

PRABHĀVA AS A CONCEPT OF SPECIFIC DRUG ACTION IN AYURVEDA: A CONCEPTUAL CORRELATION WITH CONTEMPORARY PHARMACODYNAMICS

Dr. Nimisha Upadayay^{*1}, Dr. Saikat Naskar²

¹Assistant Professor, Dravyaguna and Vigyana, ITM Ayurvedic Medical College and Hospital, Chehari, Maharajganj, UP, India.

²Assistant Professor, Roga Nidana Evam Vikriti Vigyana, ITM Ayurvedic Medical College and Hospital, Chehari, Maharajganj, UP, India.

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***Corresponding Author: Dr. Nimisha Upadayay**

Assistant Professor, Dravyaguna and Vigyana, ITM Ayurvedic Medical College and Hospital, Chehari, Maharajganj, UP, India.



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ABSTRACT

The concepts of Rasa, Guṇa, Vīrya, Vipāka, and Prabhāva provide Ayurveda with a thorough framework for comprehending the action of medicinal substances. Among these, Prabhāva stands for the particular, unique, or unusual action of a Dravya that cannot be sufficiently explained by its other pharmacological characteristics. The idea offers an essential theoretical foundation for understanding why substances with seemingly similar Rasa, Guṇa, Vīrya, and Vipāka may nevertheless have distinct therapeutic effects. Contemporary pharmacology explains drug action through pharmacokinetics, pharmacodynamics, receptor interactions, enzyme modulation, ion-channel effects, cellular signaling and other molecular mechanisms. This article critically examines the Ayurvedic concept of Prabhāva and explores its possible conceptual relationship with contemporary pharmacology. Particular attention is given to therapeutic specificity, variability in drug response, dose-dependent effects and adverse drug reactions. The article emphasizes that Prabhāva should not be directly equated with any single modern pharmacological mechanism. Rather, it may be considered a distinctive Ayurvedic explanatory category that invites investigation through modern pharmacological, phytochemical and pharmacodynamic methodologies. Such an interdisciplinary approach may contribute to a more systematic understanding of Ayurvedic drug action while preserving the theoretical integrity of Ayurveda.

KEYWORDS: Prabhāva, Ayurveda, Dravyagūṇa, Rasa, Guṇa, Vīrya, Vipāka, pharmacodynamics, Pharmacokinetics.

INTRODUCTION

Certain drugs function according to their tastes, some according to their characteristics, some according to their potency, and some according to their Vipaka. Certain drugs' actions fall outside of these categories. They take particular steps to treat illnesses that cannot be explained

by Rasa, Guna, Virya, or Vipaka. We refer to this particular action as Prabhava. While the taste, characteristics, potency, and Vipaka of two drugs may be similar, their modes of action may differ. This is due to the drug's Prabhava, or particular action.^[1]

Table 1: Ayurvedic determinants of drug action.

Parameter	General meaning	Role in drug action
Rasa	Taste	Provides an initial pharmacological indication
Guna	Qualities/properties	Influences physiological and dosic effects
Virya	Potency/active energy	Determines major functional actions
Vipaka	Post-digestive transformation/effect	Influences action after digestion/metabolism
Prabhava	Specific/peculiar action	Explains distinctive effects not adequately explained by the above

Literature 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.^[2]

Synonyms

Shakthi, Vichitra pratyarabdhatwa, Vikriti Vishama samaveta, Achintha veerya, Achintha, Anavadharaniya, Swabhava.^[3]

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, medicinal substances exert their therapeutic effects through three distinct mechanisms:

- **Dravya Prabhava (Action independent of constituent properties):** A drug's effect stems from its unique inherent nature rather than its basic qualities alone. For instance, while Chitraka (Leadwort) shares the hot and pungent traits of many herbs, its exceptionally potent digestive (Deepana) action is an exclusive, inherent property of the substance itself.
- **Guna Prabhava (Action driven by constituent properties):** The therapeutic outcome is a direct, logical result of the substance's qualities. Honey (Madhu), for example, has dry and light characteristics that naturally counteract the heavy and oily nature of Kapha dosha, directly explaining its scraping (Lekhana) effect on the body.
- **Dravya-Guna Prabhava (Action dependent on both substance and properties):** This mechanism relies on the synergy between the whole plant entity and its specific traits. Amalaki (Indian Gooseberry) provides a rejuvenating (Rasayana) and tissue-nourishing effect because its complete physical identity works in perfect tandem with its cooling energy and sweet post-digestive effect.

Although Acharya Sushruta did not explicitly use the term "Prabhava," he acknowledged the concept under the

name “Achintya Virya” (inconceivable potency). He maintained that therapeutic effects arising from this inherent nature are fundamentally unpredictable (Achintya) and beyond logical debate or questioning (Amimansya).

