

Festivals of Ayurveda: Scope and challenges

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Abstract

Background: One of the main ingredients to put human societies glued together is celebrating the festivals. Festivals are the markers of scientific achievements and historic milestones. Moreover, celebrating festival ensures the continuation of tradition. The number of festivals celebrating Ayurveda are, however, very few. Festivals bring pomp and glory in lives and are a way of expressing gratitude to the legends for bringing out the deepest meanings of the cosmos. **Aim:** To revive the lost tradition of Ayurvedic festivals, the study was undertaken. **Material and methods:** Ayurvedic scriptures and *Puranas* were carefully reviewed to find festivals associated with Ayurveda. The paper reviews the specific dates and the method of celebration of few festivals associated with Ayurveda such as *Dhanvantari Jayanti*, *Brahma Puja*, *Shakrotsava*, *Kaumudi Mahotsava*, *Madana Trayodashi*, *Charaka Jayanti*, *Kubera Mahotsava*, *Varuna Mahotsava*, and *Yamadamsashtra*. *Dhanvantari Jayanti* as National Ayurveda Day has already gained popularity. **Result:** Festivals foster national cohesiveness, promote communal harmony, preserve family values, revitalize the economy, and foster cultural and, in this scenario, even medical tourism. However, globalizing these festivals is challenging due to difference in calendars. **Conclusion:** Celebrating festivals have deep Yogic meaning. It helps to maintain national identity. The yearly seasonal cycles affect the physical and mental health of humans. Hence, there is a need to revive the traditional Ayurvedic festivals.

Keywords: *Dhanvantari Jayanti*, Indian celebration, *Kaumudi Mahotsava*, *Yamadamsashtra*

Introduction

Religious festivals are prominent features of social life worldwide.^[1] They promote economic development, foster the development of social capital, enhance voluntary public good provision, and raise levels of trust in the society.^[2] Many countries in the world are initiating newer festivals in order to promote tourism, boost economy, and increase bilateral trade. With the largest number of religions in the world, India is known as the land of festivals with the events ranging from rituals, songs, hymns, dance, feasts, pyrotechnics, unique sightings of unexplained phenomena, etc.^[3] Festivals bring pomp and glory into lives and are a way of expressing gratitude to the legends for bringing out the deepest meanings of the cosmos. In addition, festivals can be used to promote Ayurveda. No study has been done on the concept of Ayurvedic festivals. This article deals with the festivals of Ayurveda and scope and challenges of celebrating these festivals.

Aims and objectives

The objectives of the article are to compile the information regarding the festivals of Ayurveda, to understand the scientific basis of observing the festivals of Ayurveda and to analyze the scope and challenges of Ayurvedic festivals.

Material and method

The scriptures of Ayurveda were scanned for information on festivals and annually recurring events. *Puranas* were also carefully studied for information on specific dates and celebration of annual festivals associated with deities of healing. The search of relevant modern literature, PubMed, and Scopus-indexed journals was done. The compilation was then reviewed and analyzed. India is the land of festivals and every community and tribe celebrate multiple festivals and each of these festivals is associated with health and spiritual wellness. This study includes only the festivals mentioned in Ayurvedic classics and days associated with deities associated with Ayurveda. The festivals are discussed on astrological lines rather than medical significance.

Every festival of India has medicinal, cultural, and environmental significance.^[4,5] However, this article specifically focuses only

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on festivals which are mentioned in classical treatises of Ayurveda and/or are associated with deities of healing. The festivals mentioned in Dāḥaṇa's commentary on Susruta Samhita are *Sakrotsava*, *Kaumudi Mahotsava*, *Madana Mahotsava*, and *Kubera Mahotsava*.^[6] Students can take a day off from their studies on these days.^[6] *Yamadamṣṭra* is mentioned in Sṛṅgadhara Samhita as an annual event.^[7]

The deities associated with Ayurveda were compiled from treatises of Ayurveda and days associated with them were collected from *Puranas*. The deities associated with Ayurveda are Brahma, Dhanvantari, Indra, and Charaka.

