recurrence rate, making it a reliable therapeutic option. The procedure offers several benefits:

- Sterilizing Effect: Agnikarma eliminates infection by sterilizing the treated area.
- Haemostasis: It aids in controlling bleeding by promoting coagulation and constricting blood vessels.
- Root Cause Treatment: Agnikarma addresses the underlying causes of diseases, providing a comprehensive healing approach.

4. CLASSIFICATION OF AGNIKARMA

Agnikarma, a parasurgical technique in Ayurveda, is classified based on various factors to tailor its application effectively.

1. According to Dravya (Material Used)

- **Snigdha Agnikarma:** Utilizes substances like Madhu (honey), Ghrita (ghee), and Taila (oil). These are employed for cauterizing deeper tissues such as Sira (vessels), Snayu (ligaments), Sandhi (joints), and Asthi (bones).
- **Ruksha Agnikarma:** Involves the use of materials like Pippali (long pepper), Shara (arrow), Shalaka (metal rod), and Godanta (moonstone). These are applied for cauterizing superficial tissues like Twak (skin) and Mamsa (muscles).

2. According to Akriti (Shape or Pattern)

Agnikarma can be performed in various shapes, known as Dahana Vishesha:

- **Acharya Sushruta** described four patterns:
 - **Valaya:** Circular shape
 - **Bindu:** Dot-shaped
 - **Vilekha:** Linear or scratch-like
 - **Pratisarana:** Rubbing motion
- **Acharya Vagbhata** added three more patterns:
 - **Ardhachandra:** Half-moon shape
 - **Swastika:** Swastika shape
 - **Ashtapada:** Eight-limbed shape

3. According to Dhatu (Tissue Involved)

Agnikarma is classified based on the tissue it targets:

- **Twak Dagdha:** Cauterization of the skin
- **Mamsa Dagdha:** Cauterization of the muscles
- **Sira-Snayu Dagdha:** Cauterization of vessels and ligaments
- **Asthi-Sandhi Dagdha:** Cauterization of bones and joints

4. According to Disease and Site

Agnikarma is also classified based on the disease and its location:

- **Sthanik (Local):** Performed directly at the site of the disease, such as in Arsha (hemorrhoids) or Vicharchika (eczema).
- **Sthanantariya (Systemic):** Performed at a distant site from the disease, as in Gridhrasi (sciatica) or Apachi (carbuncle).

5. According to Procedure

The approach varies depending on the disease:

- **After Chedana (Excision):** For conditions like Arsha (hemorrhoids) and Kadar (abscess), Agnikarma is performed after surgical excision.
- **After Bhedana (Incision):** For conditions like Bhagandara (fistula-in-ano) and Nadvirana (sinus), Agnikarma is performed after incision.
- **After Filling:** For conditions like Krimidanta (dental caries), Agnikarma is performed after filling the cavity with substances like Guda (jaggery).

Dagdha Bheda (Types of Burns):

According to Acharya Sushruta, burns resulting from Agnikarma are categorized into four types:

- **Plushtha Dagdha:** Characterized by discoloration and excessive singeing.
- **Durdagdha:** Involves blisters, excessive pain, burning sensation, redness, inflammation, and prolonged healing.
- **Samyaka Dagdha:** A therapeutic burn with common symptoms across all tissues, including:
 - **Ana-Awagadha Vranata:** Wound not deep
 - **Talphala Varnata:** Color resembling the fruit of the Tala tree (blue-black)
 - **Susamshita Vrana:** Wound without elevation or depression
 - **Shabdapradurbhava:** Production of sound
 - **Durgandhata:** Bad odor
 - **Twak Sankocha:** Contraction of the skin

- **Ati-Dagdha:** Excessive burn leading to severe tissue damage.

These classifications ensure that Agnikarma is applied appropriately, considering the material used, the shape of application, the tissue involved, the disease and its location, and the specific procedure to achieve optimal therapeutic outcomes.

5. MODE OF ACTION⁽⁸⁾

Agnikarma is particularly effective in balancing vitiated Vata and Kapha doshas due to the Ushna (hot), Sukshma (subtle), Teekshna (sharp), and Ashukari (quick-acting) qualities of Agni (fire). According to Ayurvedic principles, a weakened digestive fire (Mandagni) leads to various diseases, and each tissue (Dhatu) has its own Agni. When this Agni diminishes, it results in disease manifestation. Agnikarma enhances the Dhatvagni, thereby pacifying the aggravated doshas and facilitating healing.

6. DISCUSSION

Agnikarma is a significant Para surgical procedure in Ayurveda, utilizing controlled heat to treat various conditions. Its therapeutic properties, such as Ushna Veerya (hot potency) and Tikshna Ushna Guna (penetrating quality), make it particularly effective for Vata-Kapha disorders, which are often challenging to treat due to the opposing nature of these doshas. However, the intense heat used in Agnikarma can aggravate Pitta and Rakta, necessitating caution in its application.

To mitigate potential complications, Ayurvedic texts advise against performing Agnikarma during the Sharad (autumn) and Greeshma (summer) seasons, as these periods can exacerbate Pitta dosha. Additionally, certain conditions and patient profiles are considered contraindications for this procedure. Individuals who are emaciated, obese, anemic, diabetic, or suffering from conditions like ascites, herpes, cellulitis, or erysipelas should avoid Agnikarma. The procedure may also be unsuitable for those with multiple wounds, internal bleeding, or compromised immunity, as well as for children, the elderly, and individuals with a Pitta constitution.

In diabetic patients, the healing process may be delayed due to impaired circulation and tissue regeneration. Similarly, individuals with anemia or those under the influence of alcohol or toxins may have a reduced capacity to tolerate the heat and stress associated with Agnikarma. Therefore, careful patient selection and adherence to contraindications are essential to ensure the safety and efficacy of this treatment.

7. CONCLUSION⁽⁸⁾

Agnikarma is a straightforward, cost-effective, and minimally invasive procedure that can be performed at the outpatient department level, often without the need for hospitalization or anaesthesia. It is particularly effective in pain management, offering a safe and efficient alternative with no known adverse effects and a low risk of disease recurrence. However, there is a pressing need for more scientific studies and research to further validate and expand its applications.

Agnikarma is a specialized therapeutic technique in Ayurveda that utilizes controlled heat to treat various ailments. This approach is considered a minimally invasive Para surgical procedure, offering a powerful alternative for managing both chronic and acute conditions.

Historically, Agnikarma has been practiced under various names across different cultures. In contemporary medicine, similar methods are employed using tools like cautery, lasers, and radiation, which can be seen as modern adaptations of this ancient technique.

The applications of Agnikarma are extensive and can be supported by various theoretical frameworks. To gain a comprehensive understanding of its applications within Ayurveda, further research and exploration are essential.

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