Because these specific actions defy standard reasoning, Sushruta emphasized relying entirely on the authority of classical Ayurvedic texts for guidance rather than independent deduction. For example, regardless of how it is processed or administered, the herbs in the ‘Ambashtadi gana’ can never be forced to act as a purgative, as that simply contradicts their inherent, textually defined nature.^[5]

Acharya Vagbhata defines Prabhava in his text (A.H.Su. 17/52) with the principle: “*Rasadi samye yat karma visishtam tat prabhavajam.*” According to Vagbhata, Prabhava is a specialized, overriding property that causes a substance to exert unique effects. It is the specific factor responsible when a drug produces therapeutic actions that are entirely distinct from, or even directly contradict, the logical outcomes one would normally expect based on its foundational profile of Rasa (taste), Guna (qualities), Virya (potency), and Vipaka (post-digestive effect).^[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]

Prabhava and Drug Action

Drug action can be considered at two levels:

A. General drug action

This includes actions that can reasonably be predicted from the properties of the substance.

For example:

Rasa → Guna → Virya → Vipaka → expected Karma

B. Specific drug action

When a particular action cannot be adequately explained by the above parameters:

Specific unexplained Karma → Prabhāva

Therefore, Prabhāva can be viewed as an Ayurvedic category that accommodates **drug-specific pharmacological behavior**.

This does not mean that Prabhāva represents an unknown chemical constituent in every case. Rather, it is a **theoretical category describing a distinctive relationship between a substance and its action**.

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 Prabhav.

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).

Vishaghna Karma of Shirisha

Shirisha and Haridra are considered as Vishaghna dravayas (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 dravaya 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.

Vamana and Virechana

If a Dravaya is having Vamana karma, then it is attributed to Urdhwabhaghara Prabhava. Eg. Vamana Karma by Madanphala.

Virechana Karma done by the Dravaya is attributed to Adhobhaghara Prabhava of that Dravaya. Eg. Anulomana karma of Hari taki.

Contemporary Pharmacological Understanding of Drug Action

Modern pharmacology explains drug action through two major areas:

Pharmacokinetics (PK) Overview^[10]

Pharmacokinetics describes how a drug moves through the body over time. It encompasses four primary processes:

- Absorption: how the drug enters the bloodstream after administration (e.g., oral, IV, transdermal).
- Distribution: how the drug disperses throughout body fluids and tissues.
- Metabolism: how the drug is chemically altered, mainly by liver enzymes (e.g., CYP450).
- Excretion: how the drug or its metabolites are eliminated, primarily via the kidneys (urine) or liver (bile).

PK analysis provides key parameters such as:

- Half-life ($t_{1/2}$): time it takes for the drug concentration to reduce by half.
- Clearance (CL): volume of plasma cleared of drug per unit time.
- Volume of distribution (Vd): the extent to which a drug distributes into tissues.
- Bioavailability (F): the proportion of the administered drug that reaches systemic circulation unchanged.

Pharmacodynamics (PD) Overview^[10]

Pharmacodynamics refers to the effects a drug has on the body. It explains how drug concentration correlates with biological response, including both therapeutic and adverse effects. Key aspects include:

- Receptor binding: interaction of the drug with specific targets (e.g., enzymes, receptors).
- Dose-response relationships: how the magnitude of effect changes with dose or concentration.
- Therapeutic window: the concentration range in which the drug is effective without being toxic.
- Efficacy vs. potency: efficacy refers to the maximum effect a drug can produce, while potency refers to the amount of drug needed to produce an effect.

DISCUSSION

Modern pharmacology therefore attempts to identify the molecular and cellular mechanisms responsible for a drug's observed action.

Ayurvedic concepts such as Rasa, Guṇa, Vīrya, Vipāka and Prabhāva operate within a different theoretical framework. Consequently, direct one-to-one translation should be avoided.

When drug get administered inside the body then it forms *Sara-Kitta Vibhajana* (absorbable & excretal fractions) due to the action of *Agni*. The *Sara bhaga* (active principles) of *Dravya* (drug) goes to *Hrudaya* and circulates all over the body under the influence of *Vyan Vayu*. *Sara Bhaga* resides in body tissues causes growth (*Vruddhi*) and loss (*Kshaya*) of particular tissue (*Dhatu*) leading to the pharmacological effects. The action (*Karma*) in ayurveda can be attributed to the following qualities of drug:

Rasa means taste of drug

Guna means basic nature of drug

Veerya means potency of drug

Vipaka means bio-transformation of drug, this mainly relates with pharmacokinetic effect

Prabhava means overall effect of drug.

These characteristics of the drug cause biochemical changes that lead to pharmacological reactions by changing *Doshas* (biological entities), intensifying *Dhatus* (tissues), eliminating *Mala* (waste), clearing *Srotas* (circulatory channels), and increasing *Agni* (digestive & metabolic power).