Dhanvantari Jayanti

One of the earliest and most outstanding leaders of Indian culture in the field of medicine in general and surgery in particular was Dhanvantari.^[8] The story of Dhanvantari emerging from milky ocean appears in *Bhagavata Purāṇa*, *Adiparva* of *Mahabharata*, and *Valmiki Ramayana*.^[9-11] *Harivamsha Purana* describes that after emerging from milky ocean, Dhanvantari was accorded the title “*Abja*” and became the disciple of Bhaskara or the sun God.^[12] He reincarnated as the king of Kasi.^[12] *Vayu Purana* also repeats the story of Dhanvantari emerging from milky ocean and his later incarnation as king of Kasi. However, it names Dhanvantari as the son of Vishnu instead of incarnation of Vishnu.^[13] *Brahmavaivarta Purana* narrates the story of battle between Dhanvantari and goddess Mansadevi, sister of Vasuki.^[14] Lord Dhanvantari is accorded as the disciple of Garuda and Lord Shiva.^[14]

Skanda, *Garuda*, and *Markandeya Puranas* have a different story on Dhanvantari.^[15] A maiden named Virabhadra carried water and quenched the thirst of sage Galava who was tired and thirsty. The sage blessed her with a son proficient in all sciences. The lady later gave birth to Dhanvantari who learnt Ayurveda from Ashvins and married the daughters of Ashvins.^[15]

However, none of these texts mention any dates for any of the Dhanvantaris. However, as per the story of churning of the milky ocean told in *Vishnu Purana*, Lakshmi appeared soon after Dhanvantari.^[16] Hence, *Dhanvantari Jayanti* is celebrated on *Kartika Krishna Trayodashi*, i.e., *Dhanteras*, a day before *Lakshmi Puja*.^[17] In all other texts, Dhanvantari emerged at the conclusion of churning, after the emergence of Tulsi, and hence, it is also celebrated on *Kartika Kṛṣṇa Trayodashi*. Celebration of *Dhanvantari Jayanti* widened during the national movement to mobilize the masses against the British oppression. The occasion was utilized to create awareness of Ayurveda. Since 2016, it is also celebrated as “National Ayurveda Day.”^[18]

Brahma Puja

Brahma is the promulgator of Ayurveda.^[19] On the 1st day of bright half of month of *Chaitra*, Brahma is worshipped using different fragrant flowers, fumigations, wearing new clothes and jewelry, and fire sacrifices and by giving *Tarpana*

to *Brahmanas*.^[20] One should observe fast for entire day and night contemplate God as possessed of a golden complexion, carrying a rosary and ladle in his right hand and a Kamandalu in his left, and having a long clotted hairs.^[21] He should be worshipped with Gayatri Mantra or with “Om Tat Sat”.^[21] This grants prosperity in this life and paradise after death.^[21]

Kaumudi Mahotsava

The full moon day of *Kartika* month is called as *Kaumudi Mahotsava*.^[22] *Kaumudi Mahotsava* marks the celebration of Ashvin twins.^[6] In *Kamasutra*, it is called as *Kaumudi Jagara*.^[23] In the Buddhist works such as *Sumangalavilasini* of Buddhaghosa, *Jatakamala* of Aryasura, *Unmadayanti Jataka*, and *Dhammapada Attakatha*, the description of this festival is seen. People used to decorate their houses with flowers, colorful buntings, and sprinkle fragrant water on the streets.^[22] Men and women put on their best clothes and enjoyed themselves singing and dancing.^[22] At night, the city would be illuminated with well-lit lamps.^[22] In Kashmir, women would sit beside the sacred fire with husband and children and watch the beauty of the moonlit sky.^[24] A fictional drama, *Kaumudi Mahotsava* by Vijjika concludes with the restoration of the kingdom by Kalyāṇa Varma on the night of *Kaumudi Mahotsava*.^[25] The drama *Mudrarakshasa* also mentions *Kaumudi Mahotsava* being celebrated in the present-day Bihar during the times of Mauryas.^[26]

Ashvins are Vedic deities of healing. Some of the references to the successful treatments of Ashvins, seen in *Rigveda*, are treating leprosy of *Ghosha* and *Shyava*, restoring the youth of sage Kali, and replacing the leg of queen *Visphala* with a prosthetic leg.^[27]

