

Review on Concept of Potency (*Veerya*) and its diversity in Ayurveda

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Abstract

The present communication details the concept of the Potency in Ayurveda. Potency certifies the applicability of the drug to be used in various conditions of the body both in healthy and unhealthy status. Any drug to act as a medicine essentially should be potent. Potency is an expression of the activity of a drug in terms of the concentration or amount of the drug required to produce a defined effect, whereas clinical efficacy judges the therapeutic effectiveness of the drug. Potency is a good preclinical marker of the therapeutic potential of a drug. Ayurveda mentions a term '*Veerya*' in context of modus operandi of a drug which indicates the 'Potency of the drug'. The review establishes that the concept of *veerya* (potency) in Ayurveda is not just limited to indicate the strength of the drug. The variants in *veerya* namely *mrudu* (slow/dull), *teekshna* (quick/sharp), *guru* (heavy), *laghu* (light), *snigdha* (unctuous), *ruksha* (dry), *Ushna* (hot), *sheeta* (cold) making it as octa potency (*ashtaveerya*) or focusing only on *ushna* (hot) and *sheeta* (cold) making it as the dual potency (*dwividhaveerya*) or even in some contexts considering it as 15 types as per *Acharya Nimi* or even widening the concept of *veerya* (potency) by viewing it responsible for the 19 *karma* (pharmacological activities) as per *Sushruta* opens the diversity or multiplicity in the drug action.

Keywords

Potency, Veerya, Ayurveda, Action, Effectiveness



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INTRODUCTION

Subsistence and Globalization of Ayurveda has been possible only due to a strong core, which is provided through its own fundamental principles. *DravyagunaVijnana* is one of the indispensable subjects in Ayurveda, which has put a limelight to every aspect of the drug actions in the body through a configuration called '*Rasa panchaka*' (the five units of the drug). This includes the various attributes linked with the drug entering the body namely, *Rasa* (taste), *Guna* (attribute), *Vipaka* (final state of transformation), *Veerya* (Potency) and *Prabhava* (specificity in action)¹.

The reason and the capacity of a *dravya* to perform an action is *Veerya* (potency)². It is a property (*karmukashaktipradayakaguna*) in the *dravya* (drug), which makes the drug capable of exhibiting the therapeutic effectiveness in the body³. *Veerya* (potency) is considered to be one among seven *padartha* (matter of priority) in *DravyaGunaVijnana*, namely *Dravya* (substance), *Guna* (attribute), *Rasa* (taste), *Vipaka* (final state of transformation), *Prabhava* (specificity in action) and *Karma* (drug action)⁴.

The present paper aims to collect the information about the view of potency in

Ayurveda and also its diversity which helps in clinical application thus defining the *modus operandi* of the drug.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Etymology (*Nirukti*) of the word *veerya*:

The etymology of the word *veerya* is from "*Veeravikrantaudhatu*". The strength or energy which is performing an activity via drug is *Veerya* (potency) of the drug⁵. The word '*Veerya*' in a noun form also represents manliness, valor, strength, power, energy, heroism, vigor, virility, efficacy^{6,7}.

Etymology of word Potency:

The term *veerya* may be equivalent to the term 'Potency' in modern pharmacology which is a word derived from latin term *Potentia* meaning the strength/force/power.⁸

Characteristics of the *Veerya* (*Veeryalakshana*)

Veerya (potency) is characterized by a *Karma* (drug action)⁹. It is also considered as one of the *guna* (property) in the drug similar to *rasa* (taste), *gurvadiguna* (attributes like heaviness), *vipaka* (final transformative state) and *Prabhava* (specific action)¹⁰. *Karma* (drug action) is a resultant performance of the drug. The property or unit of the drug which

acts as an initiative and potential power for achieving a desired effect in the body is its potency¹¹. Thus *Veerya* does not just stand for any one entity, instead symbolizes the initiating force present in totality of a *dravya* (***karmukashaktipradayakagunatatva***). The term *veerya*(potency) signifies the *shakti* (energy), or *utsaha*(active participation) and the properties like *snigdha*(unctuousness), *ruksha* (dry) etc., possessed by the drug, thus indicating that *veerya* (potency) is a physical as well as biochemical energy in the drug responsible for the action of the drug and its effectiveness in the body. It is also said as essence of the drug which is either depressed after a certain period¹² or is accentuated by certain processes.¹³

