



Review Article

AGNIKARMA - UNDERSTANDING THE PROCESS FROM PAST TO THE PRESENT

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ABSTRACT

Throughout human history, medical practices have evolved and adapted to the prevailing knowledge, culture, and technology of their time. One such ancient medical technique that holds a significant place in history is "*Agnikarma*," a fire-based therapeutic intervention. Originating in civilizations such as India, China, Greece, and Egypt, *Agnikarma*'s evolution and significance are explored within their cultural and medical contexts. Its origins are traced to ancient medical texts, including the "*Sushruta Samhita*" and the "*Huangdi Neijing*," which document its application in Ayurvedic and Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), respectively. *Agnikarma*'s role in treating a wide array of conditions, from pain relief to chronic ailments, is examined, reflecting its diverse applications across cultures. *Agnikarma* involves the application of heat to specific points on the body using a variety of instruments, such as metal rods, needles, and cow dung cakes. By stimulating blood circulation and promoting the body's natural healing process, *Agnikarma* has been used to address conditions ranging from musculoskeletal pain to skin disorders. An attempt is made using this article to review how the process started from being worshipped like God to a therapeutic procedure, the step-by-step development. This review article explores the historical origins and contemporary use of *Agnikarma* therapy. The article also discusses the future directions for the research and development of this ancient healing technique. In essence, this historical review illuminates *Agnikarma*'s cultural significance, medical impact, and role in shaping the trajectory of medical practices through time.

INTRODUCTION

Agnikarma is a very popular para-surgical mode of treatment for a variety of specific ailments. Indians have been familiar with it since the prehistoric age. Ayurvedic writings contain a substantial amount of knowledge on this crucial procedure. However, it is not as widely used as it ought to be as a standard therapeutic intervention today. The "*Sushruta Samhita*," the *Shalya Tantra*'s most authentic literature, contains a full chapter titled "*Agni Karmavidhimadhyaya*" to detail many elements of *Agni Karma*. This emphasizes the significance of thermal stimulus and cauterization within the *Shalya Tantra* category of para-surgical techniques.

Agnikarma Meaning

The combination of two words, '*Agni*' and '*Karma*' results in the term i.e., "*Agni Karma*," which means, the *Karma* accomplished by the application of *Agni* (heat). *Agni Karma* is the use of *Agni*, either directly or indirectly, to treat a patient's illness or discomfort using a variety of instruments or materials. *Dalhana*, the commentator of *Sushruta Samhita* has described *Agni Karma* as:^[1]

1. "*Agni Krita Karma*"- means, the *Karma*/action done by *Agni* i.e.,- direct application of *Agni*.
2. "*Agni Sambandhi Karma*" means, the *Karma* or action related to *Agni* i.e., indirect application of *Agni*.

The specific character of both these statements is the presence of *Agni*.

Agnikarma- The Historical Aspect

It is being attempted to track down all references to *Agni Karma* that have been made up to this point, starting with the Vedic era. The brief

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introduction of the historical aspect has been separated into three sections viz.

- i) Vedic period
- ii) *Samhita* period
- iii) *Samgraha* period

Vedic period

When we investigate the historical context of *Agni Karma*, we discover that the *Vedas* include a significant amount of writing on the subject. This makes it clear that *Agni Karma* existed in pre-vedic civilization.

Rigveda^[2]

Application of *Agni* is recommended in *Rigveda* for the treatment of many gynecological and obstetrical diseases. The vaginal and uterine disorders were advised to receive specific treatment from *Agni*, as well as heated materials.

The Rig Vedic scriptures claim that the *Agni* is capable of eliminating parasites that have invaded women's uterus and vagina while also protecting the foetus. This refers to the notion of using *Agni Karma* as a disinfectant.

Agnikarma is also mentioned to be useful in the management of *Durnama (Arsha)* (haemorrhoids).

Samaveda^[3]

Samaveda contains a detailed description of *Agni*, as evidenced by the designation of a separate chapter as "*Agnaeya Kanda*". This *Veda* gives *Agni* unique names like *Parmeshwar*, *Aatma*, *Vaishwanar*, etc. *Agni* is considered the life that exists in all creatures of the universe and spreads/proliferates throughout the region.

Yajurveda^[4]

Yajurveda emphasized the role of *Agni* in *Sheeta* (cold) treatments. According to the evidence, using *Agni* is advantageous in cases of *Sheeta* and disorders caused by *Sheeta*. In the past, *Svedana Karma* was applied using hot cotton, sand, bricks, and other materials, and used in patients with *Sheeta*-induced diseases. It is a very scientific method, with the underlying theory being that hot objects release infrared rays, such as the sun, coal, or electric fire, and has shown to have a positive impact on pain treatment.