Shakrotsava

Indra too is associated with healing. The science of Ayurveda descended on earth with *Indra* teaching the science to the sages for the well-being of mankind.^[28] There are also herbs and recipes attributed to *Indra* in Charaka Samhita.^[29] In Vedas, healing power of *Indra* is widely acknowledged. *Aphala* was healed of her hypertrichosis by *Indra*.^[27] *Shakrotsava* is celebrated on the full moon day of *Bhadrapada* month.^[6]

Kubera Mahotsava

It is celebrated on the day of *Uttarayana Sankranti*.^[6] This falls every year on the 14th/15th of January. It was celebrated in Kashmir by giving ghee and grains to Brahmins as alms.^[30]

Madana Mahotsava

It is celebrated on the 13th day of bright half of lunar month of *Chaitra*.^[6] In Kashmir, a day before *Madana Trayodashi*, Lord Vasudeva was worshipped and the day preceding that *Vastu Puja* was done.^[31] On the previous night, the water anointed with fragrant flowers and tender leaves is placed in front of Kamadeva, and on the day of *Madana Trayodashi*, women are bathed by their husbands with this water.^[31] An image of Lord Kamadeva made from cloths and adorned with garlands and perfumes is worshipped by men and women who are beautifully decorated.^[30] An image of celestial elephant known

as Asoka should be painted with red lead on the day of Madana Trayodashi and worshipped throughout the year during dusk to obtain all materialistic objects in life.^[32]

Charaka Jayanti

Charaka is considered an incarnation of Adishesha.^[33] *Charaka Jayanti* is celebrated on Nag Panchami, the 5th day of bright half of lunar month of *Shravana* annually.

Yamadamshtra

Yamadamshtra literally means fang of *Yama*. It is an annual event which includes last 8 days of *Kartika* and first 8 days of *Agrayana*.^[7] During these 16 days, one should eat less to live longer.^[7]

Discussion

According to *Pinda Brahmanda* theory, individual is a miniature of the universe.^[34] The dates of seasonal rites are based on the Vedic concept that seasonal time influences the subtle body and the mind. Therefore, the festival days, considered special nodes of seasonal times, have a beneficial effect on the religious practitioner. The effect of season on body and mind is not alien to medical science. Contemporary medicine is investigating the relation between circadian rhythm and seasons.^[35,36] Chronobiology studies the variations in human cognition, physical activity, and moods due to diurnal and seasonal time cycles.^[37]

A person's stage of life-related sacraments is also based on the principle of interrelationship between the inner celestial sphere within the human beings and the external celestial sphere.^[38] Yoga attaches great importance to the periodical events not because they happen in the universe, but because they happen in the body and take the *Prana* (internal sun) into many otherwise hidden and impenetrable places in the body.^[39]

In *Yajurveda*, the names of months are referred in terms of *Madhu-Madhava* and not as the current practice of *Chaitra-Vaishakha*. The *Yajurveda* names imply a special meaning which relates to the characteristic of the season, as shown in Table 1.^[40]

Uttarayana/Kubera Mahotsava

Suta Samhita says that inner sun rises in the zodiac constellation of inner celestial sphere.^[41] *Swara Yoga*, a book based on Tantric work *Shiva Svarodaya*, defines the *Dakshinayana* and *Uttarayana* as the movement of inner sun.^[42] *Ida*, *Pingala*, and *Sushumna* do not flow at random but at specific times in synchronization with the solar/lunar rhythms.^[43] Passage of *Prana* in *Pingala* occurs during the first six months and in *Ida* during the last six months.^[42] Passage of *Prana* from *Pingala* to *Ida* is *Uttarayana*. *Uttarayana* is thus conducive for meditation.^[44] This season is selected for meditative festivals and Vedic rituals pertaining to salvation.^[44] Similarly, *Dakshinayana* is conducive for attaining worldly objectives.^[44]

The anterior aspect of the body is considered *Purva*, right side as *Dakshina*, left side as *Uttara*, and backbone as

Table 1: Names of Yajurvedic months and their meanings

Season	Name in Yajurveda	Meaning
Spring	<i>Madhu</i>	Honey; sweet spring
Spring	<i>Madhava</i>	The sweet one
Summer	<i>Shukra</i>	Illuminating
Summer	<i>Shuci</i>	Burning
Monsoon	<i>Nabha</i>	Cloud
Monsoon	<i>Nabhasya</i>	Cloudy
Autumn	<i>Isa</i>	Moisture
Autumn	<i>Urja</i>	Force
Late autumn	<i>Saha</i>	Power
Late autumn	<i>Sahasya</i>	Powerful
Winter	<i>Tapa</i>	Penance, mortification, fire
Winter	<i>Tapasya</i>	Pain

