School of Anthropology and Conservation

AYURVEDIC MEDICINAL GASTRONOMY: FOOD AND MEDICINE, FOOD AS MEDICINE OR FOOD IS MEDICINE?

Assessing the Interface Between Food and Medicine in Ayurvedic Practice

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Introduction

In Ayurvedic and integrative hospitals in India, diet is being used as a therapeutic agent. Furthermore, many foods are used for their pharmacological action in Ayurvedic medicine. This research explores the wealth of knowledge Ayurveda has about food and how the interface between food and medicine is fluid in an Ayurvedic hospital in Bangalore.



Ethno-medicinal garden at I-AIM, Bangalore

Methods

- Therapeutic application of food was gathered through **participant observation**. Over 100 doctor-patient consultations were observed.
- **Semi-structured/ informal interviews** were conducted with 16 doctors to understand how important food is as a therapeutic tool for doctors.
- **Freelisting tasks** were used to gather a list of food species used as medicine in Ayurveda.
- To consolidate knowledge about Ayurvedic conception of food, **primary resources** which doctors recommended were consulted.

Results

Ayurvedic pharmacotherapeutics, has a broad range of drugs in use from everyday foods such as ghee, pomegranate or barley to complex herbo-mineral formulations which also contain food substances.

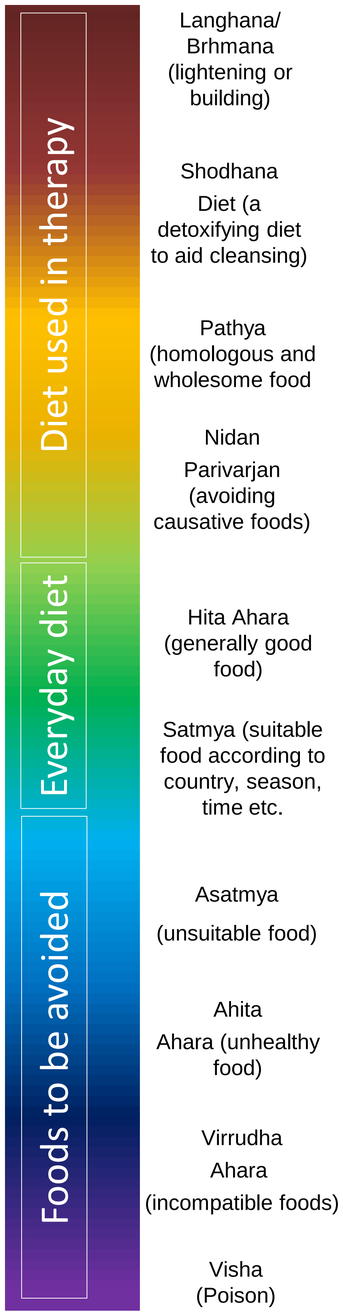


Figure 4: Diet in therapeutics

Ten distinct Ayurvedic categories of diet were identified from the research. The categories further to the top are therapeutic diets. For example, lightening and building therapy uses food as a prominent part of the treatment. The categories at the bottom are harmful diets and are avoided.

The preparation, quantity, application or objective can change which category a particular substance belongs to. For example, honey helps in *langhana* therapy because it 'scrapes fat'. However if honey is heated up it becomes *visha (*poison).

Furthermore, while diet is used extensively in therapeutics, individual foods are also attributed potency and used as medicine. **Four** categories were identified:

- **Medicinal foods and edible medicines**

These foods are used extensively in Indian cuisine and in Ayurvedic medicine. I.e. *thakra* (buttermilk), spices, ghee etc.

- **Edible medicines (less significant as food)**

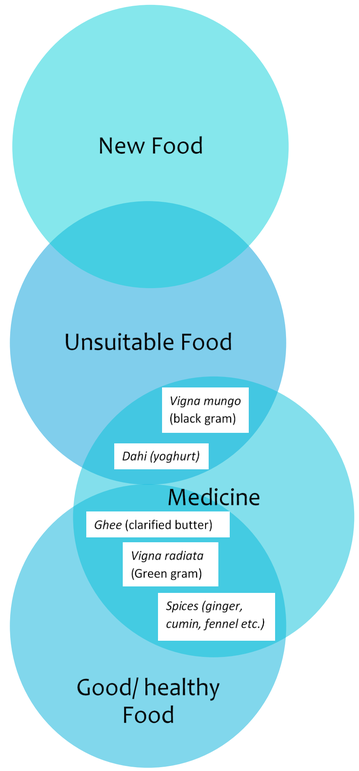
Foods which are not significant foods but important medicines. For example, amla, pomegranate, raisins etc. (*Phyllanthus embilica*)

- **Edible medicines (harmful foods)**

Vigna mungo (black gram) and *dahi* (yoghurt) are discouraged as food items but are used in therapeutics for specific purposes.

- **'New' food crops not in the Ayurvedic pharmacopeia**

Many foods such as the nightshades and Brassicaceae are not used in therapeutics and are relatively new to the Indian diet.



The central question then becomes, how do food substances become medicine? There were four ways:

- Preparation
- Dosage
- Application or objective
- Foods mixed to create ayurvedic formulations

Conclusions

Ayurvedic theory strongly supports the use of food in therapeutics and this theory is practically applied by Ayurvedic physicians at the I-AIM hospital. Diet is used extensively in treatment and individual food substances fluidly move from being eaten as foods to being prescribed as medicines within ayurvedic formulations. In Ayurveda's most important classical text it is stated:

'there is no substance in the world which cannot be served as a medicine through intelligent application, (Ca Su 26/12).' There is ample potential to find and discover medicinal uses of everyday foods. Moreover, hospitals like I-AIM are finding innovative solutions by integrating ayurvedic and contemporary healthcare. In the west, we have a long way to go before such integration can become possible but through more research and bringing attention to such initiatives around the world we become closer to that goal.

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