Concept of Veerya in Veda

The knowledge about the concept and applications of *rasa* (taste) *guna*(attribute) *veerya* (potency), *Vipaka*(final transformative state) and *prabhava*(specific action), of a *dravya* (substance) was established during the *Veda kala*¹⁴. Even in the vedic period, it was thought that drug acts because of its inherent power. This was termed as *Veerya*(potency)¹⁵.

Concept of Veerya in Samhitha:

The practitioners of Ayurveda in ancient times have tried to analyze the concept of

Veerya and its types in their own way. A detailed discussion by the commentators ensures about its practicability. Following are some points discussed as *Veeryavada*(theories about the concept of potency). The aims and objectives of all the proposed *Veeryavada* is not to create any controversy, but was an attempt made by the scientists of Ayurveda working in the field to decode the concept of *veerya* and project its relation with the drug so that its identity and applicability is clear.

I. Guna Veerya Vada (Theory proposing attributes are potency):

Two schools of thoughts are proposed under *GunaVeeryaVada*(Theory proposing attributes are potency). *Shakti matraVeeryaVada*(Theory proposing Energy is potency) by *AcharyaCharaka* and *PaaribhashikaVeeryaVada*(Theory proposing defined property of the substance is its potency) by *AcharyaSushruta* as well as *AcharyaVagbhata*. *VridhaVagbhata* opines that *Shakti veeryavada*(Theory proposing Energy is potency) is *Shastriya*(theoretical) and the *Paribhashikaveeryavadais Laukika*(practical)¹⁶.

A .Shakti veeryavada (Theory proposing Energy is potency):

In this school, potency is expressed as power. That power which enables action by the drug is the *veerya* of that *dravya*, and this power may be in form of *rasa* (taste), *vipaka* (final transformative state) etc. any among the five units of the *dravya* (drug). Among these factors singly or in combination dominate, become expressive and then be responsible for the drug action. *Utkrishtashaktisampannaguna* (Highly powered qualities) in the drug is considered as *veerya*. To add on, this theory also established one more data termed as *Bahuveeryavadat* that the drug possesses infinite potency and thus multifold actions is performed by a drug when in action. *Acharya Charaka* is supportive to this theory¹⁷. *Acharya Chakrapani* upholds the individuality of the concept of *veerya* (potency) and opines that it is something which is different from *rasa* (taste) *Vipaka* (final transformative state) or the *Prabhava* (specific activity) of a *dravya* (drug). Thus *Shakti rupa* (Form of power) of *veerya* is (potency) supported by *Acharya Chakrapani*¹⁸. As per the variation in the *shakti* (power) of the *dravyaveerya* (drug potency) can be categorized as three grades namely *teekshna* (highly potent /sharp), *Madhya* (medium/moderate) and *Mrudu* (less potent/mild). The grade of power and

energy in the *dravya* decides the posology of the *dravya*¹⁹. Prof. *Dwarakanath* opines that *veerya* (potency) conveys the idea of energy. The energy of a body is its capacity to do a work and total measure of energy is work. Energy may be potential or kinetic²⁰.

B. Paaribhashikaveeryavada (Theory proposing defined property of the substance is its potency):

In this school potency is viewed as those physical properties in the drug which get active and be responsible for the activity in the body leading to therapeutic effectiveness in the drug. *Acharya Sushruta* and *Acharya Vagbhata* support this theory. This school has two opinions about the dominant properties in action. One opinion is named as *Dwividhaveeryavada* (Theory proposing the supremacy of dual qualities-hot and cold) where only *Sheeta* (cold) and *Ushna* (hot) qualities are emphasized as potency and another opinion popular is called *Astavidhaveeryavada* (Theory proposing the supremacy of eight qualities) where *Guru* (heavy), *Laghu* (light), *Snigdha* (unctuous), *Ruksha* (dry), *Mridu* (mild/slow), *Teekshna* (sharp/quick), *Sheeta* (cold), *Ushna* (hot) qualities are emphasized as potency²¹