Pashchima.^[41] Sun in the internal celestial sphere is called as *Prajna* and yoga *Nadis*, *Ida*, and *Pingala* form the ecliptic paths of inner celestial sphere.^[41] Inner sun orbits in the inner ecliptic due to inhalation and exhalation of breath.^[41] Inhalations and exhalations are compared to day and night of an astronomical day, respectively.^[41] Movement of inner sun on the right side of the body is called *Dakshinayana* and on the left side is called as *Uttarayana*.^[41] Table 2 lists the association of months with zodiac signs and their meanings.^[45]

The aim is to reach *Aja*, the unmanifested through the process of intense meditation shedding off the worldly bondage. *Kubera Mahotsava* marks the ascent. *Kubera Mahotsava* is celebrated as *Pongal*, *Sankranti*, *Uttarayan*, *Makara Sankranti*, etc. *Uttara* also means propitious.

Kaumudi Mahotsava

It is still considered auspicious and celebrated throughout the country. However, names and mode of celebrations have changed. *Kaumudi Mahotsava* is called as *Lakshadipotsava* in Karnataka, *Dev Diwali* in Varanasi, *Kartika Dipam* in Tamil Nadu, *Boita Bandana* in Orissa, and *Tripuri Purnima* in several parts of the country.

Charaka Jayanti

On the day of Nag Panchami, serpents Vasuki, Takshaka, Kaliya, Manibhadra, Airavata, Dhritarashtra, Karkotaka and Dhananjaya are to be worshipped.^[46,47] People of a tiny hamlet called Charaka Danda near Kotdwar of Uttarakhand celebrate Charaka during the month of *Bhadrapada*.^[48] The Yearbook of Asiatic Society of India informs that *Charaka Jayanti* used to be held during December in the mid-20th century.^[49]

Yamadamshtra: Festival or not?

It is not a conventional festival since it is not associated with auspiciousness. However, many religious fasting are practiced in the world as celebration like Islamic Ramadhan where food and drinks are prohibited during day for 28–30 days, Nativity Fast (40 days before Christmas), Lent (48 days prior to Easter), and the Assumption (15 days in August) practiced by Greek Orthodox Christians.^[50] These fasting are studied for their health impact.^[51,52]

Table 2: Relationship between months, zodiac, and their meanings

Masha	Zodiac sign	Zodiac sign in English	Meaning
<i>Madhu</i>	<i>Mesa/Aja</i>	Aries	Unborn/unmanifested
<i>Madhava</i>	<i>Vrshabha</i>	Taurus	Sound of <i>Pranava</i> /creative urge of the supreme being
<i>Shukra</i>	<i>Mithuna</i>	Gemini	<i>Ardhanariswara</i> /cause of all manifestation
<i>Shuci</i>	<i>Karkataka</i>	Cancer	Universal consciousness
<i>Nabha</i>	<i>Simha</i>	Leo	<i>Jivatma</i> /individual consciousness
<i>Nabhasya</i>	<i>Kanya</i>	Virgo	Worldly knowledge
<i>Isa</i>	<i>Tula</i>	Libra	Balance of matter and spirit
<i>Urja</i>	<i>Vrishchika</i>	Scorpio	Latent ability of the humans to uncover the mysteries of the universe/ <i>Kundalini Sakti</i>
<i>Saha</i>	<i>Dhanu</i>	Sagittarius (bow and arrow)	<i>Manduka Upanisad</i> describes <i>Pranava</i> as bow and <i>Atman</i> as arrow and <i>Brahma</i> as the aim of spiritual practitioner
<i>Sahasya</i>	<i>Makara</i>	Capricorn	Intense meditation
<i>Tapa</i>	<i>Kumbha</i>	Aquarius	Extremely intense meditation
<i>Tapasya</i>	<i>Mina</i>	Pisces	<i>Savikalpaka Samadhi</i>

Yamadamshtra, in Gregorian calendar, is roughly from December 8 to 23. It is partly the duration of Nativity fast. However, not many studies have been done on *Yamadamshtra*. Since fasting during *Yamadamshtra* has health benefits, it should be popularized as a festival.

