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Review Article

GARBHA POSHANA THROUGH *NABHI NADI* IN AYURVEDA: A CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS AND CORRELATION WITH PLACENTO-FOETAL CIRCULATION

Anjelina Hansdak[1]*, Madhu Verma[2]

*[1]PG Scholar, [2]Professor, Department of Rachna Sharir, Govt. Ayurvedic College & Hospital, Patna, Bihar, India.

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ABSTRACT

Garbha Poshana, referring to the nourishment and sustenance of the developing foetus, is a fundamental concept of Ayurvedic *Garbha Sharira*. The classical Ayurvedic *Samhitas* described the dependence of the developing *Garbha* on maternal nourishment and explain the role of *Apara* and *Nabhi Nadi* in maintaining foetal growth and development. *Nabhi Nadi* is described as an important connecting pathway through which the nourishing essence derived from the mother reaches the developing *Garbha*. *Apara* is also described in relation to foetal nourishment and the materno–foetal relationship. The present conceptual study explores the Ayurvedic understanding of *Garbha Poshana* through *Nabhi Nadi* and correlates it with the contemporary anatomical and physiological mechanisms of placento–foetal circulation. Classical descriptions related to *Garbha*, *Apara*, *Nabhi Nadi*, *Rasa* and maternal nourishment are examined and interpreted in the light of modern placental physiology. In contemporary science, the placenta serves as the principal interface for materno–foetal exchange, facilitating the transfer of oxygen, nutrients and other essential substances while removing foetal metabolic products. The umbilical cord and its vessels establish vascular continuity between the foetus and placenta, thereby supporting foetal circulation and nourishment. A functional correlation may consequently be considered between *Apara* and the placenta and between *Nabhi Nadi* and the umbilical connection. Although direct anatomical equivalence cannot be established, the comparative perspective demonstrates a meaningful functional convergence concerning foetal nourishment, materno–foetal exchange and foetal development. This integrative interpretation may contribute to a deeper understanding of *Garbha Poshana* within Ayurvedic embryology while retaining the distinctive conceptual framework of Ayurveda.

INTRODUCTION

Ayurveda treats the development of the *Garbha* (embryo and foetus) as a continuous process in which maternal and foetal physiology are closely joined. In *Garbhavakranti*, the classical description of conception and intrauterine development, the formation of the foetus is traced to the union of *Shukra*, *Shonita* and *Atma*, acting through *Prakriti* and *Mahabhutas*, and sustained by *Ahara Rasa* from the mother. Within this framework, *Garbha Poshana*, the nourishment of the developing *Garbha* is a central concern.

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The classics hold that the fetus has no independent means of feeding itself. It depends wholly on the mother's nutritional resources and these reach it through defined routes.

Classical descriptions of this maternal dependence name two structures:

- *Apara* and
- *Garbha Nabhi Nadi*

Sushruta describes the *Garbha Nabhi Nadi* as connected with the maternal *Rasavaha Nadi* and as carrying the essence of maternal nourishment to the foetus.[1] Contemporary authors have interpreted these structures as the placenta and the umbilical cord respectively.[2,3] The correlation is intuitively appealing, but it needs careful and explicit analysis. The classics describe function and relationship in the language of *Dosha*, *Dhatu* and *Srotas*. Modern anatomy and physiology describe the same events in terms of

vascular architecture, diffusion gradients and membrane transporters. A responsible correlation must respect both vocabularies.

Dalhana's commentary preserves a significant quotation from *Acharya Bhoja*. It states that the developing Garbha obstructs the *Rasavaha* and *Raktavaha Srotas* of the mother, and that the *Jarayu* (*Apara*) and the *Rasa*-related *Nadi* arise from this nutritive material:

गर्भो रुणद्धि स्रोतांसि रसरक्तवहानि वै।

रक्ताज्जरायुर्भवति नाडी चैव रसात्मिका ॥ Su. Sha.3/31,32

Bhoja further indicates that the *Nabhi Nadi* reaches the *Garbha* and supports its nourishment and maintenance. The verse links four ideas: *Rasa*, *Nadi*, *Apara* and foetal nourishment. It is therefore an important textual anchor for the Ayurvedic concept of the materno–foetal nutritional relationship.[4] The same commentarial tradition connects the *Kedari–Kulya Nyaya*, the analogy of a field watered by irrigation channels, with the arrangement of channels that nourish the foetus. This explicit connection between the analogy and the vascular arrangement of the *Apara* makes the *Bhoja–Dalhana* passage particularly valuable for the present study.

