

## AN AYURVEDIC UNDERSTANDING OF DETERIORATING HEALTH IN THE CURRENT ERA

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### ABSTRACT

There is a noticeable increase in disease burden and deterioration in health globally in recent years. There are several pieces of evidence available through epidemiological data to prove the above statement. The above trends coincide with Ayurvedic beliefs about deterioration in health and life expectancy in Yugas, especially Kaliyuga. The theory of causation of diseases in Ayurveda includes the individual factors of Prajñāparādha, Asātmyendriyārtha Saṃyoga, and Pariṇāma along with the environmental factors of Janapadodhwamsa. The imbalance of common environmental factors like air, water, land, and time results in disease outbreaks affecting the masses. Lifespan is a valuable health status indicator considering both individual and community factors. Commentaries on Charaka Samhita by Gangādhara and

Chakrapāṇi discuss how lifespan is affected by causative factors, time, and environmental elements. They emphasize that the reduction in lifespan is a gradual process caused by multiple factors affecting a population.

### INTRODUCTION

The deterioration of health and increasing prevalence of diseases are issues of global concern in modern times. Modern medical research and statistics prove that there has been a considerable shift in the pattern of diseases in recent years. According to the World Health Organization, the percentage of deaths in the world caused by noncommunicable diseases such as cardiovascular disorders, diabetes, cancer, and chronic respiratory diseases is 74-

75%. In 2021 alone, these illnesses claimed 43 million lives worldwide.<sup>[1]</sup>

Furthermore, chronic diseases are the most common causes of morbidity, disability, and reduced quality of life. Various studies prove that conditions such as diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, and strokes are major contributors to the global burden of diseases, and their prevalence is expected to increase in the coming decades.<sup>[2]</sup> In addition, global reports have revealed the alarming increase in specific diseases like diabetes and neurological conditions. The prevalence of diabetes mellitus is currently around 800 million individuals in the world, and the incidence rate is increasing rapidly.<sup>[3]</sup> Additionally, neurological disorders now affect billions of people worldwide and rank among the leading causes of ill health.<sup>[4]</sup>

In addition, the prevalence of infectious diseases has been increasing recently due to environmental changes, globalization, and newly emerging pathogenic microorganisms.<sup>[5]</sup> Thus, the current global health scenario can be described as one characterized by the dual burden of communicable and noncommunicable diseases.

These findings clearly demonstrate that modern human health is deteriorating with increasing prevalence of diseases, early onset of illnesses, and higher chronicity. These changes in human health reflect both biological and non-biological factors, including environmental imbalance, lifestyle changes, and other social determinants of health.

Interestingly, modern observations about human health deterioration and increased disease burden have parallels in the classical Ayurvedic description of Janapadodhwansaniya Adhyaya. In particular, according to classical Ayurveda, with the passage of time, especially in Kaliyuga, there is a gradual decline in the strength and deterioration of health. Moreover, individuals develop susceptibility to diseases. Environmental elements such as air, water, land, and time get disturbed, and the righteousness (Dharma) is lost. As a result, the health status of humans suffers.<sup>[6]</sup>

In this sense, the deterioration in human health and increasing disease burden observed in the present era are not unique phenomena. These observations can also be viewed from a historical perspective based on Ayurvedic literature. According to Ayurveda, the current era, i.e., Kaliyuga, is characterized by health deterioration, early manifestation of diseases, and reduced lifespan.

Ayurveda is mainly concerned with the maintenance of health and prevention of diseases. It

emphasizes that the first priority in this context is to maintain the health of healthy individuals and manage the disease in the affected. To ensure this, it is vital to have a thorough understanding of the factors that affect health and cause diseases. Causative factors are thus important considerations for understanding health and disease in Ayurveda.<sup>[7]</sup>

According to Ayurveda, the causative factors of diseases in individuals are Prajñāparādha (intellectual error), Asātmendriyārtha Saṃyoga (improper use of senses), and Pariṇāma (effect of time). Prajñāparādha means improper judgment of things and performance of activities regardless of knowing that the decision or action is wrong. Such activities often involve unhealthy practices, and these result in the manifestation of diseases. Asātmendriyārtha Saṃyoga refers to the improper interaction between the senses and their corresponding stimuli. It is usually related to overuse, underuse, or misuse of the senses. In addition, Pariṇāma relates to the effect of time and seasonal changes on the body. These factors disrupt the balance of the body, and consequently, diseases appear.<sup>[8]</sup>

Thus, it can be seen that individual factors, behaviors, and adaptation to time play an essential role in determining health. However, according to classical Ayurveda, individual factors alone are not enough to explain the causation of many diseases that affect large populations simultaneously. In such cases, Janapadodhwamsa can be considered to explain the phenomenon of mass disease outbreaks. Janapadodhwamsa implies the destruction or affliction of entire populations due to common factors. Under such circumstances, individuals with different constitutions, diets, strength, and habits become equally prone to the development of diseases. Consequently, it can be concluded that factors like Prakriti, Bala, and Ahara cannot fully explain mass diseases. Thus, there must be some common environmental factors causing mass diseases.<sup>[6]</sup>