Scope of Ayurvedic festivals

Ancient materials can be invoked to reconstruct a unique tradition for novel purposes. Celebration of *Dhanvantari Jayanti* during the late 19th century provided a collective consciousness and identity among the physicians and gave their profession a “sacred” aura.^[53] Apart from having symbolic value, festivals and other recurring events are often viewed as tourist attractions. Festivals act as vehicles for the mobilization and cementation of local and global communities; strategies for building national and transnational communities and as spatiotemporal events that inspire and determine meaning in people’s lives.^[54,55] Festivals also bring together scholars and practitioners to have conversations on few pertinent problems and the effective solutions as in *Bhasha* festival of 1987, Trivandrum. Festivals help in the formation of a sense of community which transcends the borders of caste and class.^[56] Even in the current era of fast-paced life, festivals foster national cohesiveness, promote communal harmony, preserve family values, help maintain national identity, revitalize the economy, and foster cultural tourism.^[57] The events would counter existing stereotypes about Ayurveda and instead would inform the public about India’s holistic approach to health. A study conducted in the Lawra traditional area of Ghana suggests that traditional festivals are being used as platforms to plan and advocate development projects and programs by involving the local people.^[58] The government of Assam has started Assam State Rural Livelihoods Mission to promote Traditional festivals.^[59]

Challenges

The calendar confusion

In 1952, calendar Reforms Committee was formed under the chairmanship of Prof M. N. Saha which collected more than 30 calendars used by Indians in different regions to frame a uniform Calendar for the nation. The committee recommended

a solar and lunar calendar. However, the Government of India accepted only solar calendar.^[60] This has led to never-ending calendar confusion.

Thus, the luni-solar Indian National calendar got permanently fixed to the solar Gregorian calendar, as shown in Table 3. This has shifted the *Madhu* month from *Chaitra* month by 23 days.^[61] *Madhu* instead of being in *Mesha* is now in *Mina*. One of the doctrines for the realization of the Supreme Being is called *Madhu Vidya*.^[48] Attainment of salvation is the sweetness of *Madhu* month.^[48]

Dr. K. L. Daftari expressed the dissenting opinion on the new calendar starting with *Vaishakha* instead of *Jyeshtha*, as shown in Table 4. He draws attention to the fact that all ceremonies start in the *Vasanta* according to scriptures.^[62] He dissented on following the crude method of adjusting the year to the seasons and instead urged to adopt more scientific method of gradually changing the beginning of zodiac in conformity with the actual movements of heaven as was done by the scholars of *Jyotisha* several times in the past by adding intercalary *Nakshatra* months.^[61] However, the committee rejected his views.

Vastness of geographical area

Time that elapses between two consecutive sunrises at a place is called as *Savana* day or civil day.^[63] For a vast country like India, which stretches across several longitudes, the sun rises at different times at different places and the festival should be celebrated on the time calculated for that region. Furthermore, the equinoxes (*Vishuvat*) and tropical transits do not fall at the same time all over the country. Hence, celebrating these festivals as religious events across the country on the same day would be challenging.

Increase in volume of tourists

An increase in volume of tourists would pose a threat to the integrity and value of these festivals.^[64] Sustaining the festivals effectively is another challenge.

Changing times

Keeping the core spiritual values of the traditional values during the modern times of changing cultural crisis is

Table 3: Matching of Indian calendar with Gregorian calendar

Indian calendar	Gregorian calendar
<i>Chaitra</i>	March 22 in a common year and March 21 in a leap year
<i>Vaishakha</i>	April 21
<i>Jyeshtha</i>	May 22
<i>Ashadha</i>	June 22
<i>Shravana</i>	July 23
<i>Bhadrapada</i>	August 23
<i>Ashvin</i>	September 23
<i>Karthika</i>	October 23
<i>Agahana</i>	November 22
<i>Pausha</i>	December 22
<i>Magha</i>	January 21
<i>Phalguna</i>	February 20

