

# Concepts of Social and Behavioral Health in Ayurveda: Age Old Principles and Contemporary Relevance

Janmejaya Samal

Former District Epidemiologist, Gadchiroli, Maharashtra, Presently MPH Scholar, Padmashree School of Public Health (under RGUHS), Nagarbhavi Circle, Nagarbhavi, Bangalore, India.

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## ABSTRACT

Social and behavioral health sciences constitute an important component of public health. Unlike medicine these branches of health science mainly focus on the social and behavioral components of an individual and the community as a whole. These disciplines are gaining much popularity owing to their special potential of unlocking the complex social and behavioral issues of health and illness. Social health sciences have undergone considerable development and specialization in the past few years. Ayurveda is believed to be the ancient most medical doctrine of human civilization. Ayurveda has its own philosophical approach in delineating health and illness. Interestingly some of the fundamental tenets of social and behavioral sciences find their places elsewhere in the classical treatises of Ayurveda. It is difficult to find the modern day terminologies but the age old principles described in Ayurveda can be understood in the light of social and behavioral concepts. *Dharaniya Vega*, *Sadvrutta* and *Achara Rasayana* can be understood in the light of Deviance and Social control, social cognitive theory and social network theories which are in fact the most widely used models for control and prevention of health related events. In this present document an attempt has been made to explore some of the age old social and behavioral health concepts which have got a contemporary relevance.

**Keywords:** *Achara Rasayana*, Ayurveda, Behavioral health, *Dharaniya Vega*, *Sadvrutta*, Social Health

## INTRODUCTION

Social and behavioral health sciences constitute an important component of public health. These disciplines have made important contributions to the understanding of health and illnesses, and each has developed specialized fields of inquiry related to medicine and public health, such as medical anthropology, medical sociology, health psychology, health communication, and gerontological health. Like the health

science, social and behavioral sciences have undergone considerable development and specialization in the past 50 years. Much cross fertilization has taken place among the socio-medical sciences so that most research on public health topics integrates a variety of concepts and methods from different social science traditions. These disciplines mainly focus on the health effects of people's relationship to groups through various forms of social organizations, such

as role behavior, family relationship and social stratifications.<sup>(1)</sup> Interestingly some of the fundamental tenets of social and behavioral sciences find their places elsewhere in the classical treatises of Ayurveda. Ayurveda remains one of the most ancient and yet living traditions documented and practiced widely in India.<sup>(2)</sup> It has a time-honored philosophical and experiential basis. The core concept of health and disease in Ayurveda is built around the uniqueness of an individual.<sup>(3)</sup> The present day Ayurveda has undergone many changes as per the need of the day, but, important principles have remained unchanged.<sup>(4)</sup> Some of the social and behavioral concepts delineated in the classical treatises of Ayurveda hold important value in relation to the contemporary world. These principles can be used, like the modern models, to understand and unravel the complex individual and community health issues.

***Important Concepts and Their Interpretation Sadvrutta:*** *Sadvrutta* comprises of two words, “*Sat*” meaning good and “*Vrtta*” meaning regimen. Association with good people leads to the development of good behavior, which is considered as *Sadvrutta*. (Chakrapani on Charak Samhita Sutrasthan 8/17)<sup>(6)</sup>

In Charaka Samhita words of noble persons (*Satvachana*) is considered as best among the adoptable behavior. Happiness (*Harsha*) is best among promotive things. Aloofness (*Nibruti*) from bad things is good. The atheist (*Nastika*) should be avoided. Greed (*Loulya*) is prime among trouble maker. Words of the wicked (*Asadgrahana*) are prime among the factors leading to harmful effects. So person desirous of observing *Sadvrutta* should abide by the above mentioned principles. (Charak Samhita Sutrasthan 25/40)<sup>(6)</sup>