Atharvaveda^[5]

In *Atharvaveda*, *Agni* is acknowledged as God, digestion, and *Bheshaja* in reference to *Krimi*. *Agni* has been named as God and a remedy for illness in the *Atharvaveda*. It is evident from the verses that *Agni* was employed to defend the body against encroaching microbes. The sterilization by the heating procedure used nowadays can likewise be viewed in terms of the aforementioned *Atharva* Vedic concept. To get rid of infections, the affected area's skin is cauterized, which is a successful remedy. All of these techniques for using

Agni as a therapeutic tool to aid in medical practice are just old ideas. The *Atharvaveda* refers to it as "*Rakshoha Agni*."

Samhita Period

According to *Samhita Kala*, *Agni's* balance state aids in the preservation of health, *Bala*, *Varna*, *Oja*, *Utsaha*, *Prabha*, and metabolism. *Agni's* vitiation is *Roga*, and *Agni's* annihilation is death; for these reasons, it is regarded as the foundation or source of creation.

References related to Agni

In classics of Ayurveda, the word *Agni* is used extensively for different purposes:

1. In creation theory, it is one of the five basic elements of "*Pancha Mahabhoota*".
2. *Agni* was prayed before going to be a teacher or a student and hard norms were fixed for both i.e., (for teacher and students as well) in the evidence of *Agni*.
3. In pre-operative arrangements, *Acharya Sushruta* has also mentioned arranging *Agni* in the operation theatre along with other types of equipment and essential materials.
4. *Acharya Sushruta* has explained the properties of *Pitta* same as that of *Agni*.
5. *Agni* is predominant in *Satva* and *Raja*.
6. *Tejas* is mentioned as one of *Ahankara*.
7. *Agni* is also mentioned among *Nava Karana Dravya*.
8. *Agni* is mentioned among *Pancha Gyanendriya Dravya*.
9. *Agni* is described as a causative factor for *Agantuja-Vrana*.
10. Fumigation with *Agni* removes all the *Rakshasas*, *Bhootas* and *Pishachas*.

Sushruta Samhita

Maharshi Sushruta mentioned *Agni Karma* as a para-surgical procedure and it is superior to all para-surgical procedures. Many references are available in *Sushruta Samhita* regarding *Agni Karma* are-

1. In *yantra vidhi adhyaya* as an *Upayantra (Su.Su. 7/16)*^[6].
2. A detailed *Agni Karma vidhi Adhyaya* described in *(Su.Su. 12)*^[7].
3. As *Shalyaniraharana in Pranashtha Shalya Vigyaniya Adhyaya* for extraction of *Laksha Shalya in Kantha (throat) (Su. Su. 27/14)*^[8].
4. In *Sira, Snayu, Sandhi* and *Asthi Vata Prakopa Chikitsa. (Su. Chi. 4/8)*^[9].
5. In *Arsha roga chikitsa (Su. Chi. 6/3)*^[10].
6. In *Ashmari Chikitsa*, if the *Vrana* (wound) created after *Ashmari Bhedana* is not healed properly in 7 days and oozing of urine from the wound is seen with altered micturition, then *Agnikarma* was preferred. *(Su. Chi. 7/35)*^[11]