According to Ayurveda, the causes of mass diseases in individuals are the disturbed environmental elements of air, water, land, and time. The disturbances of these factors create negative effects on everyone exposed to them, resulting in epidemics and mass diseases. The disturbance of common environmental factors leads to mass health deterioration. In addition, Ayurveda believes that there is an underlying cause of disturbances of these environmental elements. It is the decline in righteousness (Dharma). Individuals and societies tend to deviate from ethical principles and natural conduct, leading to disharmony in the environment. Consequently, environmental conditions change in the form of climate modification, contamination of resources, and seasonal imbalances. All these factors cause mass diseases.<sup>[6]</sup>

Ayurveda describes that the lifespan of an individual varies according to the different Yugas, and there is a gradual decline in the lifespan with time. Individuals in earlier Yugas have greater strength, health, and longevity. However, as time proceeds, the strength, health, and lifespan of individuals reduce. In Kaliyuga, the period of time in which we live, the lifespan is less compared to previous Yugas, and individuals develop susceptibility to diseases due to reduced strength and disturbances in the environment.<sup>[9]</sup>

The average lifespan of a population holds great importance in assessing the health status of that population. Lifespan is not just an individual factor; it also reveals the collective health status of a community. If the average lifespan of a population increases, then it means that the people have excellent health, strong immune system, balanced environment, and righteous conduct. On the other hand, if the average lifespan reduces, then it shows the deterioration in health, high prevalence of diseases, poor environmental and socio-economic conditions, and unrighteousness. Due to this reason, Ayurveda has emphasized the importance of the lifespan when discussing large-scale health deterioration.

According to Acharya Gangādhara's commentary on Charaka Samhita, the understanding of the lifespan in Ayurveda is much deeper and profound. He explains that the lifespan depends upon the dynamic interaction between the cause (Hetu), time (Kāla), and manifestation (Pariṇāma). He argues that the lifespan should not be seen as a static biological factor because it is a product of a long process occurring over time. He says that even when all causes are present, they do not have any immediate effect on the body. Rather, they remain latent until suitable time arises. This is important to note that the reduction in lifespan is a gradual process that occurs gradually due to the continuous impact of several factors.

Moreover, according to Gangādhara, the factor of time is very important in determining the manifestation of causes. He explains that a cause does not always produce the desired effect on the body; the factor of time is involved in this process. That is to say, the cause may not produce any disease in one period but may do so in another period depending on the favorable time. Hence, it can be said that the factor of time is essential in determining health and disease. The importance of time is also evident from the fact that in the discussion about lifespan in Yugas, there is a gradual decline in the strength of individuals, adaptability, and environmental harmony. As time progresses toward Kaliyuga, conditions become unfavorable, and consequently, the manifestation of diseases occurs frequently, leading to the reduction in lifespan.

It is also important to highlight that the effect of causes may vary among individuals. Gangādhara mentions that a cause produces different effects in different individuals depending upon their strength, adaptability, and body constitution. However, with time, the overall strength of individuals reduces, and consequently, their tolerance towards these causes diminishes. Thus, even a small or previously insignificant cause can produce diseases in individuals in Kaliyuga. Therefore, the shortening of lifespan in later periods is partly due to this reason.

From the explanation provided above, it can be seen that the processes affecting the lifespan are dynamic and involve multiple causes. A single cause cannot produce disease alone; it requires time and favorable conditions to act. The presence of a cause alone does not mean that there is a decrease in the lifespan. Rather, it is the combination of the accumulated effect of causes and other influential factors that reduce lifespan. In Kaliyuga, the process of decline in lifespan is accelerated due to unfavorable conditions.

Finally, it can be noted that the above explanation indirectly discusses the multiplicity of factors involved in the causation of diseases. A cause does not directly cause a disease; it needs the presence of other causes, suitable time, and weak individuals. In this way, Gangādhara's explanation helps to understand the importance of time and dynamic interactions in the determination of health and disease.<sup>[9]</sup>

Similar to Gangādhara, Chakrapāṇi's explanation of the concept of lifespan also holds great significance. In particular, he provides the collective aspect of the health deterioration in Ayurveda. He discusses that when mass diseases occur in a community, individual factors such as Prakriti, Ahara, and Bala do not provide any kind of protection against disease development. He emphasizes that there are collective factors that determine the health status. In other words, when common environmental elements like air, water, land, and time are vitiated, they affect the entire population similarly. Hence, the shortening of lifespan is due to the disturbance of these environmental factors rather than personal factors.<sup>[9]</sup>

From the above explanations of Gangādhara and Chakrapāṇi, it can be seen that Ayurveda sees the concept of lifespan as a multifactorial indicator of health. Gangādhara emphasizes the importance of time and the gradual decline in strength and Dharma, whereas Chakrapāṇi highlights the significance of common environmental disturbances.

## DISCUSSION

Ayurveda provides an extensive approach to health that takes into consideration both individual factors and environmental conditions. Although Ayurveda recognizes individual causes of diseases such as Prajñāparādha, Asātmendriyārtha Saṃyoga, and Pariṇāma, it clarifies that these factors alone cannot explain mass diseases affecting large populations simultaneously. The theory of causation of mass diseases in Ayurveda is explained in terms of Janapadodhwamsa, which involves common factors such as disturbed air, water, land, and time. It is also mentioned that Janapadodhwamsa results from the decline of righteousness, indicating the imbalance of environmental conditions, society, and individual factors.

## CONCLUSION

The increase in diseases and deterioration in health in the present era can be explained through the Ayurvedic framework. The decline in lifespan, especially in Kaliyuga, is linked to the reduced strength, susceptibility to diseases, and disharmony in natural and socio-cultural conditions.

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