B.1 Dwividhaveeryavada: (Theory proposing two diverse potencies)

As per the principle of *Agnisomeeyatatva* (Theory establishing the Predominance of Fire and water elements in Universe) even though the Universe is accepted to be *panchabhautika* (made up of the five primordial elements), *Agni* (fire) and *Soma* (water) *tatva* (elements) are considered to be more powerful. *Soma* (water element) has a role in helping in growth and development, and *Agni* (fire element) is the reason for the transformations occurring in it²².

Same principle is applied to the *Purusha* (Man) who is created by the combination of *Sukra* (sperm) with *saumyatatva* (predominant with water element) and *Artava* (Ovum) with *agnyatatva* (predominant with fire element). Similarly *Veerya* (potency) of a *panchabhauthikadravya* (substance formed by five primordial elements) too have a predominance of either fire or water elements and hence will reveal activities of either of the two, fire or water. *Agneyadravya* (Drug with fire predominance is recognized to be possessed with *Ushnaveerya* (hot potency) and *Soumyadravya* (Drug of water predominance) possesses *Sheeta veerya*²³. This principle makes it easy to select the specific type of a *dravya* (drug)

for the specific type of a *Purusha* (man) both in normal and diseased status as after determining *staana* (equilibrium), *vruddi* (increase) and *kshaya* (decrease) of the *dosha* (primary units of the body)²⁴. Substances with cold potency increase body strength, *Kapha*, *Vata* and are heavy for digestion. Substances with hot potency decrease the sperm activities, *Kapha* and *Vata*, increase *Pitta* and are light for digestion.²⁵ Drugs of hot potency can produce *bhrama* (giddiness), *kshut* (thirst); *glani* (bodily exhaustion and fatigue), *sweda* (perspiration), *daha* (burning sensation) and *asupakita* (accelerated reactivity or digestion). Drugs of cold potency, on the other hand, causes *hladana* (cheerfulness and pleasure of mind) *jeevana* (sustains life) *stambhana* (imparts strength, sturdiness and steadiness to the body) and cleanses (*rakta*) blood²⁶

B.2. Astavidhaveeryavada (Theory proposing eight diverse potencies)

*Acharya Charaka*²⁷ and *Acharya Vagbhata*²⁸ mention that during their times, the theory of viewing potency of a drug with eight diversities was also popular namely *Guruveerya* (heavy potency) for the drug composed of *prithvi* (earth element) and *jala* (water element), *Laghuveerya* (light potency) for the drug composed of *agni*, *vayu* and *akasa* (elements of fire, wind and space)

Snigdhaveerya(unctuous potency) for the drug composed of *jala* (water element), *Rukshaveerya*(dry potency) for the drug composed of *vayu* (wind element) *Mriduveerya*(mild/slow potency) for the drug composed of *jala* and *akasha* (elements of water and space) *Teekshnaveerya*(sharp/quick potency) for the drug composed of *agni* (fire); *Sheetaveerya*(cold potency) for the drug composed of *prithvi* and *jala*(elements of earth and water) *Ushnaveerya*(hot potency) for the drug composed of *Agni*(fire element).²⁹

AcharyaSushruta accepts *Picchila*(slimy potency) for the drug composed of *jala*(water elements) and *Vishadaveerya* (potency of clarity) for the drug composed of *prithvi* and *vayu*(elements of earth and wind) ,in place of *Guru* (Heavy) and *Laghuveerya*.(light potency)³⁰. The commentators *Chakarapani* and *Dalhana* have opined that it is because *AcharyaSushruta* has adopted the words *Guru* (heavy) and *Laghu*(light) in context of *Vipaka* (final transformative status). *AcharyaHarana Chandra* feels that statement of *AcharyaSushruta* might be wrongly interpreted by the commentators. He also stated that no literatures have recorded *Picchila*(slimy) and *Vishada*(clarity) as *Veerya*. Definitely

AcharyaSushrutatoo had considered *Guru* (heavy) and *Laghu* (light) as *Veerya*(potency). Dr. P.V. Sharma, bridges the difference of opinion if any by mentioning that the *Picchilaguna* (Sliminess) can perform the action of *guru* (heaviness) and similarly the *Vishadaguna* (clearness) can perform the activities of *laghu*(lightness) in the body. Thus substantiation is done.³¹.