7. In *Bhagandara chikitsa*, for *Vrana* management. While treating *Paristravi Bhagandara* after excision of the fistulous tract, *Agnikarma* should be done. (Su. Chi. 8/11, 23-24).^[12]
 8. In *Granthi, Apachi & Arbuda chikitsa*, for treatment of growths, *Medoja Granthi, Amamraja Granthi (Granthi not on Marma)*, after *Krimi Chilitsa* in *Arbuda* for *Lekhana Karma*. (Su.Chi.18/14, 17,24,39)^[13]
 9. In *Vradhi, Upadansh, Shlipada chikitsa*, for treatment of inguinal hernia using *Agnikarma* with *Ardha Chandrakara Shalaka*, for treatment of *Tridoshaja Upadamsha*, and for *Vataja Shlipada* treatment. (Su.Chi. 19/21-22,50-51,53-54).^[14]
 10. In *Kshudra roga* for wound healing in *Chipp Roga* using *Agni Sidhh Tailam*, for treatment of *Kadara Roga* (corn), and for *Jatamani* (congenital mole), *Mashaka* (elevated mole) and *Tilkalaka* (non-elevated mole) treatment. (Su.Chi. 20/10,23, 32).^[15]
 11. In *Mukha roga chikitsa* for treatment of *Medoja Austha Roga, Adhika Danta* (extra tooth), *Danta Nadi*, and *Krimi Danta*. (Su. Chi. 22/9,23,27,40).^[16]
 12. In reference to *Sarpadashtavisha chikitsa* (Su. Kalp. 5/5).^[17]
 13. In reference to *Mushikavisha chikitsa* (Su. Kalp. 7/33).^[18]
 14. In reference to *Unmatta shvavidamshtavisha chikitsa* (Su. Kalp.7/50).^[19]
 15. In *Sushruta Uttartantra* in *Lagan rog Chikitsa* (Su. Utt.14/5).^[20]
 16. In context of *Agropahareniya*, as protector of *Jihwa* (Su.Su.5/24).^[21]
 17. As *Anushastra* (Su.Su.8/15).^[22]
 18. As one of 60 *Upkrama* of *Vrana* (Su.Chi. 1/8).^[23]
- Charak Samhita**
- Acharya Charak explained the *Agni Karma* as follows:
1. *Agnikarma Chikitsa* in reference to *Shastra Pranidhana* (Ch. Su. 11/55).^[24]
 2. Acharya Charak also explained *Agni Karma Chikitsa* in *Dwivraniya Adhyaya chikitsa* as a treatment of *Vrana* (Ch. Chi. 25/101-103).^[25]
 3. In *Charak Samhita* in the context of *Vidhishonita Adhayaya* for treatment of *Sanyasa Roga* for *Ashulaabhkari Chikitsa* (Ch. Su. 24/46).^[26]
 4. In *Charak Samhita* in the context of *Vividhasitapitya Adhyaay* for *Mansaj Roga Chikitsa* (Ch. Su.28/26).^[27]
 5. In the context of *Gulma chikitsa* in the reference of *Kaphaja Gulma Chikitsa* (Ch. Chi. 5/55, 61,62,163,186).^[28]
 6. In the context of *Shvayathu chikitsa* in the reference of *Granthi Rog* and *Bhagandar Chikitsa* (Ch. Chi. 12/82,97).^[29]
7. In *Udara Chikitsa* in reference to *Pleehodara* and *Yokritodara chikitsa* (Ch. Chi. 13/86).^[30]
 8. In *Arsha Chikitsa* in reference to *Arshashastra Karma, Kshara Karma, and Agni Karma*. (Ch. Chi. 14/33).^[31]
 9. In *Visarpa Chikitsa* in reference to *Granthi Visarpa Chikitsa* (Ch. Chi. 21/132).^[32]
 10. In the context of *Visha Vega Chikitsa* (Ch. Chi. 23/45).^[33]
 11. In *Vatayadhi chikitsa* in reference to *Gridharasi rog chikitsa* (Ch. Chi. 28/101).^[34]
 12. In *Siddhithana* in the context of *Trimarmiya chikitsa* in the reference to *Ardhavybhedhaka Roga Chikitsa*. (Ch. Si. 9/78).^[35]
- Samgraha Period**
- Ashtanga Samgraha** ^[36]
- Ashtanga Samgraha* dedicated a whole chapter to *Agnikarma*. *Sutra Sthana* chapter number 40 deals with *Agni Karma Vidhi*, as well as numerous other diseases in which *Agnikarma* is advised.
- Ashtanga Hridaya** ^[37]
- Sutra Sthana* chapter number 30 deals with *Agni Karma Vidhi*.
- Harita Samhita**
- Agni Karma* is indicated as an important type of treatment among the six types of treatment referring to it as *Saro Bhawati Sarvatah* i.e., everywhere used treatment as a whole. (H.S. 1/2/7-8).^[38]
- In *Arsha Chikitsa*. (H.S. 3/11/99-100).^[39]
- Yog Ratnakara**
- In the context of *Vata Vyadhi, Yogaratnakara* has explained the *Agni Karma* regarding the disease *Gridhrasi* by doing *Agnikarma* at the little finger of the foot in *Vata Vyadhi Nidana* in *Poorvardha*.^[40]
- Chakradatta**
- In the context of *Vata-vyadhi, Chakradatta* has explained the *Agni-Karma* regarding the disease *Gridhrasi*. (*Chakradatta Vatavyadhi Chikitsa* 22/51-54).^[41]
- Acharya Sharangadhara, *Gadanigraha Vangasena*, and *Bhava Prakasha* also mentioned *Agni Karma* in the management of various diseases.
- Indus Valley Civilization**
- Archaeological evidence indicates the use of heated stones for healing purposes in the Indus Valley Civilization (3300–1300 BCE) of ancient India. These stones are believed to have inspired the development of the *Agnikarma* technique.
- Buddhist Period**
- The Buddhist period in India (500 BCE-500 CE) saw the development of the *Agnikarma* technique as it is known today. The technique gained widespread acceptance as a form of empirical medicine that was