This is one of the important concepts of social and behavioral health described in Ayurveda. This particular concept emphasizes the social intercourse and its impact on health and well being in general. All the principles such as mingling with good peer, happiness, aloofness from bad things, avoidance of an atheist, and avoidance of greed are very much relevant to the contemporary wisdom of social and behavioral science. This concept can well be understood in the light of social learning or the social cognitive theory. The theory has made important contribution to understanding behavior related to health care. One of the primary component of social cognitive theory, or social learning theory, is the idea that many of the thoughts and beliefs are rooted in the observational learning experiences that have occurred in our environment. These experiences, in turn, are related to our attribution of our abilities and our sources of motivation. This theory is a work of Albert Bandura (1986) who believes that people learn by watching what others do and what happens to them when they do the same. This is all about *Sadvrutta*, the good regimen, association with good helps develop good behavior. This concept has been applied to many different settings to understand health behavior and the same can also be applied as an intervention measure to control faulty behavior leading to many health problems. One case study can be taken as an example to understand the theory better. On the basis of observational learning researchers in California developed a programme to prevent substance abuse among Hispanic youth. In this the researchers discovered that the preteens are highly influenced by their peers and few positive role models were present within that population. This was done in a middle school in a community that was fraught with crime, high incidence of substance abuse, and school drop outs. A

bilingual programme was developed that provided positive peer models for substance free living. The programme had a skill building component which taught the teens to say no in situations where they are encouraged to indulge in substance abuse and other illegal activities. The programme emphasized the social norms within the community showing that following the law, not using drugs, and staying in school were acceptable and common ways of life. This programme was not evaluated formally but the participants felt a tremendous impact on their life. These models have been found very fruitful in many health related problems such as HIV/AIDS, Road traffic accidents, substance abuse etc.<sup>(1,5)</sup>

**Behavior Regarding Personal Hygiene:**

One should clean excretory orifices and feet frequently. One should cut hair, mustache, body hair, and nails thrice in fifteen days, wear clean good cloth every day, pleasant mind, apply scent, decently dress, comb the hair, apply oil to head, ear, nose and feet every day. One should smoke medicated tube and should have pleasant face. (Charak Samhita Sutrasthan 8/18)<sup>(6)</sup>

Ayurveda, the ancient Indian system of medicine describes certain principles for personal hygiene and health promotion. These principles are described in classical treatises of Ayurveda in their own parlances. The concepts and principles described in classical texts of Ayurveda can be grouped as “*Dinacharya*” (Daily regimens) and a variant of *Dinacharya* called “*Ratricharya*” (Daily regimens especially during night). Both of these collectively enlighten about personal hygiene and health promotion. Ayurveda does not make clear cut distinction between hygiene and health promotion so the principles could be understood with their intent. Though it is difficult to follow a stringent *Dinacharya* in this fast moving life but is highly recommended by Ayurvedic physicians

owing to a number of health benefits accrues to it. *Dinacharya* makes one to lead a healthy and disciplined life. According to the latest studies in the field of medical science, people who stick to the daily routine are more fit than those, who do not have a particular time to perform their everyday activities. It is said that *Dinacharya* reduces the stress level to a great extent. In addition to this, the person's body is purified and detoxified. Therefore, barring a few exceptions like sickness, very old and young age, Ayurvedic *Dinacharya* is recommended for everyone.<sup>(7)</sup>

**Behavior regarding Natural Urges:** One should not sneeze, eat or sleep in prone position. One should not do any work holding natural urges. One should not spit, urinate, and defecate in to breeze, fire, water, sun, moon, *Bramhin*, teachers, on the road sides and public places. (Charak Samhita Sutrasthan 8/21)<sup>(6)</sup>

The explanations given in the above paragraph is very obvious. Releasing natural urges in public and crowded places may lead to occurrence of various diseases depending on the bio-substance released. Sneezing in public and crowded places may lead to the spread of influenza, SARS, PTB etc. Similarly releasing human excreta in public places may lead to development of Acute Diarrheal Diseases. It is needless to mention that the open air defecation practiced in rural areas is the leading cause of diarrheal diseases.