Astaveerya (eight potencies) had a wide popularity among physicians and the activity was illustrated as follows: *Ushnaveerya* pacifies *kapha*, *vata*; aggravates *pitta*, causes-*Dahana*-heat; *Pacana*-digestion of food, assimilation of *dhatu*,(body tissue) healing of *vrana* (wound),*shopha* (inflammatory pathology).*Murchana*-loss of consciousness, *Swedana*-sweat/diaphoresis *Vamana*-emesis, *Virechana*-purgation, *Vilayana*-absorption , *Bhrama*-giddiness, *Trashna*-thirst *Glani*-exhaustion, *Laghuta*-lightness, *Avrashya*- decreases the virility/*Shukradhatu*. *Sheetaveerya* pacifies *pitta*, aggravates *kapha*, *vata*. Causes-*Vishyandana*-stopping the flow, *Sthirakarana*-stabilizing, *Prasadana*- purifying, *Kledana*-moistening, *Jeevana*- life promoting *Stambhana*-causing stasis, *Guru*- heaviness, *Balya*-strengthening, *Snigdhaveerya* pacifies *vata*. Causes-*Snehana*-oleation, *Brahmana*-

bulk increasing, *Santarpana*- health promoting, *Vajeekarana*- increasing the sexual vigour, *Vayastaapana*- prevents aging. *Rukshaveerya* pacifies *kapha* and aggravates *vatadosha*. Causes- *Sangrahana*- accumulation, *Peedana*- pressing effect, *Virukshana*- dryness, *Upalepana*-coating/healing. *Guruveerya* pacifies *vata*. Causes- *Brahmana*- bulk increases, *Upalepana*- anointing, *Laghuveerya* pacifies *kaphadosha*. Causes- *Lekhana*- ematiating. *Mruduveerya* pacifies *pitta dosha*. Causes- *Raktamamsaprasadana*- saturates *rakta/mamsa*; helps in *Susparsha*-softening, *Teekshnaveerya* pacifies *kapha*. Causes- *Sangrahacushana*- constipative, *Avadarana*-tearing, *Sravana*- secretion, *Vishadaveerya* pacifies *kaphadosha*. Causes- *Kledaacushana*-causing dryness *Virukshana*- drying *Uparohana*- promoting healing. *Picchilaveerya* pacifies *vatadosha*. Causes- *Upalepana*-anointing *Purana*- promoting healing, *Brahmana*- bulk promoting, *Samsleshana*- slimy, *Vajeekarana*- promoting sexual vigour.³²

Following are the statements substantiating the view of *astavidhaveeryavada* where, out of twenty physical properties only the eight properties stand up as potency in world of material

medica³³: *Samagragunasarata* (essence): The

eight physical properties if in a drug, they last longer not letting the destruction of their physical form even when they come in contact with the digestive enzymes; *Shaktutkarsha* (powerful): The eight types of potencies are most powerful possessions of the drug; *Vyavahaaramukhyata* (Practicability): The high esteem of eight types of potencies are practically understandable and so clinically implementable; *Bahulata* (abundance) All among the eight type of potencies are capable of performing multiple or abundant activities in the body and thus effectiveness is appreciable; *Upayogita* (Utility): The clinical application of these eight type of potencies of drugs are utilized commonly in practice; *Prabhalata* (empowerment): The eight types of potencies can overpower the *rasa* (taste) etc. other qualities of a drug and show their performance; Eg. if there is *teekshna* (quick/sharp) potency in sweet tasting drug, the usual functions like *upalepa* (making a coating) and *kaphavardhaka* (increase in *kapha*) are not seen because here the sharpness wins over the taste *Madhura rasa yuktaikshurasab* because of *sheetaveerya* supporting *vata* *viddhi* (increase in *vata*) in the body; *Katu rasa yuktapippali* (pungent Piper longum) instead of