The present article has three aims. It examines the concept of *Garbha Poshana* through the *Nabhi Nadi* as described in the Ayurvedic literature. It analyses the *Kedari–Kulya Nyaya* as a conceptual model of channel-mediated nourishment. And it explores the functional correlation of these ideas with modern placento–foetal circulation, while stating clearly the limits of such a correlation.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study is a conceptual and literary review. Four groups of sources were consulted:

1. Classical Ayurvedic *Samhitas* and commentaries dealing with *Garbha*, *Garbhaavakranti*, *Apara*, *Nabhi Nadi*, *Garbha Poshana* and the *Kedari–Kulya Nyaya*, including the *Bhoja* quotation preserved in *Dalhana's* commentary.
2. Published Ayurveda research articles that interpret these concepts.
3. Previous academic work cited in that related literature.
4. Contemporary peer-reviewed studies on placental physiology, umbilical circulation and materno–foetal exchange.

The material was read critically. Classical statements were first understood within their own theoretical framework, including the meaning of terms such as *Rasa*, *Nadi* and *Srotas* in context. They were then compared with modern descriptions of placental exchange and umbilical circulation. The comparison was kept at the level of function and relationship. No claim of strict anatomical identity was sought. Where classical and modern descriptions differ in scope or terminology, the difference is stated rather than smoothed over.

RESULTS

Ayurvedic perspective on foetal nourishment

The classics present foetal nourishment as entirely dependent on the mother. The *Garbha Nabhi Nadi* is associated with the transmission of maternal *Ahara Rasa* toward the developing *Garbha*.[5] *Ahara Rasa* is the first product of digestion and metabolism and the basic nutritive fluid of the body. It is the same substance that, in the mother, nourishes her own *Dhatus* and, in a lactating woman, is partly directed to the breasts as *Stanya*.

The literature also describes a developmental sequence in nourishment. In the earliest stage, before a stable placental connection exists, the embryo is nourished by *Upasneha* and *Upasweda*. These terms are generally understood as a form of direct permeation or percolation of nutritive material from the surrounding maternal environment. As development proceeds and the *Apara* forms, nourishment is then said to occur through the *Garbha Nabhi Nadi.* Related conceptual studies likewise identify the *Apara* and the *Nabhi Nadi* as structures associated with foetal nourishment. [6]

The sequence is of considerable interest. It recognizes that the means of nourishment change with the stage of development, which is a sophisticated idea for a classical text. It is consistent with the modern observation that early embryonic nutrition is histiotrophic, relying on secretions of the uterine glands and the surrounding environment. A true haemotrophic circulation is established only once the placental circulation matures. The correspondence between *Upasneha–Upasweda* and early histiotrophic nutrition is suggestive, but it should be treated as an interpretive parallel and not a proven equivalence.

The *Bhoja* quotation and the origin of *Apara* and *Nadi*

Bhoja's verse supplies a distinctive account of origin. The *Garbha* is said to obstruct the *Rasavaha* and *Raktavaha Srotas* of the mother. From the blood (*Rakta*) the Jarayu arises, and the *Nadi* that arises is *Rasatmika*, meaning it is of the nature of *Rasa*. Two points follow:

- The *Apara* is associated with *Rakta*, which matches its vascular character.
- The *Nadi* is associated with *Rasa*, which matches its role as a conduit of nutrition.

The verse thus assigns the two structures complementary relationships to the maternal nutritive channels. The *Apara* is the organ related to the blood supply. The *Nabhi Nadi* is the conduit through which nutritive *Rasa* is carried onward to the *Garbha*.