Table 4: Seasons and months in new Indian national calendar

Seasons	Months
<i>Grishma</i>	<i>Vaishakha</i> and <i>Jyeshtha</i>
<i>Varsha</i>	<i>Ashadha</i> and <i>Shravana</i>
<i>Sharad</i>	<i>Bhadrapada</i> and <i>Ashvin</i>
<i>Hemanta</i>	<i>Karthika</i> and <i>Agahana</i>
<i>Shishira</i>	<i>Pausha</i> and <i>Magha</i>
<i>Vasanta</i>	<i>Phalguna</i> and <i>Chaitra</i>

challenging. Traditional festivals face a kind of anomie of cultural dilemma, lack of core values, and emotional identity and popularity of Western festival culture.^[65]

Conclusion

Festivals are occasions to celebrate the long legacy of Ayurveda. Celebrating festivals preserves values, maintains national identity, promotes trade, and fosters cultural tourism. It is challenging to globalize these festivals due to calendar confusions. Identifying the correct date as per the traditional calendar and practicing the festivals spiritually is beneficial. Studies need to be done on fasting festival of *Yamadamshttra* and its impact on longevity. It is important to celebrate these festivals in order to preserve cultural identity and to promote core values.

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हिन्दी सारांश आयुर्वेद के त्यौहार-क्षेत्र और चुनौतियाँ के. आर. भावना

पृष्ठभूमि: मानव समाज को एक साथ बांधे रखने के लिए त्यौहारों को मनाना मुख्य कारणों में से एक है। त्यौहार वैज्ञानिक उपलब्धियों और ऐतिहासिक धरोहर के प्रतीक हैं। इसके अलावा, त्यौहार मनाने से परंपरा की निरंतरता सुनिश्चित होती है। हालाँकि, आयुर्वेद में वर्णित त्यौहारों की संख्या बहुत कम है। त्यौहार जीवन में उत्साह और गौरव लाते हैं और ब्रह्माण्ड के सबसे गहरे अर्थों को सामने लाने के लिये के किंवदंतियों के प्रति आभार व्यक्त करने का एक तरीका है। **उद्देश्य:** आयुर्वेदिक त्यौहारों की खोज के लिए आयुर्वेदिक ग्रंथों और पुराणों करने के लिए यह अध्ययन किया गया। **सामाग्री एवं विधि:** आयुर्वेद से जुड़े त्यौहारों को खोजने के लिए आयुर्वेदिक ग्रंथों और पुराणों की सावधानीपूर्वक समीक्षा की गई। यह लेख आयुर्वेद से जुड़े कुछ त्यौहारों जैसे धन्वंतरि जयंती, ब्रह्म पूजा, शक्रोत्सव, कौमुदी महोत्सव, मदन त्रयोदशी, चरक जयंती, कुबेर महोत्सव, वरुण महोत्सव और यमदंष्ट्रा की विशिष्ट तिथियों और उत्सव की विधि की समीक्षा करता है। धन्वंतरि जयंती को राष्ट्रीय आयुर्वेद दिवस के रूप में पहले ही लोकप्रियता मिल चुकी है। **परिणाम:** त्यौहार राष्ट्रीय एकता को बढ़ावा देते हैं, सांप्रदायिक सद्भाव को बढ़ावा देते हैं, पारिवारिक मूल्यों को संरक्षित करते हैं, अर्थव्यवस्था को पुनर्जीवित करते हैं, और सांस्कृतिक और इस परिदृश्य में, यहां तक कि चिकित्सा पर्यटन को भी बढ़ावा देते हैं। हालाँकि, कैलेंडरों में अंतर के कारण इन त्यौहारों का वैश्वीकरण चुनौतीपूर्ण है। **निष्कर्ष:** त्यौहार मनाने का गहरा योगिक अर्थ है। यह राष्ट्रीय पहचान बनाए रखने में मदद करता है, वार्षिक ऋतु चक्र मनुष्य के शारीरिक एवं मानसिक स्वास्थ्य को प्रभावित करते हैं। इसलिए, पारंपरिक आयुर्वेदिक त्यौहारों को पुनर्जीवित करने की आवश्यकता है।

मुख्य शब्द: कौमुदी महोत्सव, धन्वंतरि जयंती, भारतीय उत्सव, यमदंष्ट्रा