Among the *Dravya*'s drug constituents, such as *Rasa*, *Guna*, etc., *Prabhava* is the most significant. All of these drug ingredients—*Rasa*, *Guna*, *Virya*, and *Vipak*—can be replaced by *Prabhava*, but none of them can replace *Prabhava*. *Prabhava* thus takes on the most significant role of all. Some *Dravyas* use their *Rasas* to carry out their actions. Other *Dravyas* with the same *rasa* can be used in place of these *Dravyas*. If sugar is unavailable, jaggery can also be used to make tea. Some people use their *Vipaka* to act. Another *Dravya* with the same *Vipak* can be used in this situation as well. Another *Dravya* with the same *Virya* can be substituted while obtaining the actions of *Ushna* and *Sheet Virya*. While obtaining the actions of *Ushna* and *Sheet virya*, another *Dravya* having the same *Virya* can be used as substitute. The same is true for the various *Gun*as. But when a substitute does not have the desired action, then the original *Dravya* is must. Such an action of the *Dravya*, which cannot be substituted, is brought about by the *Prabhava* of the *Dravya*. It should be said that *Prabhava* can be produced by that specific *Dravya* only. It is imperative to have the original *Dravya* for obtaining its *Prabhava*.^[11]

Prabhāva and Pharmacodynamics

Specific Mechanism of Action (Drug-Receptor Interaction)

- **Ayurvedic Concept:** Acharya Vagbhata stated that when two herbs have identical physical properties (*Rasa*, *Guna*, *Virya*, *Vipaka*) but produce entirely different effects, that specific action is *Prabhāva*.
- **Pharmacodynamic Correlation:** This perfectly mirrors receptor specificity and affinity. Two drugs can share the same physical characteristics (e.g., lipid solubility, molecular weight, pH) but have completely different therapeutic effects because their

specific active molecules bind to different cellular receptors. *Prabhāva* is essentially the macro-level clinical observation of microscopic receptor-binding specificity.

"Achintya Virya" vs. Molecular Biology

- **Ayurvedic Concept:** Acharya Sushruta described *Prabhāva* as *Achintya* (inconceivable or unpredictable based on general rules).
- **Pharmacodynamic Correlation:** Before the advent of molecular biology and the discovery of specific enzymes, ion channels, and DNA targets, the exact way a drug worked was "inconceivable" through basic physical assessment. Modern pharmacodynamics decodes *Prabhāva* by explaining why it happens at a cellular level. What Ayurveda classified as an unexplainable inherent power (*Prabhāva*), modern science maps out as complex biochemical cascades.

Structure-Activity Relationship (SAR)

- **Ayurvedic Concept:** *Dravya-Prabhāva* states that the action depends on the specific identity of the whole substance.
- **Pharmacodynamic Correlation:** This correlates with the **Structure-Activity Relationship (SAR)** in pharmacology, where the exact 3D molecular structure of a drug dictates its biological effect. Even a minor change in the chemical structure (like moving a molecule's spatial arrangement from left-handed to right-handed) can completely change its pharmacodynamic effect, much like how the specific identity of an herb dictates its *Prabhāva*.

Classical Examples Explained through Pharmacodynamics

- **Danti vs. Chitraka (The classic similarity test)**
 - **Ayurveda:** Both *Danti* (*Baliospermum montanum*) and *Chitraka* (*Plumbago zeylanica*) are *Katu* (pungent) and *Ushna* (hot). However, by *Prabhāva*, *Danti* acts as a strong purgative (*Virechana*), while *Chitraka* acts as a digestive fire stimulant (*Deepana*).
 - **Pharmacodynamics:** *Danti* contains specific resinous compounds that chemically irritate the intestinal mucosa and stimulate peristaltic receptors, causing a laxative effect. *Chitraka* contains *plumbagin*, which dynamically stimulates gastric mucosal secretion but lacks the specific intestinal receptor affinity to cause purgation.

Shirish (*Albizia lebbek*) as Anti-toxic (*Vishaghna*)

- **Ayurveda:** *Shirish* eliminates toxins (*Vishaghna*) through *Prabhāva*, an action not easily explained by its basic taste or temperature.
- **Pharmacodynamics:** Pharmacological studies show that extracts of *Albizia lebbek* stabilize mast cells and inhibit the degranulation of histamine. Its specific mechanism of action (pharmacodynamics) acts as an anti-allergic and anti-anaphylactic agent, validating its "anti-toxic" *Prabhāva*.

CONCLUSION

Thousands of years ago, Ayurvedic scholars clinically observed that certain herbs had unique, highly specific actions that did not follow the basic rules of *Rasa*, *Guna*, *Virya*, and *Vipaka*. They termed this special inherent action *Prabhāva*. What ancient Acharyas called unpredictable or beyond logic (*Achintya*) is exactly what modern science now explains through pharmacodynamics—specifically how drug molecules bind to targeted cellular receptors. Connecting these two concepts proves that Ayurvedic pharmacology has always been deeply scientific. The ancient texts accurately documented *what* the drug did, and modern science simply explains *how* it does it at a cellular level. Classical Ayurvedic texts are not just history—they are highly accurate maps of specific drug actions. By studying herbs with a known *Prabhāva*, modern researchers have a clear head-start in discovering new, highly targeted medicines today.

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