practiced by physicians across the Indian subcontinent.

Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM)

In ancient China, *Agnikarma* was practiced as part of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) and was known as "Jiu" or "Cauterization." Chinese medical texts, such as the "Huangdi Neijing" (Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon), documented the use of heated needles to treat various conditions by stimulating energy flow along meridians. In TCM, cauterization was used to treat pain, skin disorders, and various internal diseases by influencing the flow of Qi (vital energy). The technique was also used in wound management to prevent infection and promote healing. In China, the concept of Yin and Yang and the flow of Qi were central to TCM, and *Agnikarma* was seen as a way to influence these energies.

In ancient Greece and Egypt, fire-based therapies were also prevalent. Greek physician Hippocrates mentioned the use of cautery to treat certain diseases, and the ancient Egyptian medical text "Ebers Papyrus" documented the application of heat to treat ailments.

Agnikarma or *Tau-Dam*

Tau-dam is basically a traditional Himalayan therapy practiced by the rural Himalayan people for liver troubles, stomach troubles, backache, etc. This therapy was also practiced by the ancient people and is also mentioned in Ayurveda as *Agnikarma*. He mentions that in other parts of India like Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, and Gujarat also this therapy is used for stomach, liver troubles, *Guda Bhramsha*, and abdomen pain.

Tau therapy is generally practiced by the older people of the village and is compulsory for 6-months to 1-year-old children. A 45-60cm long iron rod is called the *Tau*, which is sharply curved at one end and has one or two holes depending upon the disease. In this therapy, the *Tau* device is placed on a burning fire till it gets red-hot. Older people touch this red-hot *Tau* on the affected skin for only a few seconds. And after branding it, they massage the affected area with mustard or olive oil. In the *Dam* technique, fresh seeds of *Terminalia chebula* or *Anaphalis araneosa* are burned on fire and touched on the required part of the body for only a few seconds. After this, the effective area is massaged with mustard or olive oil like *Tau*.

Agni Karma in Present Era

In one way or another, modern doctors also practice *Agni Karma*. All of these techniques fall under the category of cauterization processes.

- Obstetricians and surgeons frequently use cauterization to check bleeding.
- ENT specialists use cautery for the cauterization of nasal polyps.

- Monopolar and bipolar cautery probes are available in the market and are extensively used in various surgeries.

CONCLUSION

Agnikarma is a traditional healing technique that has withstood the test of time, and its efficacy and safety have been proven through generations of use. Although there is a need for more research into its mechanisms of action, *Agnikarma* therapy is being increasingly recognized as a valuable form of medicine that can complement conventional treatments. Thus, it can be said that *Agni Karma* therapy has been used as a form of treatment in some form or another throughout history. Although the development of this *Agni Karma* treatment was halted and medical research was also impacted by changes in social patterns and religious beliefs. Few details about this therapeutic approach were provided by authors, commentators, and researchers.

The majority of scientists, researchers, and educated medical professionals are currently working to reconstruct this beneficial and successful form of treatment. From the information above, it can be concluded that *Agni Karma*, an ancient form of medicine, is still significant today. It also has significant efficacy for the individuals receiving this medication today.

Agnikarma stands as a testament to the ingenuity and resourcefulness of ancient civilizations in their pursuit of medical solutions. It reflects the symbiotic relationship between culture, philosophy, and medicine. While *Agnikarma's* usage has faded with time, its historical significance and impact on the development of medical practices cannot be overlooked. It serves as a reminder of the ever-evolving nature of medicine and the continuous quest to alleviate human suffering.

Future Directions: With the growing interest in alternative medicine worldwide, *Agnikarma* therapy has the potential to become a widely used form of treatment for various health conditions. It is essential to carry out more research and development to create a standardized protocol for administering *Agnikarma* therapy, to develop more sophisticated instruments, and to integrate the technique into the modern healthcare system.

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