Modern evidence on the placento–foetal interface

Modern evidence demonstrates that the placenta is a specialized materno–foetal interface where oxygen, nutrients and metabolic products are exchanged. Placental nutrient supply depends on three factors: uterine and umbilical blood flow, the properties of the exchange barrier, and the activity of transporter mechanisms. Foetal blood reaches the placenta through the umbilical arteries and returns through the umbilical vein after exchange.[7]

Several features of this arrangement deserve emphasis. Maternal blood enters the intervillous space through remodelled uterine spiral arteries and bathes the placental villi. Within each villus, foetal capillaries lie close to the surface. The separation between maternal and foetal blood is formed by the syncytiotrophoblast and the foetal endothelium. Oxygen and carbon dioxide cross largely by diffusion. Glucose crosses by facilitated transport, and amino acids and many other nutrients cross by specific carrier systems. Waste products of foetal metabolism travel in the reverse direction. The umbilical cord, with two arteries and one vein embedded in a protective connective tissue matrix, is the conduit joining the foetal circulation to the placenta.

The *Kedari–Kulya Nyaya*

The mechanism of *Garbha Poshana* is explained in the classics through the analogy of *Kedari–Kulya Nyaya*. *Vagbhata* states that the *Garbha* is nourished by the *Nadi* in the same manner that a field (*Kedara*) is nourished by water flowing through irrigation channels (*Kulya*):

गर्भं कुल्येव केदारं नाडी प्रीणाति तर्पिता ॥ Su.Sha.3/31,32

In the context of foetal nourishment, the maternal nutritive component is understood to reach the developing *Garbha* through the *Nabhi Nadi*. This is analogous to water being distributed from a principal channel into an agricultural field.[8] Three elements of the analogy can be identified:

- The source- Reservoir or principal stream corresponds to maternal *Rasa*.
- The channel- *Kulya* corresponds to the *Nadi*.
- The recipient- *Kedara*, the field, corresponds to the *Garbha*.

Contemporary literature has interpreted this analogy in relation to the vascular arrangement of the placenta and the umbilical circulation. The branching vascular network supplying the placental villi provides a functional illustration of channel-based distribution. Such a comparison, however, remains conceptual and not a direct anatomical equivalence.[9]

DISCUSSION

Correlation of *Apara* and *Garbha Nabhi Nadi* with modern structures.

A functional correlation can be proposed between the *Apara* and the placenta and between the *Garbha Nabhi Nadi* and the umbilical connection. The interpretation is supported by Ayurvedic conceptual literature and by contemporary placental physiology. In both traditions the *Apara* is the organ that mediates between maternal supply and foetal need and the *Nadi* is the conduit connecting it to the foetus.

Ayurvedic descriptions operate within a distinct theoretical framework. However, the term *Nadi* in the classics is used for tubular or conduit-like structures in a general sense. It is not a technical equivalent of "artery" or "vein". *Rasa* is not simply "plasma" or "nutrients". It is a functional category that includes nutritive and fluid aspects of the body. The correlations proposed here should therefore be regarded as functional or conceptual and not as definitive anatomical equivalences. The strength of the comparison lies in the shared logic of the system: a maternal source and a specialised interface, a conduit and a dependent recipient.[10]

The *Bhoja–Dalhana* perspective

Bhoja emphasises the relationship of the developing *Garbha* with the maternal *Rasavaha* and *Raktavaha* pathways, and associates the formation of the *Apara* and the *Nadi* with these nutritive components. The statement that the *Garbha* obstructs these *Srotas* can be read as an observation of the profound redirection of maternal nutritive and vascular resources toward the pregnancy. Modern physiology describes a comparable redirection. Maternal blood volume expands considerably during pregnancy; uterine blood flow rises many fold and maternal metabolism shifts to favour nutrient availability to the foetus. These are not claims that the classical authors knew of these mechanisms. They show that the underlying intuition, that pregnancy reorganises the mother's nutritive channels around the needs of the foetus is consistent with modern findings.

Dalhana's decision to preserve and quote *Bhoja* is also significant. It shows that the *Kedari–Kulya* analogy and the vascular-nutritive interpretation of the *Apara* were treated as meaningful within the commentarial tradition itself, and not added later by modern interpreters.

The *Kedari–Kulya Nyaya* as a conceptual model

Vagbhata, through the *Kedari–Kulya Nyaya*, explains the distribution of nourishment through channels, using the irrigation of a field as an analogy.[11] A *Nyaya* in Indian intellectual tradition is a maxim or illustrative example that makes an abstract process intelligible by reference to a familiar one. Its function is explanatory and not anatomical.