**Sexual Behavior:** One should not insult woman or depend on them or reveal secrets to them or authorize them. One should not indulge in sexual intercourse with menstruating women, suffering from disease, impure, having infection, not good looking, having bad conduct, bad manner, not having skills and not friendly. One should avoid sex with one who is not interested in sex, interested in other person, other's wife and other caste. Sexual

intercourse in any other organ than genitalia is contraindicated. Sexual intercourse should not be done under holy trees, public places, crematorium, slaughter house, in water, in clinics, in home of *Bramhin* (Priest), teachers and temples. Sexual intercourse should not be done in the morning and evening time and in auspicious days; one should not do sexual intercourse while impure, without taking drugs that enhance *shukra* (Aphrodisiacs), without desire, without erection, without taking food or after having heavy meals, in uneven places, under the pressure of urge for urination, when tired, after exercise, fasting, having exhaustion, or in places devoid of privacy. (Charak Samhita Sutrasthan 8/21)<sup>(6)</sup>

Behavioral scientists have studied sexual behavior in many different settings in relation to various health consequences. It has been found that the sexual behaviors, attraction, and identity vary by age, marital or cohabiting status, education, and race and Hispanic origin.<sup>(8)</sup> These behaviors and characteristics are relevant to birth and pregnancy rates, as well as to the incidence of sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), the virus that causes acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS).<sup>(9-11)</sup> The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Atlanta, USA estimates that about 19 million new cases of STIs occur each year.<sup>(10)</sup> About one-half of all STIs occur among persons aged 15–24, and the direct medical cost of these diseases for that age group alone was estimated at \$6.5 billion in the year 2000.<sup>(12)</sup> In 2008, CDC estimated that rates of Chlamydia increased, and the largest numbers of reported cases of Chlamydia and gonorrhea were among teenagers aged 15–19.<sup>(13)</sup>

***Achara Rasayana (Codes of Conduct):*** One should always speak truth; refrain from anger, sexual act and violence. One should be peaceful, avoid exertion, speak sweetly,

practice *Japa* (chanting) and cleanliness. One should be courageous, generous, perform penance, respect god, Brahmin, preceptors and elders. Be away from cruelty and always be kind to all. One should sleep and get up in proper time, take milk and ghee every day, have knowledge about place and time. Should have proper planning with intelligence, not egoistic, have good conduct, be devoid of wrong thoughts, inclined towards philosophy, have belief in god, serve elders, read religious book. Should always be endowed with qualities of rejuvenation. (Charak Samhita Chi. 1/4/30-35)<sup>(6)</sup>

*Achara Rasayana* emphasizes the conduct of an individual in social settings. It reiterates the behavior and conduct of an individual in a social network. Social network is a theoretical construct useful in the social sciences to study relationship between individual, group, organizations, or even entire societies. The term is used to describe a social structure determined by such interactions. Social networks can influence health outcomes in direct and indirect ways, including 1) social influence, 2) social engagement and participation, 3) prevalence of infectious disease and network member mixing, 4) access to material goods and informational resources, and 5) social support.<sup>(14)</sup> This is being used to understand complex problems such as obesity, tobacco use and HIV/AIDS epidemics. Investigation of social networks in HIV/AIDS began with the mapping of relationships between one of the first identified AIDS cases, an airline steward, and a large number of his male sex partners in the early 1980s.<sup>(15)</sup>

***Dharaniya Vega (Suppressible Urges):*** One should control urges of greed, grief, fear, anger, ego, shamelessness, jealousy, excessive attachment and desire for things possessed by others. (Charak Samhita Sutrasthan 7/27)<sup>(6)</sup>

One should avoid speaking harsh words, back biting, lying and using untimely words. (Charak Samhita Sutrasthan 8/28)<sup>(6)</sup>

The action of violence against others, desire for other women and stealing should be avoided. (Charak Samhita Sutrasthan 5/29)<sup>(6)</sup>

Many of the psychological problems such as anxiety, depression and different forms of psychosomatic disorders result due to non-controlling of these *Dharaniya Vegas*.

## CONCLUSION

The disease pattern around the globe is changing very rapidly due to epidemiological and demographic transitions. Communicable diseases are no more a threat to many developed and even developing countries. Non communicable life style disorders are leading the front and many of such morbidities cannot solely be understood by the classical germ theory or epidemiological triad. This is the time when social epidemiology plays a pivotal role contrary to the classical medical or clinical epidemiology. Many of the current and emerging health problems such as HIV/AIDS, road traffic accidents, alcoholism, and cigarette smoking can be addressed by *Sadvrutta, Acharara Rasayana, Dharaniya Vega* as per Ayurvedic principles. This document explored some of the fundamental tenets of social and behavioral health in brief and similar work can be done to unravel some more relevant concepts pertinent to social and behavioral health.

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