increasing the *pitta* because of *mrudusheetaveerya* helping in *pitta* shaman. *Acharya Dalhana* accepts that *veerya* (potency) denotes *Shakti* (power or energy) in the drug which is explainable by using terms like *sheetha –ushna* etc. He accepts the theory of multiple *veerya* enunciated by *Acharya Charaka*. *Dalhana* notes that although there is no third category but *sita* and *ushna* according to the predominance of *Soma* and *Agni* principle, practically there is a scholarly group telling that *Veerya* (potency) can be on the borderline which is termed as *sadharana* representing the *veerya* status as *anushnasheeta* (common/intermediate)³⁴.

b.3. Shadvidha Veeryavada: (Theory proposing six diverse potencies)

Acharya Priyavrat Sharma proposed six potencies of the drug namely *Guru* (heavy), *laghu* (light), *Ushna* (hot), *snigdha* (unctuous) and *ruksha* (dry) which are instrumental in increase and decrease of *dosha*, *Guru* (heavy) is capable of *Bruhmana* (Bulk promoting), *Laghuveerya* for *langhana* (emaciating), *Snigdhaveerya* for *snehana* (oleation), *rookshaveerya* for *rookshana* (drying) *sheetaveerya* for *sthambhana* (coagulation) and *Ushnaveerya* for *svedana* (Sudation)³⁵.

II. Karma veeryavada: (Theory proposing exhibited activity of the substance is its potency):

Acharya Badantha Nagarjuna proposed that action itself is a character of its potency. He has not accepted the *Gunaveeryavada* (Theory proposing attributes are potency). He observes that, if predominant of *rasadi* (five units of drug) or *guna* (physical property) is accepted as *veerya* (potency), in spite of presence of *rasa* (taste) and *guna* (property) in the drug, the action exhibited is different and not related to either taste or the property of the drug. Also, it is observed that though *rasa* (taste) and *guna* (property) are present in a drug, the *karma* (drug activity) may not be performed by the drug; instead when there is absence of *rasa* (taste) and *guna* (property) *karma* (drug activity) is performed -eg. *Mantra*. He believes that drug can perform an activity without having any relation to *rasadi* (five units of drug). Hence the activity exhibited by the drug has to be considered as *veerya* (potency). He has not enumerated the number of *veerya* (potency) with regards to its *karma* (drug activity) but believes *veerya* present with many diversities.³⁶ This theory is supported by *Acharya Nimi*, diversities of *dravyaveerya* (drug potencies) are fifteen in number, based on the drug action with

relation to its basic combination. 1. *Adhobhagahara veerya* (purgation effect) of the drug predominant with water and earth elements; 2. *Urdhwabhaga veerya* (emesis effect) of the drug predominant with fire and wind elements; 3. *Ubhayatobhagaharaveerya* (bidirectional effect where dosha move out both by emesis and purgation) of the drug predominant with elements of earth, fire and wind; 4. *Sangrahaikaveerya* (cumulative effect) of the drug with predominant elements of earth and wind; 5. *Samshamanaveerya* (subsiding effect) of the drug with predominant with elements of wind, water and earth; 6. *Deepanaveerya* (appetizer effect) of the drug predominant with elements of earth and fire; 7. *Jivaneeyaveerya* (reliving effect) of the drug with predominant elements of earth and water. 8. *Pranagnaveerya* (life threatening effect) of a drug with predominant wind and fire; 9. *Madanaveerya* (mind influencing effect) of the drug with elements of wind and fire; 10. *Shitikarana veerya* (chilling effect) of the drug with predominant water element. 11. *Shothakara veerya* (inflammatory effect) of the drug with elements of earth and water; 12. *Shotagna veerya* (anti-inflammatory effect) of the drug with predominant elements of ether and wind; 13. *Pachana veerya* (digestive effect) of the drug with predominant elements of fire; 14. *Darana veerya* (stabilizing effect) of the drug with predominance of wind and fire elements.; 15. *Ropanaveerya* (healing effect) of a

drug with predominant elements of earth, water, wind.³⁷

Veerya (potency) with 19 diversities in form of actions:

Aushadhakarmukatha of the *dravya*, in all circumstances is because of the *veerya* only .eg---*vamana* (emesis), *virechana* (purgation) *ubhayabhagahara* (birectional movement of vitiated dosha) *karma*, *samshodhana* (purification), *samshamana* (pacification), *agnideepana* (appetizer) *sangrahana* (cumulative), *peedan* (pressing effect), *lekhana* (scraping effect) *brumhana* (bulk promoting effect), *Rasayana* (rejuvenating effect), *vajeekarana* (increase of libido), *swayathukara* (inflammatory effect), *swayathuvilayana* (anti-inflammatory effect), *dahana* (burning effect), *maadana* (confused and influencing brain) *darana* (stabilizing), *pranaghna* (life threatening), *vishaprashamana* (pacification of toxicity) etc. Also *Veerya* (potency) due to its power can dominate over *Rasa* (taste), *Guna* (property) etc factors in the *dravya* (drug), and thus exhibit its action.³⁸

III. *Dravyaveeryavada*: (Theory proposing the substance in its form is its potency):

Most of the modern scholars of the field like Dr. Yadavaji Trikamji Acharya believe that *dravyautkrishtaamsha* (Active principle) is

veerya (potency) and that is responsible for performance of an action³⁹. Acharya Priyavrata Sharma considers active principle as a seat of potency. He believes that the potency in active principle is transferred during the different procedures in pharmaceuticals. The process of transfer of the potency is called *veeryasankranthi* (transference of power).⁴⁰ As per Shivadasa Sen the *dravya* is *panchabhautic* and *dravyagatasaratishayarupaamsha* (the essence) is called as *veerya*⁴¹. He also considers *Veerya* (potency) may be *Sahaja* (natural form) or *Kritrima* (artificial form). Examples of *Guduci* (*Tinosporacordifolia*) and *Guduci Satwa* (concentrate), *Palasa* (*Butea monosperma*) and its *Kshara* (alkali) etc can be considered where the source of drug is transformed to a new form which is acquired by processing⁴². Also it is observed that whatever process is undertaken for the drug, like *kashaya* (decoction), *gritha* (ghee), *taila* (oil) etc, all those have a definite expiry time mentioned in the classics after which it loses its potency and does not work up to the expectation. Selectivity of the part of the drug also is an important issue as the selected part alone will contain maximum potency

for specific karma (action). Eg., *Dashamoola* (ten roots), *Triphala* (three fruits), *Ashokatwak* (Bark of *Saraca asoka*) etc.⁴³

DISCUSSION

Whatever the substances do, whether by *dravya Prabhava* (virtue of their nature) or *gunaprabhavat* (by virtue of their qualities) or by *Dravya-Gunaprabhavat* (by virtue of their substantive and qualitative nature) in any given time, in any given place (system or organ), having administered in a given mode, with a given result in view is their action, whereby they act is the potency, wherein they act is the place, when they act is the time, how they act is the mode, what they achieve is the result⁴⁴. There cannot be any action in the body in absence of *veerya* of the drug. The effectiveness of the drug may be wholesome or unwholesome, but the reason behind is potency of the drug. The documentation in literature since the times of Veda till date about the specificity of the time of collection of the herbs, use of specific parts, the time of administration, different types of processing, preservation techniques, use of different utensils for storage⁴⁵ preparation of different extracts, isolation of the active principles etc., all

indicates the recognition of increased potency of the drug.

CONCLUSION

In spite of complimentary inclination of scholars of analyzing potency varies either in form of Guna(drug property), Karma(drug activity) or as dravya(drug) itself, they have a definite understanding that potency irrespective of its form is essential to reach the target in the body. To achieve the result in form of karma (therapeutic action), the very essential need is that the drug should be potent and thus the relation between the Veerya (potency) and Karma (activity) of the drug is established. Potency though diverse, is a deciding factor to achieve the drug action.

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