The analogy has real explanatory power when set beside modern placental physiology. Water in an irrigation system is not delivered at one point. It

passes from a main channel into progressively smaller channels and reaches the whole field. The placental vascular tree behaves similarly: umbilical vessels divide repeatedly within the chorionic plate and villous stems, ending in terminal villi, which provide a very large surface for exchange. The analogy also captures the idea that the supply depends on the channel being open and adequate. A blocked or narrowed irrigation channel leaves the field poorly watered, just as impaired placental or umbilical flow compromises foetal supply.

The analogy has limits that should be recognised. Irrigation water flows one way, whereas placental circulation is bidirectional in its exchange: nutrients and oxygen pass to the foetus while carbon dioxide and metabolic wastes pass back. The field is also passive, while the foetus actively influences its own supply, for example through endocrine signalling and by regulating blood flow. The placenta itself is not a passive channel. It is metabolically active, synthesises hormones and regulates transport. The *Kedari–Kulya Nyaya* is therefore best used as a model for distribution through channels, and not as a complete description of placental function.

Modern evidence on transport and foetal growth

Modern studies demonstrate that placental and umbilical vascular networks regulate the delivery of oxygen and nutrients and the removal of foetal metabolic products.[12] Evidence also indicates that placental transport capacity is closely associated with foetal growth and may be altered in foetal-growth-restricted pregnancies. This finding bears on the Ayurvedic model. If nourishment depends on a functioning channel, then disturbance of the channel should be reflected in foetal development.

This relationship is consistent with a central Ayurvedic theme: the quality of foetal growth depends on the adequacy of maternal *Rasa* and on the patency of the pathway by which it travels. It also suggests why classical texts give so much attention to maternal diet and regimen in pregnancy. In the Ayurvedic view, the mother's *Ahara* and *Vihara* determine the nourishment available to the *Garbha* through the *Nabhi Nadi*. Modern research on maternal nutrition and foetal growth supports the general importance of this idea, although the mechanisms are described in a different language.

Value of an integrative reading

Placing the classical and modern accounts side by side offers three benefits. First, it clarifies the classical concepts by giving them a physiological reference point, which helps students and practitioners understand terms that can seem abstract. Second, it shows that Ayurvedic embryology contains a coherent functional model of foetal nutrition, with a source, a conduit and a recipient. Third, it identifies where further research is needed, particularly in the translation of classical terms into testable physiological concepts.

An integrative reading also guards against two opposite errors. One is to dismiss classical descriptions because they do not use modern terminology. The other is to claim that classical authors anticipated modern anatomy in detail. The more defensible position is that the classical texts give a functional account that is compatible with, and in some respects illuminated by, modern physiology.

Limitations

This study is conceptual. It rests on textual interpretation and does not include experimental or anatomical data. The classical sources may have variant readings and commentarial differences, and translations of terms such as *Nadi*, *Srotas* and *Rasa* are open to debate. The correlation proposed is functional and is not offered as proof of anatomical identity. The modern evidence cited concerns general placental physiology and was not generated in the context of Ayurvedic hypotheses. These limitations mean the conclusions should be read as an interpretive framework and not as established fact.

CONCLUSION

Garbha Poshana through the *Nabhi Nadi*, together with the *Kedari-Kulya Nyaya*, provides an important Ayurvedic framework for understanding foetal nourishment and maternal–foetal interdependence. The *Bhoja* quotation in *Dalhana's* commentary links *Rasa*, *Nadi*, *Apara* and foetal nourishment in a single account. *Vagbhata's* analogy of the irrigated field makes that account intelligible through a familiar image of channel-mediated distribution.

Correlation with contemporary placento–foetal circulation demonstrates meaningful functional parallels in nutrient transfer and foetal support. The *Apara* may be understood functionally as the placenta, and the *Garbha Nabhi Nadi* as the umbilical connection. The *Kedari–Kulya Nyaya* may serve as a useful conceptual model for channel-mediated nourishment. These correspondences should remain interpretive and not definitive.

Further interdisciplinary research that integrates classical *Samhitas* analysis with anatomical, histological and physiological evidence may provide a stronger evidence base for this correlation. Such work would refine the translation of Ayurvedic terms into physiological concepts and give the classical framework a firmer place in discussions of foetal nutrition.

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***Address for correspondence**
Dr. Anjelina Hansdak
PG Scholar,
Rachna Sharir Department,
Govt. Ayurvedic College & Hospital,
Patna, Bihar.
E-mail: anjelinahansdak@gmail.com

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